

# THE TURNING POINT

H. PERRY ROBINSON



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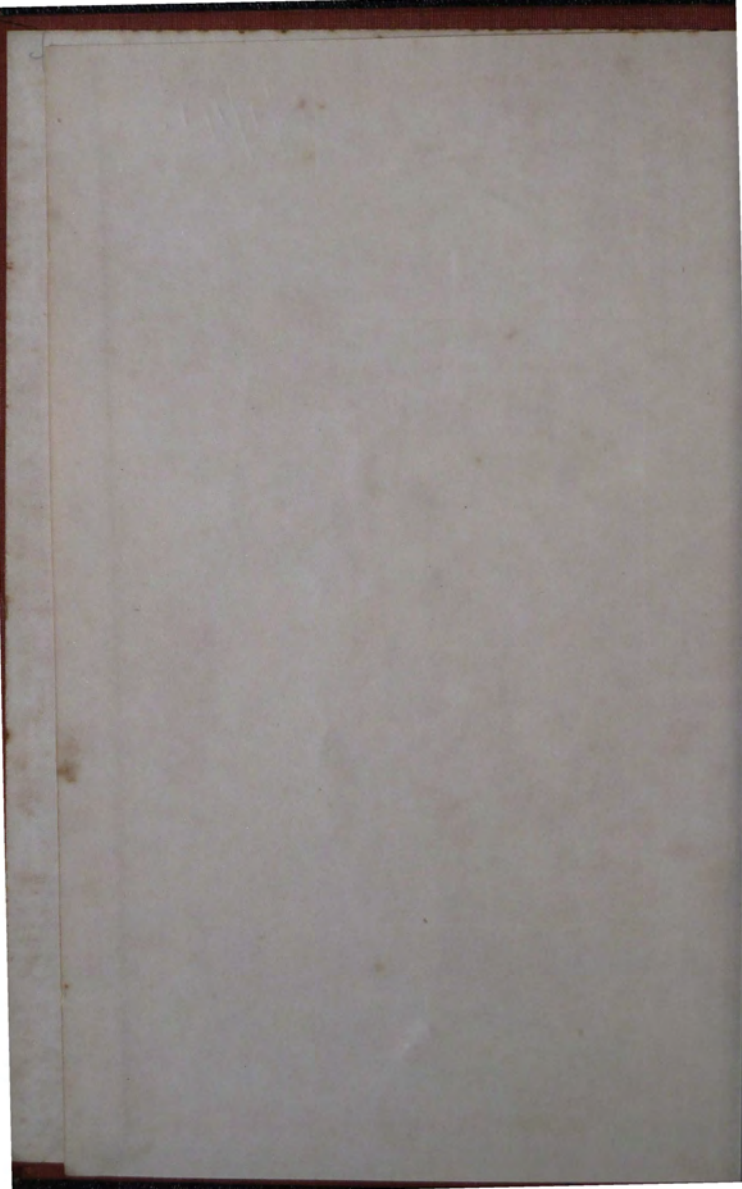
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# THE TURNING POINT

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

BY

H. PERRY ROBINSON

"TIMES" WAR CORRESPONDENT

*ILLUSTRATED*



LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

*London: William Heinemann. 1917*

## PREFACE

THIS is not an account of the Battle of the Somme which will satisfy military readers. Such an account could not be written yet, even by an expert writer on military affairs, which I make no pretence to be.

What I have endeavoured to do is, using my dispatches to *The Times* as a basis, to give at least a fairly consecutive narrative of the operations so that the whole might be viewed as one picture. Even that is a task which can only be very imperfectly done. It is not possible for one witness, however industrious, to have knowledge of all the incidents—even of all the major incidents—of a drama so gigantic. I know that my perspective must often be faulty; that I have probably magnified some things beyond their true proportions at the expense of others equally worthy of commemoration. Military considerations also forbid the mentioning of all the troops engaged in any action. Only here and there has it been permissible to give the name of an individual regiment; and every name so given is an injustice to all the other troops which shared the dangers and glories of that particular field.

But, even with these limitations, it has seemed to me that the story is one which I must do my best to tell, if only because my material might help others, coming after, to tell it better. The story as here written is, at least, sincere; a true account of the events of the battle so far as I was able to see or understand those events. If I have failed to convey an adequate impression of the magnitude of the



achievement of our Army or of the quality of that Army itself, it is because I have not the power. I do not believe that the Empire yet appreciates at anything like their true value either the splendour of our successes or the heroism of our men.

The account is deliberately partial only in that it deals with the operations of the British troops alone, with only the most incidental references to the brilliant co-operation of the French; but I had no such acquaintance with the actions of our Allies as to justify me in writing of them. That is a task for others. I saw enough, however, to convince me that one of the outcomes of the joint battle on the Somme which is likely to be most fruitful of good results in the future was the mutual admiration which was developed between the men of the two Armies. I believe, at least, that we won the esteem of the French; and I know that our admiration of them was unbounded.

H. P. R.

*January 11, 1917.*

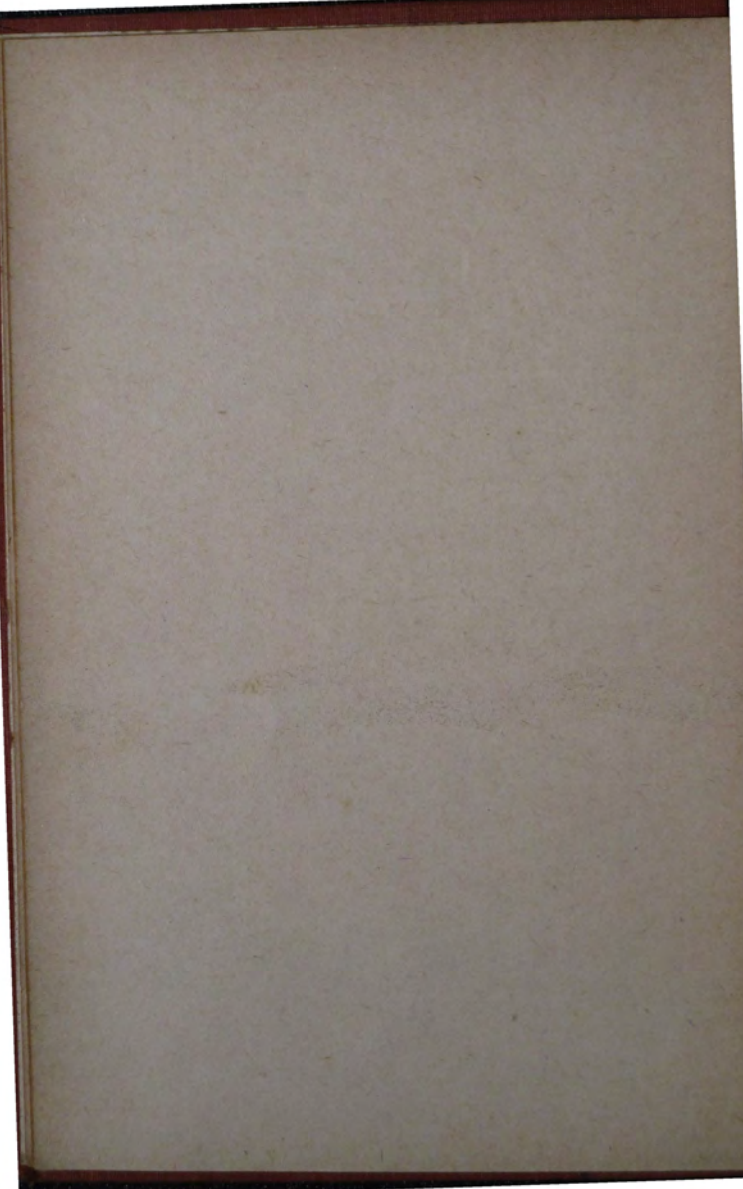
## CONTENTS

I. BEFORE THE GREAT OFFENSIVE	PAGE 1
II. BEGINNING OF THE BATTLE	12
III. SUCCESSES OF THE FIRST DAY	23
IV. FROM FRICOURT TO MAMETZ WOOD	34
V. CONTALMAISON	47
VI. BREAKING THE GERMAN SECOND LINE	55
VII. THE VICTORY OF JULY 14	65
VIII. OVILLERS-LA-BOISSELLE AND POZIÈRES	78
IX. OUR WONDERFUL ARMY	92
X. THE WORK OF OUR AIRMEN	104
XI. WEARING THE GERMANS DOWN	124
XII. TOWARDS THIEPVAL	145
XIII. GUILLEMONT AND GINCHY	161
XIV. TANKS	175

	PAGE
XV. THE GERMAN THIRD LINE	184
XVI. THE ENEMY ON THE RUN	200
XVII. THIEPVAL	218
XVIII. EAUCOURT L'ABBAYE AND LE SARS	228
XIX. RAIN AND MUD	236
XX. BEAUMONT HAMEL AND THE ANCRE	250
XXI. CONCLUSION	269
POSTSCRIPT	281

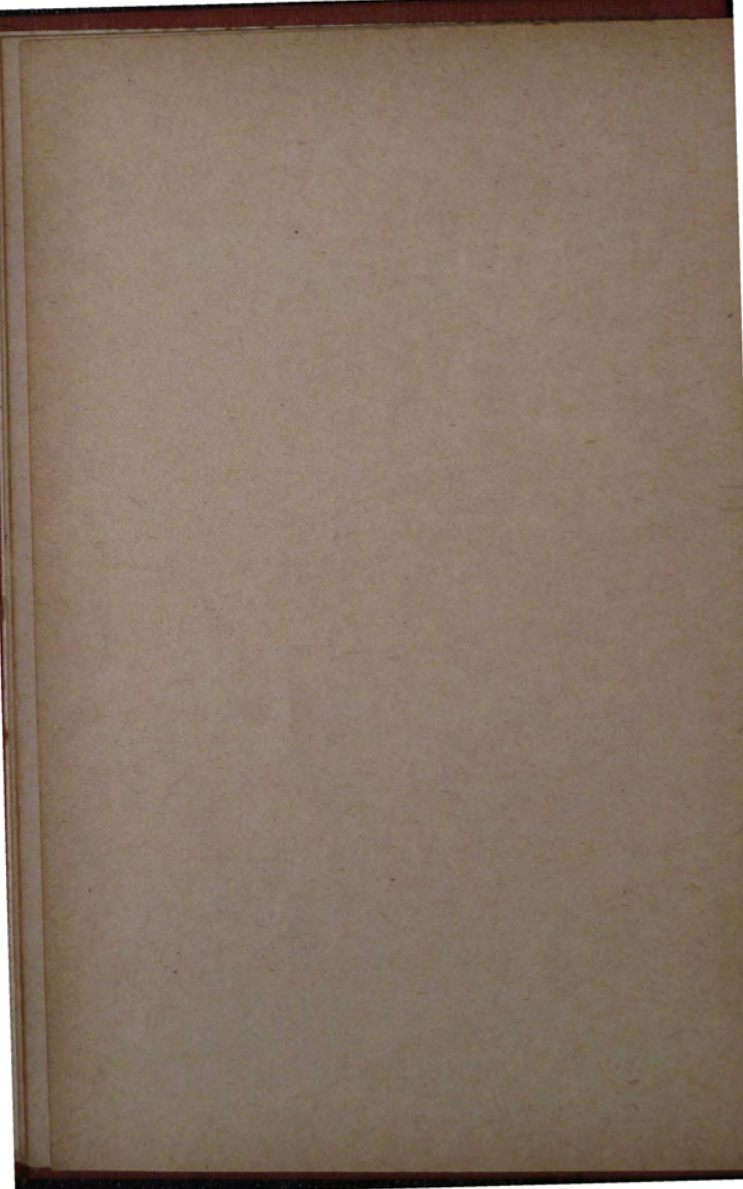
## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
Sir Douglas Haig	<i>Frontispiece</i>
A Roll Call	<i>To face page</i> 2
Manhauling a heavy Howitzer	" 24
The King passing between two large Craters near Mametz	" 48
The Virgin of Montauban—the only thing left intact in Her Village	" 56
Our Men Advancing	" 66
All that is left of the Church at Pozzières	" 78
Highlanders going up to the Trenches	" 96
Anti-Aircraft at Work	" 106
German Prisoners in one of the "Cages"	" 124
Feeding the Guns	" 146
The Battlefield near Guillemont	" 164
A Tank in Action	" 176
Australians on Road	" 186
New Zealanders on the road to the Trenches	" 200
An Advanced Dressing Station	" 220





THE TURNING POINT



# I

## BEFORE THE GREAT OFFENSIVE

WHEN I left England for the British front early in April, 1916, there was much talk of the "great push" which was about to begin. All London whispered of it. I heard men in the railway carriages talk of it as a matter of fact; and on the train which took us to the boat for Boulogne the air was full of tales of it. When I arrived at the front, I found no talk of it at all.

In England the belief in the great spring offensive found its justification in the famous saying attributed to Lord Kitchener in the preceding autumn. "When," it was reported that he had been asked, "is the war going to end?" "I don't know when it will end," he was alleged to have replied, "but it will begin next April." And the British people had only a hazy idea of what the organisation of a great Army meant, which was natural, as there had been nothing in British history to teach them. The people knew that there had for some time been immense activity in the establishment of munition works, but they had no conception how long it would take those works to turn out munitions on the scale required. They knew that we had enlisted millions of men: why should not these millions be turned loose to overrun Germany? Of all the enormous labour that was required to convert the raw material of enlisted civilians into disciplined troops and to put those troops into the fighting line in France as an Army, fully equipped with all the vast machinery of artillery and transport, commissariat, communications and

hospitals behind them—of this the British people were quite ignorant.

The men at the front were less ignorant, for they had learned much. They had learned what it meant that Germany had been at work perfecting her military machine for forty years; and they had known for over a year what it was to have to hold a front against that machine and its millions of disciplined troops, with the men, the organisation, the guns and equipment designed for an expeditionary force of 100,000. I will hazard the conjecture that in times to come military critics will say that the prime cause of Germany's failure in the war—the thing wherein the German Higher Command for ever threw away all chance of final victory—was not in any mistakes which may have been made later nor in any shortcomings in the fighting quality of her armies, but in her not using all her strength in the first year of the war, when she had odds of five to one and ten to one in her favour, to crush us on the Western front. There was the crucial battlefield. It was there that ultimately the Allies would develop their main strength; and according to the traditional and elementary canons of German strategy, it was there that, while she had the power, she should have smitten us.

By what miracles of gallantry on the part of the French and British, and of reluctance to risk too much on the side of Germany, we were permitted to hold that front for eighteen months while we built up our armies and our strength behind it, will only gradually come to be understood by the world. But while it was being done, those who were at the front were never under any misapprehension as to the character of the situation.

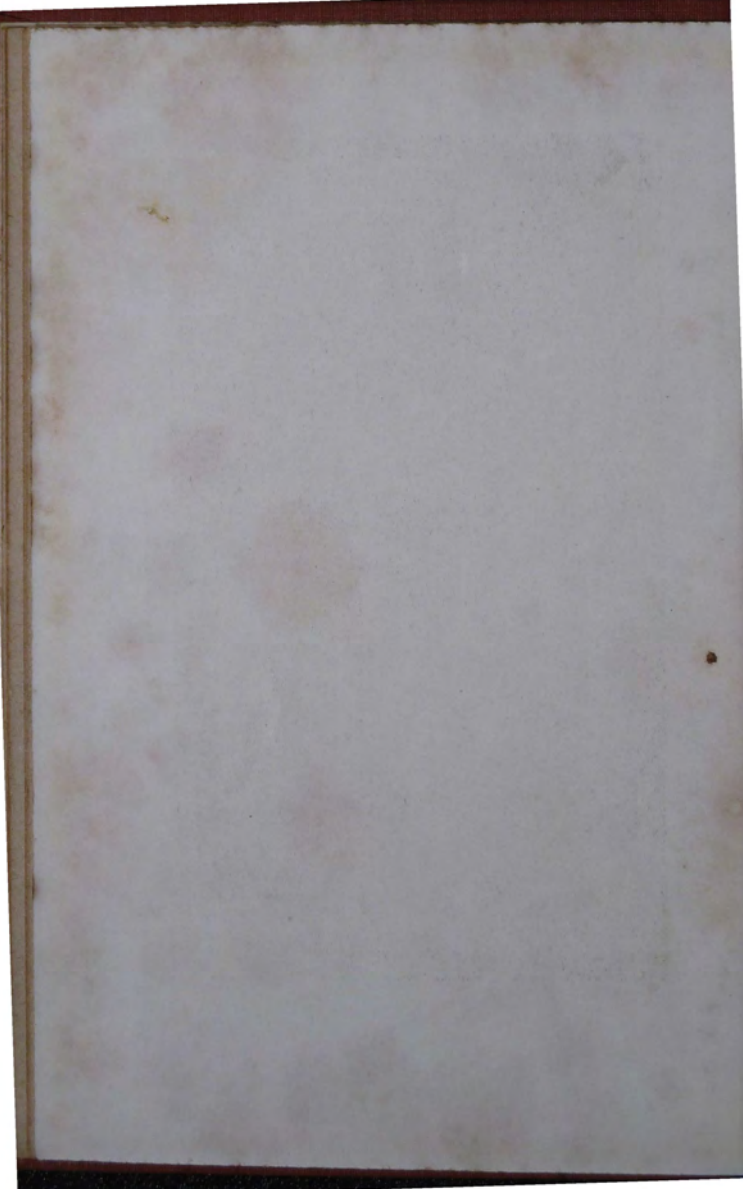
One can laugh now openly at the poverty and the shifts of those days. Guns then had no ammunition for months together. Batteries of heavy artillery which needed to be fairly active were given an allowance of five shells per battery per week; and they could dribble them out at the rate of a shell a day for five days in the seven, or save them up for a fortnight and then have one glorious burst of ten rounds





A ROLL CALL.





in an afternoon. Brigades were told that, as the Divisional allowance for that week was only sixteen hand grenades, they must for the present go without, because some other brigade had more urgent need of all the munificent sixteen. There is the tale of one battalion which was the envied possessor of one rifle grenade which it cherished for weeks and, when the enemy grew too active, it put up a notice above its trenches: "Take care or we shall fire our grenade at you!" The Germans were able to waste daily more ammunition than we could assemble for use in a month.

In the late winter and early spring of 1916 shells and materials of all kinds were coming into France in ever increasing quantities. But there was not a man in the Armies who did not feel acutely that he was still in the presence of an enemy vastly his superior in every detail of equipment and organisation, or to whom the idea of an immediate offensive on a grand scale—such as England talked of so glibly—was not preposterous. It would be grossly unjust to say that the Army was depressed. It was confident that the day would come when the tide would turn. Meanwhile, our very inadequacies were turned to jest and made fuel for that amazing cheerfulness, as sane as it is outrageous, which is part of the character of the British soldier.

It would be idle to pretend that the events of the spring and early summer of 1916 were on the whole exhilarating. In the spluttering activities which went on along the whole front, our men showed always the greatest pluck; but it was horrible warfare, a warfare of gas attacks and midnight raids and mining—all dreadful forms of fighting. A few days after my arrival, General Munro, then commanding the First Army, told me that on his front he had exploded forty-six mines in the preceding thirty days, many of them involving the use of several tons of explosives. In this underground warfare our Tunnelling Companies, men from the mines of Staffordshire and South Wales, rendered invaluable service.

There were many very brilliant, if local, exploits performed by various units of our Army, as by the Shropshires on the

night of April 21-22, when they very gallantly recaptured trenches which the Germans had taken from them by surprise two nights before ; by the Dublin Fusiliers and Inniskillings on April 26 when, at what was known as the Chalkpit Salient, near Hulluch, after the enemy had penetrated their lines under cover of a gas attack, they counter-attacked with the greatest dash and flung the Germans out again with the bayonet ; by the Northumberland Fusiliers and Royal Fusiliers at St. Eloi ; by the Loyal North Lancashires and Lancashire Fusiliers at Vimy in the middle of May ; by men of the Border Regiment in a night raid on June 5 ; by the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and some of the Middlesex, in their repulse of a German attack at the Duck's Bill at Givenchy Hill ; by the Highland Light Infantry in a very successful raid upon strong trenches near Angres on June 27 ; by the Australians, Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry and King's Liverpools in similar raids immediately before the beginning of the great battle ; and, finally, by the Canadians in the heaviest fighting of the whole spring in the Ypres Salient, beginning with the enemy attack on June 2 and culminating in the very fine Canadian counter-attack of June 13.

The sum of all these affairs, with a score of others like them, would have made the equivalent of operations on a considerable scale. The greater strength of the Germans and their immense superiority in gun-power were offset by the dash and intrepidity of our men, who countered their every move. The enemy never blundered against our lines without being severely stung for his trouble. It is impossible to claim, however, that we were able anywhere, except in incidents of a purely local character, to establish any ascendancy over the enemy. With his greater strength and preparedness the general initiative rested with him ; and it still seems inexplicable that he should have frittered his advantage away through so many months in such trivial affairs as he did.

It is true that the Germans were abundantly occupied at Verdun. The strategy which impelled them to choose that point, in spite of its strength, as the scene of their main attack,

will be a subject of contention between military critics for ages to come. What seems obvious to us now is only that with their enormous advantages they might surely have broken the Allied defence somewhere, and that they chose to try at a point where they failed. Undoubtedly they had vastly under-estimated the quality of French generalship and the heroism of French troops. The attack on Verdun had been begun in the last days of February. As the spring wore on, the Germans found themselves committed to greater and greater effort there, and they were less and less able to inaugurate grand operations on any other part of the line. Instead of diminishing, the fury of the attacks on the Verdun positions increased, and it began to be doubtful if even the splendour of French gallantry would ultimately be able to stand the strain. As time went on, we at the front began to be aware of preparations for a great offensive on our side in what was known as the Fourth Army Area, the region, that is to say, immediately above the Somme, which we had recently taken over from the French, where General Sir Henry Rawlinson, with the Fourth Army, was in command.

The Germans also soon became aware that large operations were in course of preparation, and the German Press busied itself with taunting us and inviting us to attack. Especially they pretended to believe that the impending movement was a definite attempt to "break through." But the real nature of the attack was quite clearly understood at the time and its objects are made plain by the facts of the situation.

The first and chief object was to relieve the pressure of the Germans on Verdun. Hardly less urgent was it that they should be so distracted as to prevent their making the great attack on Russia which was evidently impending. Russia's inferiority in guns and her lack of ammunition had necessitated the retreat of the preceding autumn and winter. That shortage of artillery had by no means been made up. In spite of the tenacity with which the Russian Armies had held their existing front, there was little hope, in the spring of 1916, that they could have withstood another great advance



made with all the power that Germany could muster behind it. Personally I had opportunity of talking with not a few well-informed Russians that spring, and I know how great was their anxiety and how immediate the need was for a diversion of Germany's threat.

Behind these two immediate objects of the offensive was the general consideration that, in all human probability, the end of the war would ultimately only be brought about by the steady wearing down of Germany's military strength in the West, combined with constant pressure from our sea-power. For the purpose of this wearing down process it was essential that we should begin attacking in strength at the earliest moment that we were able to do so without courting disaster.

If that rather ill-defined operation known as "breaking through" had been our object, there were many sound reasons why the neighbourhood of the Somme was not the most favourable point for the attempt. If, however, our object was merely to distract the enemy, to contain and occupy as many German troops as possible and to make some appreciable progress towards the attrition of Germany's military strength, then nothing could have been better than the combined Anglo-French attack upon the Somme. For the purposes of the attack we withdrew our troops from the immediate neighbourhood of the north bank of the river and again surrendered to the French part of the line which we had recently taken from them. It was evident that the closest *liaison* between the two armies could more easily be maintained if they were immediately in contact at some point on the line than if they were operating on the two sides of the river with the water between them.

The Germans, as has been said, were aware of the preparations for the attack, for operations on so large a scale cannot be concealed in these days of aerial observation and highly organised Intelligence Departments. They were in a measure deceived, however, as to the extent of it. We misled them into an expectation that it would extend much further north



than was contemplated ; and they did not anticipate that it would reach to, still less continue to the south of, the Somme.

To us, looking on, the preparations were a matter of immense interest. It is hardly necessary to say that nowadays war correspondents are taken into the confidence of the Higher Command only to an extremely limited extent ; but the combined observation and inference of a group of trained correspondents commonly arrive at a good deal more information than is intentionally given to them. I have the less shame in confessing that we all had, I believe, profound misgivings, because those misgivings were, to the best of my knowledge, shared by every man in the Army. I doubt if there was a man in France, outside of that extremely small circle which knew everything, who believed that we were as yet in any way fit for the great offensive or able, if we began, to carry it through to any really large end. There could, perhaps, be no higher praise for those who were in supreme command than is contained in that statement. To every one else the splendour of our Armies, the magnitude of our organisation and resources, the perfection with which our plans had been prepared and were carried out, came as a revelation and an amazement.

The British Army in France felt much as a small boy might feel, who for a year and a half had stood up to some great bully who threatened every moment to crush him. With a heart which atoned for every weakness the boy had held on, biding his time till the day should come when he would have grown up, at least to such a stature as to enable him to reach the bully's face. Suddenly, almost without warning, he was told that he was big enough and that he must hit. To the boy himself it all seemed appallingly premature. "Let me wait," he was longing to appeal, "until next spring. I shall be big enough to wallop the life out of him then." But there could be no waiting. Verdun called and Russia called. "You cannot wallop him yet," the boy was told, "but you can go in and fight him and keep him too busy to bully anyone else." So

the boy went in, very distrustful—let it be confessed—of his own strength but still, happily, with his heart sound.

When the German Emperor, the German Higher Command, the German Press, or individual Germans talk of the battle of the Somme as being a heroic resistance on their part to a ferocious attempt on the part of their combined enemies to crush the life out of them, they are saying what, according to the degrees of their information, they know to be false. We had no illusions as to the possibility of crushing Germany in one battle—no dreams of romping triumphantly to Berlin or to the Rhine. We sought only to divert to ourselves as much of Germany's strength as we could, hopeful that our untried Armies would be able to stand against it, and determined in what followed to inflict on the enemy such punishment as our half-grown strength made possible. Never, I believe, did an Army undertake great enterprise in a less boastful spirit. It was a spirit almost sacrificial: not despondent—far from it—but with great earnestness concealed under a mask of jest.

The attack was originally planned for June 28. On the 26th, however, rain began to fall and continued almost without cessation for three days, compelling the postponement of operations until July 1st. Meanwhile the preliminaries to the infantry attack had been begun four days before the time originally fixed—that is, on June 24. Not only on the section of front to be attacked but up and down the whole line from the Somme to Ypres the artillery bombardment increased daily in intensity until the German *communiqués*, two days before the battle began, spoke of it as being of "unprecedented severity." Gas attacks were made at a number of points, aggregating, as Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig has told us, a total frontage of about fifteen miles. In addition, over seventy raids were made on the enemy trenches north of the actual front to be attacked—that is to say, between the Ypres salient and Gommecourt. Mines were exploded at several points and, finally, our aeroplanes, by a new method of attack, which one cannot yet describe, effectively raided

the enemy's observation balloons—or "sausages"—and destroyed nine in a single day.

Never since the war had entered on its stationary phase in the existing positions had there been anything approaching in scope and intensity the shelling and miscellaneous fighting which raged along a hundred miles of front. It was only the overture; but it was stupendous and terrifying, even though what one saw or heard was only a small section of the dreadful whole.

On June 28 and 29 I was able to watch the bombardment from various points within our lines, as from an advanced artillery observation post just opposite Beaumont Hamel, where our front line trenches were immediately below, from a spot on the Albert Ridge and from the forward face of the high ground above Fricourt. The former of the two days was wet and the air was thick with rain and mist, but one saw Beaumont Hamel, which until the day before had been half hidden in trees, swept in a few hours almost out of existence, to become but a bare heap of ruins behind a few ragged branchless trunks. It was an extraordinary and a terrible spectacle.

From each point on this part of the front one gazed on a wide panorama of what would in ordinary times have been a charming pastoral and agricultural country of undulating land with prosperous villages, nestling among groves of trees, and scattered farmsteads and châteaux among the fields. But all the foreground was a mere brown wilderness embroidered with a maze of trenches. The woods within the dreadful zone were being deliberately stripped leafless, and château and farm and village alike converted into jagged piles of ruins. Most terrible of all was the constant cloud of smoke which overlay the landscape.

June 29 was a sweet summer day of mixed cloud and sunshine, so that shadows floated across the field of vision, and here and there a wood, a village or a patch of farmland leaped suddenly into view as the sun fell upon it. And wherever the sun fell it revealed the same scene of desolation. The guns roared on all sides, the crash of the nearer pieces piercing and



dominating the dull uproar from those further away to right and left. For twenty minutes I watched the concentration of I know not how many guns on the ruins of what had been the village of La Boisselle till it and the air above it were all one swirl of fumes, grey and white. Again it seemed as if half a hundred guns at once were pouring their shells into two wretched acres of bare land at the corner of Fricourt Wood, where doubtless there was an enemy battery concealed, though nothing met the eye but the level surface of the ground. Watching, it was difficult not to be sorry for the men—Germans though they were—who manned that battery.

Further away Contalmaison lay behind a low ridge of rising ground, so that, from our lines, one could not see it. It seemed that not for a moment during the afternoon did our shells cease dropping just beyond that ridge. One could not see them explode, but continuously the sullen columns of smoke rose upwards until where the doomed village lay there was nothing but a dense fog bank.

All the while, nearer to us than any of these places, our fire went on pitilessly on the German front line trenches, now and again dropping back to pick out the line of a communication trench or a support trench in the rear. It was impossible not to admire the certainty of our fire. And what was, as always, one of the most impressive features was the utter absence of any visible human being. You, with the three or four men beside you, and an occasional bird sweeping hurriedly overhead, appeared to be the only living things in a world which was all being broken into chaos again.

Overhead, indeed, were other signs of life, for our aeroplanes never ceased to circle in the sky, while as far as the eye could reach to north and south the line of the front was marked by the evil-looking, sausage-shaped balloons tethered high in the air. It was a significant and encouraging fact that from where I stood above Fricourt, one could count sixteen balloons, of which thirteen were ours and only three were German.

What losses we had inflicted on the enemy so far it was, of course, impossible to say, but deserters who came to us



told that in the trenches from which they came there had been no food for two days because supplies could not come up through our fire. The enemy's artillery reply was almost everywhere in these days very light, and our own losses were insignificant.

In the numerous raids which we had carried through in the last few days, the prisoners captured had enabled us to identify every enemy battalion on the whole British front; and the German disposition was shown to be precisely what we had expected. No troops had been removed, as rumour at the time said they were being removed to Russia or elsewhere. That troops had gone to Russia from France we knew, but these—the Xth Corps, the XXII<sup>nd</sup> Reserve Corps, and the 11th Bavarian Division—had been withdrawn from Verdun or Champagne. Of the Bavarian Division the story told us by deserters was that it had been sent to Russia as a punishment. It had been badly mauled at Verdun, and on being told to go in again refused. The Kaiser, so the story went, had ordered one man in every ten in the Division to be shot, but the King of Bavaria pleaded for and obtained mercy. The Division was then sent to the Eastern front in disgrace. However these facts might be, there was no weakening of the German line before the British front.

To us unlookers, these were days of anxiety and strange elation. It was as if the new-found power of Britain was unfolding itself before our eyes. We had no conception yet how great that power was to prove itself; but after the long months of patience and strained resistance to the pressure of overwhelming force, at last it was we who took the initiative, and already we were visiting on the German lines punishment heavier than anything that the enemy had been able to make us endure.

## II

### BEGINNING OF THE BATTLE

IN the ground just north of the Somme, selected as the scene of the offensive, Nature had presented us with a definite objective for the attack in the triangle of ground made between the confluence of the Ancre and the larger river. Here, from the south side of the Ancre, a high ridge ran in a rough semicircle from Thiepval by Longueval and Ginchy towards Combles. This was to be the immediate object of the British attack while the French had care of the ground below Combles and across the Somme. Along this ridge the Germans occupied positions of great strength, from which it would be excellent to remove him. The operation involved the necessity of fighting our way from the bottom of the valley up the long slope of the ridge, in itself an extremely formidable undertaking. But the advantage and the moral effect of the capture of the ridge would be great. If the attack on the ridge succeeded, it would be open to us to push on, if we saw fit, down the descent of the slopes beyond, with the taking of Bapaume as a possible ultimate goal.

An evident difficulty in the way of this operation was that the northern slope of this ground, where it dipped steeply to the Ancre by Thiepval and Grandcourt, was completely commanded from the enemy's positions on the opposing slope on the other side of the stream, especially from the neighbourhood of Beaumont Hamel and the Serre plateau. The capture and occupation of the southern face of the valley would obviously be a formidable undertaking if the Germans were

in undisturbed possession of the northern face. It was, therefore, decided to extend the scope of the operation. While the ridge to the south of the Ancre remained the real objective, the front to be attacked included the enemy's lines northward to the other side of Gommecourt, about five miles beyond Beaumont Hamel.

The movement on this northern part of the line, then, was subsidiary to the main operation. The enemy's positions at Thiepval and Beaumont Hamel, the two pillars to the gateway of the Ancre Valley, were notoriously as strong as, perhaps, any point in his defences on the whole Western front. If the thrust at Gommecourt was successful, and we also penetrated his line below Thiepval, at La Boisselle and thereabouts, the capture of the gateway would be immensely simplified. In any event, the attack on this northern front would serve to keep the Germans busy there, and to prevent them from giving undivided attention to the southern part of the advance.

The point to be clearly understood is that while the attack north of the Ancre was in itself an operation of some size, occupying as it did the front of three Army Corps, it was secondary to the real attack on the south, the flank of which it was designed to protect. When our attack on the north of the Ancre had largely failed, the Germans attempted to represent this as being the main operation and to minimise our brilliant success on the south. From what was said in the preceding chapter, however, it will be seen that we war correspondents watched the opening of the battle with all our attention concentrated on the section of the line from Thiepval by La Boisselle to Fricourt and Mametz. On our success or failure here on that first day hung the prospect of success or failure in the whole offensive; and it was our triumph there on that first day that put the success of the offensive beyond doubt.

At midnight of June 30, I watched the bombardment from a position on the Albert ridge commanding a view of a large section of the front, and it was an awe-inspiring sight. It was a soft dark night with a light and gusty westerly wind,



so that the noise of the shells was borne away from us. Much has been written (more in the French newspapers than in the English) about the strange acoustic phenomena observed in this war, innumerable instances being known of the sound of cannonading being plainly heard at great distances while practically inaudible close at hand. The comparative noiselessness of the bombardment from close at hand that night was very curious. The direction of the wind accounted for something; but there was undoubtedly something else—some unknown atmospheric property—at work which prevented us hearing, on the hilltop where I stood, any sound save of the guns immediately by us, with occasional bursts of sound, coming quite illogically, from far away. And all the while the flare and flashing of the shells were continuous.

Not only directly before us but to north and south, as far as the eye could see, it was one amazing display of fireworks. It was more constant than the flickering of summer lightning, resembling rather the fixed but quivering glow of Aurora Borealis. One could distinguish the bursts of the great shells from the rhythmical pounding of the trench mortars, and the quick, ruddier flashing of the shrapnel bursting in the smoke bank which hung overhead. Punctuating it, intensely white against the other flames, rose almost like a continuous fountain the star shells and with them red flares, like the balls of huge Roman candles, which rose and hung awhile and slowly sank and died away.

There were places which were like the mouths of furnaces, where there burned a permanent glow flecked and illumined with never-ending streams of white sparks. One ordinarily measures the weight of a bombardment by the number of shells that burst in a minute. In this case, counting was hopeless. Fixing my eyes on one spot I tried to wink my eyes as fast as the lightnings flickered, and the shells beat me badly. I then tried chattering my teeth; and I think in that way I approximately held my own. Testing it afterwards in the light, where I could see a watch face, I found that I could click my teeth some five or six times in a second.



There were always three or four points within the field of vision at which the shells were bursting at that speed; and always in between, over the whole circuit of the field, they were bursting with great, if lesser, rapidity. What the expenditure of ammunition was in such a bombardment it was impossible to conjecture, when along the front of ninety miles there were always points at which the shells are bursting at the rate of some hundreds to a minute. And this had already gone on for five days and nights.

As we stood, in the shadow of some trees, twenty yards from the high road leading directly down to the trenches, which at that point was screened on both sides by continuous green canvas walls to hide it in daylight from the enemy's eyes, there was an almost constant movement of traffic on the road. Detachments of troops came swinging by in half companies, companies and battalions. Long before they came abreast of one, one heard the steady roar of their feet—tramp-tramp! tramp-tramp! and always, as they passed they whistled softly in unison. Some whistled "Tipperary," some "Come back, my Sonny, to me," and some, best of all in the surroundings, "La Marseillaise."

As we came back along that road towards the rear we met more companies, more battalions. On the tree-shaded road and between the canvas screens it was too dark to see them, save only as vague dark masses against the light background of the highway. One felt their presence and heard, more than one saw, them: always the steady tramp-tramp, tramp-tramp as they shouldered by, and they were always whistling. Now and again a laugh broke out at some unheard joke, a completely careless laugh, as of a holiday maker. And, knowing what it was that they were going into, for the fiftieth time one marvelled at the way in which the British youth has proved itself in this most terrible of all wars.

In the early hours of the morning I turned in and, as I lay, still watched the flare and flicker in the heavens—"the lighting of the footsteps in the sky." Here, where other things interposed to hide the actual bursting of the shells, it was still

more like the never ceasing lifting and paling of the Northern Lights, and as long as I lay awake, until it was near to dawn, it went on.

The war correspondents had been given information of the hour at which the great attack would begin in the morning. It was necessary to be up very early, and while the night mists still hung heavy and the herbage was soaking with dew I was again on the edge of the ridge by Albert, overlooking the lines at what was practically the middle of the front on which the attack was to be delivered. The extreme right of the line, where the French were attacking, was from here beyond the range of vision, the heights above the Somme, by Suzanne and Vaux, being only dimly visible on the far horizon. What was immediately within view was the valley of the Ancre, the town of Albert below our feet, and the enemy's country from Thiepval by Oivillers-la-Boisselle and La Boisselle itself, to Fricourt and Mametz, where the line ran eastward and so passed out of sight.

It was a lovely morning, the sun, still low, shining directly in our faces from behind the German lines, so that where we stood it was necessary to be careful in the use of field glasses, which flash like a heliograph when the sun falls on them, nor was it prudent to display white maps too ostentatiously. In front of us, Albert was almost hidden in mist, except that the church tower with the wonderful spectacle of the leaning figure of the Virgin stood clear above the white bank below and caught the sun.

The advance was set for 7.30. For an hour or so before that time the bombardment seemed more furious than ever. It was difficult to say if it really was ; for it had been terrible enough when I had watched it from this same spot a few hours and twenty-four hours before, as it had been terrible now for days. What was curious was that while I was no nearer than I was when I had seen the firing at night, the noise was now almost overwhelming. Against the sunlight the bursting of shells no longer made sudden flashes of light. One heard the roar and saw the spurts of earth and *débris*

as the great projectiles plunged to earth and the slowly unfolding columns of smoke from high explosives and the fleecy white of shrapnel up above. The only flashes were those of such of our own guns as were ahead of us, so that we looked upon their hidden positions from the rear.

When 7.30 came the mist was still too thick for us to see our men advancing from their trenches. The lines of the trenches themselves were only doubtfully visible, the light westerly wind not being strong enough to do much to dispel the fog or to carry away the smoke and dust of the bursting shells. As the fateful moment approached the uproar seemed to deepen. Faintly, straight ahead of us, we heard through all the clamour a ripple of rifle fire. To the left by Thiepval and away in the direction of Auchonvillers and Hébuterne a dark smoke cloud mingled with the morning mist and blotted out all the horizon. To the right on the high ground by Fricourt we saw the line of a white smoke *barrage*, denser than the mist but paler than the fumes of shells, which we made to cover our advance. Behind all the welter and the tumult it was impossible to guess what was passing, only one knew that they must be terrible things. Around us, here in the sunlight, there in the shadow of a hollow, our reserves, battalion after battalion, were slowly moving up towards the front or waiting their time in the shade of some clump of trees. And all the while, above the smoke and mist, two kestrels swung and circled and hovered in the sunlight.

Other things also were in the air. Immediately behind us overhead hung one of our uncouth kite balloons, bathed in sunshine, and stretching far away to right and left one could see a line of them marking the direction of the front. And in and out our aeroplanes moved continuously. One squadron of six together sailed splendidly and insolently straight over the German lines and far beyond. Other single machines patrolled unwearyingly up and down, perfect testimony to our supremacy in the air.

It was between 9 and 10 o'clock when I left the scene of the fighting. The sun had grown stronger and the mists had



almost gone, so that the details of the landscape were clearly visible. But the visibility came too late to enable one to see our men actually moving from their trenches. They had already gone from the ground where one might have seen them, on beyond the German front line, to where a thick veil of smoke still hid everything. It had turned into a beautiful summer day, with promise of great heat, the first for over a week. The sky above was clear blue, flecked with dazzling white islands of cloud. But there, where at night the horizon was all a flicker of lightning, there was nothing but a sullen bank of thick pearl-grey. Behind that bank the British Army was at work.

The afternoon I again spent watching the fighting from as near as it was permissible to go to the little town of Thiepval, which our artillery was subjecting to the most intense concentration of fire it is possible to conceive. High explosives and lyddite simply poured into the place, while the air above was thick with exploding shrapnel and the trench mortars played incessantly, the projectiles of the last named being clearly visible in the air. The place was a veritable devil's caldron, a mere bowl of seething fumes, black and green and white, till it seemed incredible that anything, friend or foe, could live there while the struggle was at its fiercest. To us looking on it was a sight of pure horror.

Not that night nor yet throughout the following day was it possible to get any clear idea of what had happened on all the length of front. That we had broken through and overrun the German trenches almost everywhere was certain; but, on the northern part of the front especially, after the enemy had recovered from the first shock of the attack and had been able to issue from his hiding places, where he had sheltered from our shelling, and bring machine-guns into action, even though our front waves had swept on, it sometimes proved impossible for supporting troops to follow. There were places, as near Serre and Thiepval, to which we knew that some small fragment of our thin first wave had penetrated, because they had signalled their arrival there or our aeroplanes had seen them



from overhead. But the door had shut behind them and to throw successive waves of men against the now organised machine-gun defences was only to give them to be slaughtered. Throughout the day of July 2, therefore, there was great uncertainty as to how far we held certain advanced positions which we had reached. From some our men succeeded in fighting their way back again. The Germans, however, claimed to have taken 800 prisoners, and, presumably, the statement was correct. How many of the prisoners were unwounded was never stated; but these undoubtedly represented remnants of the gallant bands which had fought their way over successive lines of trenches through a wilderness of enemies to places where, alone amidst the whole German armies, they could not be supported.

On the southern and vital section of the attack, where success really mattered, our success was undoubted. We had captured Mametz and Montauban. We had isolated Fricourt so that it must fall to us. We had made wide breaches in the enemy's front to the north, and had also penetrated the outer defences of La Boisselle. Immediately below the Ancre we had broken into the German front line below Thiepval and had captured and held the formidable positions at the angle of the Thiepval salient known as the Leipzig Redoubt, the possession of which was to prove of great value to us in the later fighting. While the evening of the first day still saw the enemy holding his advanced positions at many points along this front, we had broken in at so many places, and so much of his most formidable defences were in our hands, that the omens were of the best.

While it was necessarily our success in the south that attracted most attention—and will attract most attention in history—it may well be that the Army will be even more proud of the performance of some of the regiments which fought on the northern part of the front, where they achieved some things of impossibility almost, even if other things were quite beyond human reach.

Here, over these northern five miles, the opposing fronts

faced one another from opposite faces of gentle declivities with a narrow level bottom between. The highest point on the German side was near Serre, but the top of the plateau ran nearly level as far as Beaumont Hamel, where there was a steep slope down to the valley of the Ancre. Then the ground rose again to another swelling plateau, which continued to Ovillers-la-Boisselle, the highest point on this side being near, and behind, the village of Thiepval.

Not only was each of the places mentioned—Serre, Beaumont Hamel and Thiepval—a position of great natural strength which had been fortified (chiefly underground) to as near impregnability as places could be made, but they all interlocked, as it were, and commanded each other. It seems incredible now from what we know of the whole situation, but in the first rush of that morning some of the Ulster troops did actually penetrate beyond Thiepval into the enemy's final stronghold at what was known as "The Crucifix" beyond the highest point of the ground, and that farther up the Warwickshires actually managed to reach Serre, while contingents of the Rifle Brigade and Somersetshires fought through or over the successive German trenches of the first-line system till they too were on the highest point of the plateau, some being known to have got into a little wood, which bore the name of Pendant Copse, well to the south-east of Serre itself.

The attack having started at 7.30, each of these objectives was reached by 8.30 or 9 o'clock, and it may be doubted if the world ever saw an hour of more heroic work than our men did there.

I heard from onlookers, and later read in the phrases of an official report, the amazing story of the advance at one portion of this front of battalions of the East Lancashire and York and Lancasters. Our front line had been bombarded more or less heavily during the night. As the hour of the attack approached the enemy put a tremendous *barrage* on our front line, and fifty yards before and behind it with heavy explosive shells. At the same time the whole of No Man's Land was drenched

with shrapnel fire and with a storm of machine-gun and rifle fire from the enemy's front lines.

The German machine-gun men, as well as their infantry, behaved with great bravery. Observers described how, under our artillery fire, the enemy's front line was so battered that it seemed to change shape momentarily. But in their deep, almost impenetrable, emplacements, many machine-guns survived. In some cases the German gunners were seen to bring their machine-guns out before their parapets, into No Man's Land, thus getting in front of our *barrage* and being able to enfilade our men as they advanced.

Under the hurricane of fire our front line trench practically disappeared. The air of No Man's Land was a sea of flying projectiles of every kind; and into it our men—the East Lancashires and the York and Lincs—went without one falter, without a single man hesitating or turning back. Some not only reached the German front line, but actually fought their way over four successive tiers of trenches. No men could possibly have borne themselves more splendidly.

The point of the German line which ran down to the valley of the Ancre below Beaumont Hamel, the village (no more than a heap of rubble now) lying in a fold of the hills above, was probably as strong a position as was to be found on all this front.

Back on the high ground behind the enemy had massed an immense amount of artillery, of guns ranging from 77 mm. to 150 mm. in size. At one point was a mass of machine-gun positions, dug into the ground behind. Above this point were other machine-guns. Against this front our men charged, under a fire that cannot be described or imagined, without one man faltering for a moment. It was as splendid as any action of human bravery could be.

Immediately below this point, on the southern end of the Ancre, the Ulster troops behaved in a way that will be remembered as long as history is read or written. It is said that the Royal Irish Fusiliers were first out of the trenches. The Royal Irish Rifles went through what was an absolute



hell, over the German parapets, and killed the men in the machine-gun emplacements with their bayonets. The Inniskillings rushed and cleaned out certain positions in the enemy's lines which had been named respectively "Inniskilling," "Omagh," and "Strabane." It is said that they all went forward shouting "No surrender!" and "Remember the Boyne!"

They were subjected to a murderous cross fire from above the Ancre, and were fired at by machine-guns from three sides. Yet they went on, over the German first and second lines. Some came back with prisoners, one man, it is said, herding a party of fifteen Germans across No Man's Land, where they were so afraid of their own *barrage* that he had difficulty in making them cross, which, however, he did with the utmost cheerfulness and success.

Still there were regiments which I have not mentioned as being entitled to their full share in the glory which will rest on all the troops which took part in this truly amazing fighting. The South Wales Borderers, the Border Regiments and Essex, and the King's Own Scottish Borderers all had battalions in it, and each was worthy of the others and worthy of the traditions of the British Army. Indeed, I believe I am not exaggerating when I say that if the British Army had had no traditions before this month of July, 1916, the achievements of the troops engaged in the one day's fighting on this piece of the front would alone be enough to establish it as the equal in gallantry of any army on earth. More than ever here we justified that fear of us which the Germans had embodied in their foolish hate since the beginning of the war.



### III

#### SUCSESSES OF THE FIRST DAY

THE great success of the first day's fighting was won in the region of Fricourt, Mametz and Moutauban.

Fricourt itself was not only a point of strategic value, the nose of the German salient, but its possession had large sentimental importance, for there was hardly any place on all the French and Belgian front which had been the scene of more persistent and deadly fighting at short range. Hardly any bit of all the tortured country had been so wracked with mines, so shell-torn, and so watered with blood. So notoriously strong was the German position in and before the village itself that in the plan of our first day offensive, no attempt was made to take it by direct frontal attack. Two thrusts were directed on either side of it: one to the right against Mametz and the other to the left of it against the line between Fricourt and La Boisselle. Fricourt itself was to be "pinched out" between the two. It was not until the next day that another division was thrown against the lines before the village and the operation was completed, the troops of the two pinching divisions and those of the critical one forming juncture at and along the line of Fricourt Wood, behind the village. Meanwhile the two thrusts on each side of the village were immediately and brilliantly successful.

On the day after the final reduction of Fricourt I went into the village and wandered about the field of the fighting from here to Mametz.

It was a dreadful sight. From what were our front line

trenches you went through remnants of rusted and torn barbed wire over the narrow strip of ground between the lines, across the writhing, twisted rails of what was once a railway line, through the wreckage of the enemy's wire, to the German front line.

You must not imagine yourself to be walking over level ground. It had been level; but it was now all ridge and pit and hummock. Nowhere—not for one single square yard, I think—could you see the true surface of the ground. You went down the sides of a huge shell hole, the bottom full of a litter of equipment, and up the other, jumped across a smaller one, followed for three paces the obliterated line of an old trench, then into another shell hole. So it was over the whole of Fricourt, except that in the village itself the shapeless piles of brick and masonry, here heaped man high, there battered flat, covered all the earth.

There were no streets or houses; merely so much of the earth's surface covered with ruin and wreckage. And everywhere were the more immediate, the more terrible, relics of the fighting.

It was easy to see where our men went. The work of gathering the dead and preparing them for burial was still going on. Some still lay where they had fallen, full length with their heads toward the German trench. Others, laid in orderly rows and being very gently and reverently handled, were side by side along a narrow open piece of ground at the village edge, where service was to be read over them later in the day.

Beyond the German front line were the other dead, not less pathetic because they were dressed in grey instead of khaki. But, most of all, the German dead lay in their trenches and inside their dug-outs, where they had fled when our men at last broke in upon them. Some were killed by shell fire or bombs, some had been bayoneted. Apparently some must have gone into the dug-outs, after they were wounded, to die. Others were bombed inside. In one place a man had been killed at the mouth of his burrow and had fallen on the steps



MANHAULING A HEAVY HOWITZER.





leading downwards, half-blocking the entrance. At the entrance to another was a man who had both legs blown off. A third had been used as a dressing-station and five men had seemingly died there while waiting their turn or had been brought in and died before they could be attended to. But I think the most horrible figure of all was that of a man—part of a man—who lay flat upon the earth, and there was nothing of him above the shoulder blades. War in its details is a gruesome thing.

The German trenches were, as always, more elaborate than ours. Here they were deeper and wider. They were therefore more open to a shell bursting directly above; but, when under fire, the German soldiers keep as much as possible in their dug-outs, which were—here as always—more extensive, deeper, and better built than ours. The trenches immediately before Fricourt were not very seriously damaged by our bombardment, while to the left of the village and also about Mametz, they were practically destroyed. The barbed wire in front had been cut and blown to bits, except in certain spots, and all the ground around was, as I have said, devastated beyond description.

Inside the trenches was every sort of human wreckage and remnant of equipment. There were immense quantities of unused cartridges, of unused hand grenades and unused bombs; and anyone who had a taste for those horrible relics known as "souvenirs"—dead men's helmets and personal possessions—could load himself here with trophies.

What impressed one in all the places which we took was the immense strength of the German defences. One could not wonder that they believed them to be impregnable. They would have been impregnable to any troops less heroic than our men showed themselves. Nor was it only the actual positions in the front-line trenches which were so strong. All the little villages and woods, each eminence and hollow, in all the area between the first and second lines had been converted into a fortress as formidable as the character of the ground made possible. In the year and a half for which

have been demoralised. The suddenness of the Liverpools' attack was more than they could stand, and among the prisoners taken here were a German Regimental Commander and his staff.

The largest individual lot of prisoners, however, taken on this part of the front that day fell to the Norfolks and Berkshires acting in conjunction. A battalion from each of these regiments, attacking side by side, had opposed to them a particularly difficult part of the German line, consisting of an interlacement of trenches, old mine craters, and fortified positions. They attacked it as our men seem to have behaved on every part of the line. Norfolks and Berkshires seem to have got there together, with a dash through a veritable storm of rifle fire. Once there, they found machine-guns everywhere and deep dug-outs full of Germans who slipped through underground communication trenches. Here was hard bayonet work and every kind of rough and tumble fighting; and when it was over there were, besides the dead and wounded, 800 German prisoners.

A word must also be said of the gallant behaviour of men of the Queen's, South Staffords and the Royal Scots Fusiliers. Their performance was on a level with all the rest and contributed not a little to the extremely satisfactory outcome of the fighting at this end of the line.

The net results of the first day's operations were that we had shattered and taken possession of the elaborate defences of the German first main line for a distance of something over 8,000 yards. Mametz and Montauban were in our hands. We had practically isolated Fricourt and it fell on the following day. We were in the village of La Boisselle and the fate of that also was sealed. All this was on the southern and main part of the attack. On the northern part we had pierced the enemy's lines almost everywhere, but we only held two small stretches of his front line. From one of these we were destined later to withdraw, as it was useless for any large purpose and costly to hold. The other, being the position known as the Leipzig Redoubt, we permanently consolidated

with our trench system. We had taken in the course of the day about 5,000 prisoners.

The great triumph of the day, however, was the revelation of the quality of our new Armies. No praise could be too high for the men on every part of the line. Nowhere was there anything but perfect courage. I talked, late in the afternoon of July 3, with a well-known neutral, who was at the moment here with our Armies. He had been earlier in the day over the field across which our men charged in the first triumphant assault that led to the capture of Mametz, where the enemy believed the position to be impregnable. The neutral in question has seen most of the fighting in the world of recent years, and he had read the story of our advance as it was written in the dead upon the ground and in the positions as they stood ; and he did not believe that there was ever a more entirely gallant feat performed in war. Nothing, he declared, which the Japanese did in the Russian war was so perfectly heroic.

I also heard on that same day the considered opinion of a distinguished soldier who had seen much of war and who witnessed the attack of our men on the first morning of the battle on the positions in the extreme north of our advance, by Gommecourt. This soldier declared that the advance of our men through a double *barrage* and against machine-gun and rifle fire was as fine a thing as was ever seen on a battlefield.

That is, above all things, what the first days of the battle taught—namely, that, whatever we may have imagined of our great new Armies, they were better than we could have dared to hope. Nothing in any case stopped them except being killed.

Our losses, of course, were heavy. But already one was tempted to say that any losses were justified, not merely by the defeat which we had inflicted on the Germans, but in teaching us the magnificent quality of our men, the men who were not professional soldiers, but the British people.

The other chief lessons of the first day of the battle were, first, the magnificent quality of our artillery and, second, the immense strength of the German defences, especially in



the elaborateness of the dug-outs and underground fortifications and in the scientific use of machine-guns.

Many of the towns and villages in this part of France have complete systems of catacomb-like cellars, like the famous *boves* or cellars of Arras and Albert. This was the case at Thiepval and at Serre. In all these cases the German had made the fullest use of them, and had extended them into elaborate subterranean barracks and fortified positions. Elsewhere, as at Fricourt, Montauban, and La Boisselle, we found dug-outs over 30 ft. deep, proof against any shells, and even these had in some instances lower storeys yet, where stores were kept. Some of these we subsequently used as dressing stations and emergency hospitals. The value of such underground habitations in case of such a bombardment as we had inflicted was obvious. The complete destruction of a village overhead only increased the thickness of the protective covering. It was not only at Thiepval that, after our men had passed, the enemy issued from secret hiding places underground, and took our men in the rear and flank with machine-guns, and the fact that the Germans succeeded in holding out in the various villages in the northern part of the line was in each case due to these elaborate underground works.

At one place a number of Germans came out of the dug-outs holding up their hands and bearing white flags. They were rounded up and left under guard. After the main body of our troops had gone on more of the enemy poured out of the burrows, very much outnumbering the guard, when the prisoners, getting such weapons as they could, joined the new comers in turning on their captors. Whether it was a legitimate *ruse de guerre* or not was probably not a question which much troubled the Germans.

As for machine-guns, one was tempted to wonder from the first day of the battle whether an era was not coming in warfare in which the rifle would become subordinate, and the line of evolution would be, like the naval contest between projectiles and armament, a constant struggle to produce, on the one side, more and more impregnable machine-gun positions, and, on



the other, bigger and bigger guns to knock them out. As the battle progressed, when the Germans were forced back to new positions where they had not time to make the elaborate defences of the first line, the machine-gun still remained the pre-eminent factor in resistance to every attack. The strength of the machine-gun for defensive purposes, of course, was not new ; but it was only in such an operation as this, where we were attacking positions which the enemy had been laboriously perfecting for nearly two years, that the value of their machine-gun equipment and organisation was demonstrated in the fullest degree. Wherever their resistance met with any success, it was practically always due to the survival of their machine-guns in impenetrable positions where our bombardment could not reach them. The machine-gunners in the German Army formed a *corps d'élite*, each man, it is said, being bound by an oath not to leave his gun while he lived. They fought, it has to be confessed, with great bravery, and there were many instances on the first day of machine-guns being only silenced when we had reached the enemy's lines and the men manning the guns had been killed either with the bayonet or with bombs.

I am sorry to say that the evidence is undoubted that the machine-guns played upon our wounded on the ground. I talked with several wounded men, who only saved themselves by rolling into shell holes and lying hidden till they could be removed under cover of the darkness.

In places the enemy had made most cunning machine-gun shelters. From one of his deep dug-outs he would run a tunnel backwards or off to one side under a hill. Then ascending, he would drive another tunnel or gallery out to the face of the hill. Here, hidden by a bush or artificial covering, the small opening necessary for a machine-gun would be invisible, and if the slope was, as in some cases it has been, steep enough, no amount of artillery of any calibre would break in the hill above him. Out of half a dozen machine-guns so hidden on the face of a slope, if two or three survive a bombardment, any infantry attack across open ground in front is hopeless, at least in daylight.

Of the character of our artillery I have already spoken. All of us, I think, in the bombardment of the days immediately preceding the battle, when the enemy's reply had been so feeble, had had some apprehension lest he was only lying low, declining to unmask batteries which we should find massed against us in overwhelming strength as soon as the real business began. He did, in fact, discover new guns on the northern part of the front, where, as on the heights above Serre and Puisieux, he had a great concentration of artillery. On the battle front as a whole, however, we had on the first day, and continued to hold, the same mastery as we had possessed in the preceding week. He had no guns to spare for counter-battery work. The energies of his artillery were devoted to endeavouring to check our infantry attacks by *barrages* on our front line and on support lines behind. Much of the first few days I, with other correspondents, spent in wandering among or in advance of our own batteries, and at that period the amount of the German fire which came as far back was very small. Our heavy guns, on the other hand, were persistently pounding his batteries, in which they were immensely assisted by the observation furnished by our supremacy in the air.

No feature of the battle was more conspicuous than this from the first day onwards. We all know that there had been a time, and that very recently, when our flying men had been at a great disadvantage in the air. The completeness with which they had wrested the mastery from the Germans at the time when this battle began was, I believe, an amazement to everybody who witnessed the fighting. There was not a man in the British Army who from the first day was not possessed by an unlimited and joyful admiration of the Royal Flying Corps.

The way in which our aeroplanes dominated the air, sailing and circling over the enemy's lines, disdainful of the shrapnel fired at them, and swinging far away into his country was a delight to watch. Nor was a single German aeroplane to be seen. The value of the work of our machines for purposes of observation was inestimable. It was not only the enemy's

batteries, movements of troops, and such larger matters that they reported to our guns, but they enabled us to harass the enemy in innumerable details. As a minor instance, in one case on the first day of the battle an airman signalled the whereabouts of a convoy of nine enemy lorries on a road quite invisible except from the air. One of our heavy batteries opened fire on it and destroyed three of the lorries and the rest escaped by bolting.

Another airman was flying near Flers, four miles or so in German territory beyond our line, when he saw infantry marching on a road, came down and played a machine-gun on them, getting home unscathed. Instances of similar actions became frequent later. Indeed, it grew to be almost a regular practice of our airmen to worry German infantry on the march or in their trenches in this way; and we know from the statements of hundreds of prisoners and from official documents of higher officers of the German Army what an amount of demoralisation it caused. In those first days the Army rang with praise of the exploits of our flying men.

But, after all, the great fact was what I have called the revelation of the quality of our Army as a whole, the new civilian army of which many of us, perhaps, had had certain misgivings deep down in our hearts. In one day every possibility of misgiving had been swept away. The new Army was worthy of the proudest traditions of the old.

In view of our great success on the south of the line, it was evidently desirable to continue to strike here as hard as possible. In order to enable General Rawlinson to give his undivided attention to the operations on this section of the front, therefore, Sir Douglas Haig removed the two corps holding the north section from the Fourth Army, making them the nucleus of a new (the Fifth) Army which was put under the command of General Sir Hubert Gough. The business of this Army for the moment was to exert steady pressure on the enemy front from La Boisselle northwards, while the main advance was pushed by the Fourth Army on its right.



#### IV

#### FROM FRICOURT TO MAMETZ WOOD

A GLANCE at the map will show how our attack of July 1 had given us two large, nearly semicircular areas of enemy ground—two large bites out of his territory—to the right and left of Fricourt respectively. After the fall of Fricourt itself on July 2 and of La Boisselle on July 3, on the extreme left, our next visible objective of importance must be the village of Ovillers-la-Boisselle. On the extreme right of the Fourth Army front two woods—Bernafay Wood and Trônes Wood—lay between us and any possibility of advance on the nearest villages in that direction, namely, Longueval and Guillemont, which were protected by the German main second line. In the centre lay the large wood of Mametz and the village of Contalmaison. Below these, however, in the wedge or salient of German territory (the apex of which was at Fricourt Wood) there lay a large tract of land, gradually sloping upwards, which was studded with formidable defensive positions, the most notable of which were the long trench line known as Railway Alley, with Bottom Wood and Shelter Wood beyond on the right and left, and the complicated positions known as the Horseshoe and the Quadrangle, the last, which was protected on one side by Acid Drop Copse and on the other by Mametz Wood, being especially strong.

The immediate work which lay before General Rawlinson, then, was to fight his way up through this forbidding series of fortified places until within striking distance of the German



second line and the larger objectives beyond. It was a task which occupied ten days of the sternest fighting.

The clearing of Fricourt Wood, just above the village, was the first operation. This was done by a brigade, which had been in reserve on the previous day, of the division which had carried the trenches on the left of the village. The clearing of the wood occupied them the whole of July 2. The wood was so dense that, with the timber which the enemy had purposely felled and what had been destroyed by our gun fire, it was literally impossible to walk through it. You could only scramble and climb.

The enemy had machine guns at its forward edge and rifles in hiding all through it. As our men attacked, both rifles and machine guns opened fire at a point-blank range of about 150 yards. Officers who saw it say that it was a perfect hurricane of lead which swept the narrow open space before the wood. None the less, from one corner our patrols worked into it. Gradually we got more men in and systematically we went through the whole wood. There was no possibility of our men using their rifles. They could only climb and crawl, and when they came upon a German kill him with a bomb or fall on him in hand-to-hand fight. It was not till 7 o'clock in the evening that the wood was finally safely in our hands and our men had hurriedly, tired as they were, dug themselves in along its forward edge.

Such Germans as had escaped from the wood had slipped across the narrow bit of open ground—less than 200 yards—to the first line of trench beyond, known as Railway Alley. From here throughout the night a persistent and heavy fire was kept up on our front along the wood, with rifles, machine guns, and trench mortars. We made no reply, but kept silence, thinking that silence might worry the enemy more than any useless fusillade. Our men got what rest was possible under the circumstances, for they had had none, though in reserve, the night before. Necessarily the delay in clearing the wood held up our advance in the immediate right and left of it.

With the morning of July 3 began the attack on Railway Alley, which was known to be extremely strongly held. Our artillery had subjected it to a severe bombardment on the day before and continued shelling it that morning. The wire before the trench was fairly destroyed, but the trench itself was not seriously wrecked. Taking advantage of a curve in the ground one company (now commanded by an officer of eighteen) worked up to the communication trench running into it on the right, while farther to the right a battalion pushed up beyond the trench and very gallantly, under heavy fire, rushed and captured the copse known as Bottom Wood, whence, however, they could not debouch; but from there they bombed down to meet the company in the communication trench.

At this moment a small party of Germans was seen to leave the trench at the other end and escape up the slope. It was supposed that all were preparing to evacuate; so a general frontal attack was ordered. As soon as the attack began a terrific fire broke out from the whole line of the trench. The first wave of our attack was already well in the open, and there was no other course but to go on. Officers watching doubt whether any of our first wave and more than very few of our second ever reached the trench; but a third and a fourth and a fifth wave followed. Within five minutes of its starting—some say within three—the enemy's fire was silenced. We were over the parapets and into the trench, bombing, stabbing, and killing as we could.

The actual charge I was able to watch from an artillery observation post on the edge of the plateau behind our original front line to the South of Mametz. The farther edge of the plateau sloped steeply down, seamed with trenches, to where, over a little level bottom land, the village of Mametz lay. The village was then but a ragged pile of grey ruins of what once were houses, with naked tree trunks standing up like ragged black telegraph poles. Immediately to the left lay Fricourt Wood, the narrow point of it jutting out just beyond the northern edge of the village of Mametz. Both Fricourt

Wood and the village had been ours since the previous day.

Above the village and to the right of the end of the wood you saw a bare slope which once was green, but was now one utter wilderness of brown and pounded earth. Diagonally across this a white line of trench showed clearly the course of Railway Alley. Beyond Railway Alley a small crescent-shaped spinney on the left had the name of Shelter Wood. A tiny patch of wood to the right of it was Railway Copse; another to the left, no more than a small clump of trees, was rather ridiculously named The Poodles, from a fancied resemblance of the outline of the trees to some sort of animal. All these places, with the exception of Shelter Wood, were full of Germans, and I saw them cleared out.

Shelter Wood had been captured on the preceding day by attack from the west; and the taking of it was a very determined and gallant achievement. There was probably as bitter hand-to-hand fighting as had taken place in all this dreadful struggle. Our men were at close grips with the enemy for three and a half hours, every minute of it strained and breathless fighting. Our losses were inevitably severe; but there were German dead alone upon the field as many as our total casualties, and we took nearly as many again in prisoners. Already, at this early stage of the battle, we began to realise the terrible, intensive character of the fighting, where the field was so narrow and the German defences so intricate that incidents which involved as many men and as many casualties as considerable battles in ordinary wars were fought out on a single acre of ground, around a trench or in the shadow of a wood.

The possession of Shelter Wood in a measure isolated the Germans in Railway Alley from their supports on that side. From the Alley itself, however, from Railway Copse and from The Poodles, machine guns and rifles poured a withering fire on our men as they advanced.

From our position on the slope we watched the dotted brown lines of our men swing out from the end of Fricourt Wood—



irregular, snaky lines, one behind the other, followed by other bits of lines and scattered dots, across that dreadful brown open space. Some of the dots ceased to keep up with the others; but the lines as a whole went on, bending a little, at points seeming to break, but always others seemed to come up and the line joined again, and always it went on till, even as one watched, the left end of it disappeared in the shadows of The Poodles and, almost simultaneously, the middle and right of the line reached the end of the white scar on the slope which marked Railway Alley; and into it, behind the white parapets, we saw our men pouring without a check.

As soon as they were in they started bombing. We could see their arms swing as they threw the bombs, and the air above became thick with smoke and the dust of the struggle that was going on out of sight below. But it was very short. Almost before the last of our men were into the trench at one end other figures came pouring out at the other. They looked darker than our men, and they came running straight down the slope towards Mametz; and as they came they brandished what we took to be handkerchiefs, and all had their hands above their heads.

There was an astonishing number of them, more than our men in the thin lines which had pushed so gallantly up the hill. And then yet others came, more slowly, under guard, from the trees of The Poodles. In all we got 700 prisoners from these two spots.

By now the machine guns in Railway Copse had been silenced and our men had pushed in there from Shelter Wood beyond. In both those places more prisoners were taken, and the whole bag of the afternoon in that one area amounted to 1,100. But what chiefly impressed one as one watched was that it was all curiously unreal and like some scene on the cinematograph which had been carefully rehearsed before being photographed.

I know that the foregoing is not the orthodox way in which to describe what was really a very gallant and thrilling performance by British troops, a notable and successful incident



in a gigantic battle, which will be described for centuries in history. It ought to be told with many glorifying adjectives; but I am trying to describe just what I saw. And it all passed in plain view in the brilliant sunshine of a perfect summer day.

Of course, to complete the picture you must have the setting. The air fairly shook to the noise of our guns, firing from behind us and around us and from every direction. The shells screamed and hurtled—saying *whirra whirra* as they went—over our heads. High above us our aeroplanes circled and paraded up and down. Beyond the field where all these things went on smoke rose unceasingly, in white puffs and great grey columns from where the guns around us were dropping their shells to form a *barrage* against reinforcements coming from the enemy beyond.

Above all, of course, the picture was made splendid, as one watched, by the significance behind it. That brown line, so waving, yet so steady and irresistible, was our men—and so were those poor dots which ceased to keep up with the others. And those bands of others running with their hands upraised were the enemy; an enemy who was infinitely cunning in resource and incomparable in his organisation, but who—as you here saw before your eyes—was never a match, man to man, when it really came to grips on even terms, for our men.

The capture of these positions had practically wiped out the German wedge or salient between the two halves of our advance so that we held a fairly even line from La Boisselle on the left to Montauban on the right; and the next few days were occupied with local and confused but desperate fighting at almost all points along this line. Everywhere, it must be remembered, we were fighting up hill over difficult ground against positions which had been strengthened to the last detail in the course of the two years of the German preparation.

On the right, northward from Montauban, our artillery so shattered the long sinuous line of Caterpillar Wood that it offered little resistance to our infantry and by July 5 we had

forced our way for about 1,000 yards beyond Montauban to Marlboro' Wood, which we captured after a short burst of very fierce fighting. This brought us on that side almost abreast of the middle of Mametz Wood.

On the further left there was a hard and prolonged struggle for possession of the two little patches of woodland, known as Birch Tree and Peake's Woods, and of a formidable complication of trenches resting upon the latter wood, known as the Horseshoe. We attacked the Horseshoe simultaneously from two sides, from the southern end and also at the northern angle, which was protected by a strongly fortified redoubt. Both attacks were successful, but on each side our troops thought that the others had occupied more of the Horseshoe than was the case. For a day the enemy remained in possession of trenches in the middle of the position from which he was able to snipe us both ways. It was not until Peake's Wood, just beyond the Horseshoe, was taken in a separate operation by a frontal attack that the situation was cleared up. This was done on the evening and night of July 6-7, and throughout the operations there was bitter hand-to-hand fighting, both by day and in the darkness, and repeated bombing attacks and counter-attacks.

Of all these minor positions, however, the most formidable resistance was offered by the Quadrangle which I have already mentioned. It was only roughly a quadrangle, and the first and longest side, known as Quadrangle Trench, as well as the right and left hand parallels, called respectively Quadrangle Alley and Pearl Alley, though costly and formidable enough, offered no such obstacle as the fourth and shortest side, known as Quadrangle Support, which had extremely strong positions at both ends of it, and was commanded, on the one hand, from Contalmaison, and, on the other, from Mametz Wood, whence it could always be reinforced.

Working up the two side parallels of the Quadrangle we could get close up to the strong positions at both ends of the Support, but the positions themselves resisted every attempt upon them, whether made by direct attack, with bombs, or with

trench mortars. Heavy enemy counter-attacks on Quadrangle Trench were stoutly repulsed by troops of the Royal Irish and Welsh Fusiliers. Between July 4 and July 9 we made three separate frontal attacks on the Support itself. The first two failed. In the third, made shortly before midnight on the 9th, a Staffordshire battalion crept out in dead silence till within a few yards of the trench. Then with one yell of "Stafford," they rushed the parapets and literally fell headlong on the enemy inside. Here there was real bayonet work of the sternest kind, and it is believed that not a German got away.

We stayed in the trench all night until after 3 a.m., but with daylight the enemy began to sweep it with machine-gun and rifle fire from both ends. It was impossible to stay, because no one who stayed could have lived, and at last in the early morning, most reluctantly, those of our men who were left made their way back in small parties to the other side of the Quadrangle.

With the fall of Contalmaison and Mametz Wood on the following day, another battalion of the same Brigade again rushed the Support and, as this time it was no longer raked by fire from the two ends, held it for good. In the course of the ten days' fighting this Brigade had worked its way right up from Fricourt to the top of the Quadrangle, and in doing so had taken over 1,500 prisoners, ten machine guns, and three field guns, and a lot of other booty.

Mametz Wood and the village of Contalmaison, it has just been said, were captured on July 10. We had penetrated into both places before this. Our patrols had been some way into the wood and we had an established line across the lower spur of it; as for Contalmaison, a party of Northumberland Fusiliers had actually entered it on the second day of the battle—July 2—when they had fought their way, far ahead of any supports, from the direction of La Boisselle. It was one of those incredible incidents which occurred again and again in this fighting, when, if our men had a fault, it was their excess of courage. They seemed determined that if they straggled, they should straggle straight towards the enemy;



and at least a dozen times in the first three months' fighting on the Somme, small detachments of our men stormed on ahead of the general line "into the blue" and got "lost," generally to be found again, probably reduced in numbers and after amazing experiences, when our general advance pushed on some days later. This was the case here at Contalmaison.

After the reduction of the Horseshoe, on the following morning, July 7, at about 7 o'clock we began a bombardment of the enemy's positions at Contalmaison and in Mametz Wood as heavy, perhaps, as any which had taken place in this battle. It was a magnificent spectacle as I watched it from a short distance away. From Mametz Wood, from Contalmaison, from by and beyond La Boisselle—points on which the fire was concentrated—great columns of smoke clouds rose continually, even darker than the rain clouds which covered the sky, and against this background each shell-burst showed with a stab of flame.

At 8 o'clock the air above Contalmaison and Mametz Wood began to clear. Over La Boisselle and beyond, towards Thiepval, the tumult seemed to increase, but from Contalmaison and Mametz Wood, where our infantry was now attacking, the fire was pushed back on the German positions beyond.

Advancing both to right and left of the wood and on Contalmaison, our men swept through machine-gun and rifle fire without a check. By 10 o'clock they were working through the wood. By noon word came that they were in part of Contalmaison and had taken 300 prisoners. At one point in the wood a considerable party of Germans, after what they had been through, came to shake hands with our men almost sobbing at mere joy to be out of it.

Perhaps the most dramatic incident of the fighting occurred between Mametz Wood and Contalmaison, on which line one of our attacking columns was to push up. Whether in anticipation of an attack or not, or as an independent offensive movement, is not known, but just before our heavy bombardment



started the enemy launched on this line a heavy attack with five battalions of the Third Reserve Division of the Prussian Guard. They came down over the ground where an hour later our infantry would have been pushing up. When half way, in the half light of the dull morning, our bombardment suddenly broke upon them. One battalion especially seems to have caught the full force of it. They appear to have endeavoured to push on through it and some did do so, only to be made prisoners by our men.

They gave the most appalling accounts of the destructiveness of our artillery fire, as it caught them, declaring that they lost in a few minutes 75 per cent. of their effective number. Certain it is that they were quite shattered. The prisoners said that they had been told and understood that our troops which had done the fighting hereabouts in the last few days were our Guards Regiments. They were astounded when they heard that it was "Kitchener Men" who had fought like that.

The later incidents in this immediate neighbourhood are extremely obscure. About noon the rain clouds which had covered the sky began to break. The storm increased in intensity and throughout the afternoon and all night long an almost tropical downpour—like the worst of a thundershower continuing for twelve hours—continued. A great quantity of moisture fell and, under the torrent, through which no one could even see any distance, operations became practically impossible.

From the confused accounts of what passed it is difficult to get a clear view of the events of the afternoon and night. It was from the south-west that an attack on Contalmaison was delivered, chiefly by a trench known as Shelter Alley. It was a most gallant affair, led by an officer who won the Victoria Cross in Gallipoli. Some three companies, or what was left of them, actually got into the village and occupied, perhaps, one-third of it.

Then came the rain. At Contalmaison itself the trench by which our men had gone up, already half choked with dead and wounded, became almost literally full of water, a rushing

stream. Supports tried to get up and failed. The enemy appears to have come round from the west side of the village in the dark and counter-attacked, and our little band fell back to a single point at the extreme south of the place. That they held; and the extraordinary thing is that with them they took seventy prisoners, as well as the party of Northumberland Fusiliers whom they found in a dug-out.

For two days our line rested here without material change, touching the outskirts of Contalmaison, thence across the Quadrangle, below the final trench from Acid Drop Copse, and so through the lower spur of Mametz Wood. The chain of enemy positions here was extremely strong, and the two days were spent subjecting them to the heaviest possible bombardment. On July 10 the real attack on the whole of this line was delivered, and nothing could exceed the gallantry with which it was pushed. The Welsh troops, when, after two days of waiting, they were once started into the wood, displayed the utmost doggedness and determination in the way they fought their way through and almost to the top of it.

Mametz Wood, as nearly as one could calculate a tract so irregular in form, had an area of about 220 acres. There was one patch where it was fairly open, in its south-westerly portion; but in all the rest the young growth of saplings—which had missed two seasons of their usual thinning—was so thick that, as an officer who was with the first troops to push through expressed it to me after the fight, even when on foot “you had to twist and squeeze to get through.” There were certain drives cleared through it and a railway line cut diagonally across it from south-west to north-east in its upper portion.

In its southern end the Germans had strung barbed-wire entanglements through the trees. Elsewhere there were four heavy guns in the wood, which we captured. Apart from this, the enemy had it chiefly defended with machine-gun positions, with the usual concomitants of deep dug-outs, etc., at various points round the circumference, commanding all approaches and any place on the inside of the wood where the

growth was thin. He expected the density of the wood itself to be a sufficient obstacle to anything like formidable attack through it.

So strong was it held to be that I know that there were those who, at the beginning of these operations, considered that we could never carry it directly, but should have to content ourselves with working round it and keeping it masked until we could isolate and reduce it, as it were, by siege. Approach to it, both from the east and west, was made extremely difficult by the interlaced position of the Quadrangle on the west side and similar positions by Flatiron Copse on the other. That we forced our way up systematically through from the south to the north, the northern edge being only some 300 yards from the front trenches of the main German second line, in spite of all that the enemy could do from his carefully chosen positions, added to very heavy artillery shelling, was a magnificent testimony to the stubbornness and courage of our troops.

We managed to deceive the enemy into thinking that our real attack was to be delivered from the east side of the wood, and, while he put a tremendous artillery *barrage* on that side, our main force pushed up into the wood from the south, working north and north-west. That evening we were some three-quarters of the way through the wood.

It was on the same day that the troops outside the wood on the left side carried the Quadrangle Support with its formidable connecting positions. Without this position in our hands we could never have got to the top of the wood, except at very heavy cost.

Officers in command told me that nothing could have exceeded the dash and keenness of their men. Indeed, they were almost too keen. In attacking we, of course, had our artillery at work on the wood ahead. Some scattered parties of our men actually pushed up through our own fire to the very edge of the wood, not in the least deterred by the fact that they might in this way lose their lives from our own shells on the way. Our artillery, then, to spare them, had to lift

off the wood on to the German second line beyond, the Germans still holding their machine-gun positions all along the northern and north-eastern edge of the wood.

That night we drew in our advanced parties and organised on a line about half-way up the wood, made up partly of an open drive and partly of the old railway line. The enemy tried to counter-attack us during the night, but made no impression on our position. In the morning we again advanced with four battalions, which pushed out to the east, north-east, north, and north-west. Besides machine guns and rifles the enemy had *Minenwerfer* on the northern edge of the wood. We got, over most of the front, to within forty or fifty yards of the edge, but could not make that last narrow strip, every yard of which was charged with death.

Again we drew back—some English troops having now relieved the Welsh—part way to the line on which we had rested before, while for thirty minutes our guns pounded the edge of the wood. Immediately the bombardment ceased we attacked again. But the machine guns, in impenetrable retreats at the north-east and north-west angles of the wood, had escaped our shelling and for some time held us up, sweeping every inch of the now half-thinned wood, through which the fallen timber, shattered by the shells, made barricades against our advance almost as formidable as wire entanglements. Only by sheer pluck and utter contempt for death did we go on.

It was a desperate and awful day's work ; and it was not until 4 o'clock in the afternoon of July 11 that we finally broke out of the wood on the north-east corner, silenced the machine guns, captured the *Minenwerfer*, and, so far as is known, killed or took prisoner every German there.

During the evening the remaining (or north-west) corner of the wood was taken and by nightfall the whole place was in our hands. The night was spent in consolidating the position, which was only 300 yards from the main German second line.



## V

### CONTALMAISON

THE capture of Contalmaison was an equally fine achievement, successfully carried through under most difficult conditions. It has been told how we penetrated into a portion of the village some days before, but, through mischance in the dark and torrential rain, failed to hold our place. We had, however, held on to a single strong point at the very southern end of the place.

The difficulty of attacking lay not merely, or even chiefly, in its individual strength so much as in the fact that the approaches to it were commanded by the enemy. On the right or east side, between Contalmaison itself and Mametz Wood, we were held up by the obstacle of the Quadrangle and its connected positions, and we could not reach Contalmaison from that side. On the west, there was bare ground, swept by the enemy's guns, across which there were only two practicable lines of approach, by inadequate communication trenches, from which it was impossible to debouch. The direct approach from the south was completely at the mercy of the enemy's artillery in the direction of Pozières.

It was from the south-west that our first attack of July 7 had been delivered. By July 10, however, we had worked up on the left, or west, side into Bailiff's Wood, which, while we had penetrated it before, was higher than any point that we had formerly occupied. Probably the enemy thought an attack across the open from that side impossible. At all events he seems to have read the indications as pointing to a new attack from the south. Instead of that, our men—troops who had

already done most gallant work in the taking of the Horseshoe maze of trenches—charged boldly with a rush across from Bailiff's Wood and other points on the west. It was an extremely dashing attack and entirely successful, attended with much less loss than an attack from the south, against which the enemy had prepared his machine-gun and other defences, could have been.

The attack was made in four successive waves, each close on the heels of the one before. It was preceded by a *barrage*, which was lifted just in advance as the men went on; and the work of the artillery was, as usual, admirable.

We struck the village first at the north-west corner, thence sweeping round on the north side and simultaneously penetrating it at many points on the west. The fighting was of the bloodiest description. Through and among the ruins the battle raged with hand-to-hand combats and the blindest of fighting at short range. As always, the German, who, throughout this fighting here, showed himself brave and tenacious in holding on to his machine-gun positions and fortified posts, was no match for our men at this close and desperate work in the open. Their losses were very heavy. There is every reason to suppose that they were in greater strength than were the troops which we threw into the attack, but they were driven and battered and stabbed and thrust out of the village to stream away out of the north-east corner. Here they were caught by our guns, and, even more efficaciously, by some of our machine guns, which, taking their range from artillery officers, fired, from our advanced positions below the village, over an intervening ridge, doing terrible execution among the fugitives.

Here, as elsewhere, the enemy had huge dug-outs and old caves enlarged below the buildings of the little town. These refuges have been extremely valuable to him in many instances since the battle began, and also not infrequently they have been his death-trap. In one dug-out in Contalmaison it is said that we took eighty German prisoners and in another sixty.



THE KING PASSING BETWEEN TWO LARGE CRATERS NEAR MAMETZ.





The capture of Mametz Wood, Contalmaison, and the final stronghold in the Quadrangle in the one operation of July 10-11, was a very fine performance. The artillery received the especial thanks of the Army Commander. Splendid service was also rendered, as often in this battle, by the Pioneer Battalion which pushed up through Mametz Wood with the Welsh Division and showed the greatest gallantry in consolidating the newly won positions, wiring the front of the line and making strong positions which enabled us to hold on against desperate counter-attacks which followed. The infantry engaged had had some sixty hours of hard fighting with practically no rest, and their stubbornness and determination were beyond praise.

While this struggle was going on in the centre of our advance, hard fighting also took place both on the right and left. On the left we doggedly forced our way along the German first line and through the maze of defences behind it from La Boisselle into the village of Ovillers-la-Boisselle. The latter was destined to be the scene of as protracted and sanguinary a struggle in a contracted area as, perhaps, any other spot on all the Somme battlefield. At this time—July 10—we were only in possession of the southern portion of the village.

On the extreme right there had been fighting of the toughest kind. We had driven the enemy from the dip running east and west, known as Caterpillar Valley, and, almost yard by yard, forced our way up the slope beyond to a line practically level with the middle of Mametz Wood. Further to the right we had cleared Bernafay Wood without great loss. Then a desperate struggle ensued for possession of Trônes Wood. Three times we had swept across the open under machine-gun fire into Trônes Wood, only to find it impossible to hold it when we got there. It was continuously swept by the enemy's fire from above, at and beyond Guillemont, and the approaches to it on the German side from the north were sheltered by the lie of the ground, so that he could always pour in supports for a counter-attack. We could—and three times did—clear the enemy out of the wood by sheer superiority in fighting.

Then no man could live to hold what had been won under the rain of shells which poured into it.

It was necessary that the Germans should not hold the wood, not for our own sake so much as because from it they could enfilade the French upon our right. But it was merely giving up our men to be slaughtered by shell fire to leave them in the wood in strength. So for several days the wood, now blasted out of all semblance to a real wood, lay as a Dead Man's Land, untenable by either party, between the Armies. In the several attacks on the wood, the gallantry with which our troops charged across the open, in the face of intense machine-gun fire, from the direction of Bernafay Wood (as, on one occasion, by certain of the Queen's) was as fine as, perhaps, anything in the Battle of the Somme. After one attack, when we had gone through the wood and then been compelled to withdraw again, a party of about 100 of the West Kent Regiment were cut off in the further side of the wood. The enemy knew that they were there, and made every possible effort to dislodge them, but the gallant little band held on until the final capture of the wood on July 14.

The result of the first twelve days of fighting had been that we had won from the enemy ground on an average front of about 8,000 yards to a depth of between 3,000 and 4,000 yards, or, roughly, about eight square miles. In this area were five villages, and we had taken about 8,000 prisoners.

On the first day of the battle, on July 1, I had seen a batch of 470 prisoners and thereafter, every day, one saw them in large or small parties, till one became very familiar with the awkward, mud-spattered figures in their field-grey uniform, bareheaded or with the small red-banded cap perched on the top of their square heads. They generally showed in their gait that they were very tired, and they walked furtively and with a cowed and frightened air; for at that time nearly all Germans believed that they would be killed if they fell into British hands.

As they came down they were kept for a while in "cages," as the paddocks enclosed with barbed wire were called, for

the necessary examinations and so forth, and then, as rapidly as possible, cleared for the rear. Every time that one visited one of these cages one found it full of a new lot. And they varied extraordinarily. Many were fine, robust-looking men in the prime of life. As many others were weedy and poor, some old, some very young. And it was by no means the "best" regiments which were now composed of the best material. I saw none who looked under-nourished, though many had plainly endured great privations immediately before their capture.

In some of the officers' dug-outs there were ample evidences of plenty and even luxury, with great quantities of dainties in tins and glasses and large numbers of bottles of, especially, a famous table-water, the spring of which is *not* in Germany, and of one of the best-known brands of Scotch whisky. The officers themselves were sometimes singularly offensive in their manner, and there was abundant evidence of the ill-feeling borne towards many of them by their men.

There was a notorious case of a German officer who, after his capture, when walking down to our lines under guard, suddenly produced a bomb from, it is believed, his cap, and threw it at a British officer, killing him and the man to whom he was talking. It was generally reported in the Army that, with our fine but perhaps excessive punctiliousness, he was tried by court-martial and acquitted, because the evidence against him—the two men who could have testified best being killed—was technically insufficient. There seems to have been not the smallest moral doubt of his guilt, and a British officer under like circumstances in Germany would unquestionably have been shot out of hand.

Some of our men engaged about Contalmaison told an absurd story of a German officer who came out to surrender as if on parade, with gloves and cane, and very spick and span—whereas, to do them justice, the German prisoners generally looked deplorable. As he advanced, his first remark was to demand a certificate as to his gallantry and honour. Our men were so enraged that they incontinently fell upon him and



took his gloves and cane, and cut all the buttons and badges off his coat. It is the one solitary instance which I have heard where Tommy has had any idea except to feed his prisoners and make pets of them.

In these first days I talked with many prisoners and with men of the Prussian Guard, with Württembergers and Bavarians. Württembergers of the 122nd Regiment told me how they had been hurried over from the Russian front. They arrived here five days before and had a terrible time, having been very badly off for both food and water since they arrived ; and they frankly expressed their pleasure at being taken prisoners. When I saw them they were being fed, Tommy making himself very greasy in showing them how to open bully-beef tins. One man, who was a baker by trade when at home, was loud in praise of the quality of our Army biscuits. As coming from an expert the testimony had value.

The prisoners spoke quite freely of the very bad times which their families were having at home from lack of food. One man was illuminating. When he told how tired they all were of the war, and I told him that on the contrary Great Britain was only just beginning to fight—"But," he said sadly, "you had very few men to fight with at the beginning of the war. Our losses have been terrible from the first." He added, however, as an afterthought: "But you had your Fleet." With which I agreed.

Of the behaviour of our men as a whole, I have already spoken, and to tell particular stories of individual gallantry seems in a way unjust when so many thousands of deeds as gallant must go unrecorded. Such stories, however, were abundant after every day's fighting.

In one case a man of the Northumberland Fusiliers was sent back with a message. He had to pass through a zone exposed to rifle fire and was mortally wounded. He struggled on, however, and just managed to reach one of our advanced posts. As he sank down, he could only muster strength enough to point to a spot on his tunic and say, "It's in here!" And he died.



A lieutenant in a Yorkshire regiment was wounded and fell. As he lay, he was sniped (as the German way is) and was hit twice more. With the three wounds, after twelve hours in the open, he managed to crawl back under cover of the darkness. On the way he found two unwounded Germans hiding in a shell hole, and, with his revolver, he brought them home as prisoners.

There was a stretcher-bearer of the Lincolns who crept out some 400 yards at night right up to the German wire at a point where another regiment had been attacking, and there picked up a wounded captain of that other regiment and brought him safely back, though the ground was swept with rifle and machine-gun fire.

Certain men of one of our regiments had pushed out and held a desperate and almost hopeless advanced position. Some men of the Royal Engineers crawled out to them literally on their stomachs, and there, working in the dark, put up wire round our little outpost. The Sappers brought back word that the men certainly could not live. But they did, and it was the wire that saved them.

It was a captain of the Lincolns again who was wounded in the heel and went on. Then he was wounded in the thigh, and he still went on. He was wounded in the arm, and not even that stopped him. It was a fourth bullet in the head that killed him, and he died instantaneously, lying with his arm raised still waving his men on.

Some day, perhaps, a poem will be inspired by the tale of the young lieutenant of the same battalion who had leaped into the enemy's trench and, it is conjectured, had leaped straight upon an exploding bomb. He was dreadfully mangled but they got him back, only to die as he was being attended to. And he died smiling, saying that everything was all right as long as we had got the trench.

But such tales tell little of all the splendid heroism of our men. I have mentioned in the course of the narrative the names of a certain number of individual regiments; but one cannot yet, without disclosing too many details of our battle

order, write freely of all the troops engaged. But the glory was not to individual regiments but to the British Army. Accidents of narrative give credit to one battalion and ignore others which did equally well. In the main it was the staunch British line regiments which bore the burden of the day, and it is impossible to say that any showed finer courage than any other. In all the line only one battalion of overseas troops was engaged, and by a caprice of fate it had the heaviest losses of any unit engaged. This was the gallant Newfoundland Regiment. Flinging itself heroically against what proved to be an impregnable position, it lost, in one terrible but glorious hour of fighting, all the officers and over three-quarters of the men who went into action. Surely gallantry could go no farther !

Happily in all this early fighting the number of killed and seriously wounded was small in comparison to the total casualties. Even so, the price of victory was sufficiently heavy. But history will recognise how gloriously it was worth it.

## VI

### BREAKING THE GERMAN SECOND LINE

WE have seen how over the greater part of our front we were now confronting the main German second line where it ran before the villages of Bazentin-le-Petit, Bazentin-le-Grand, and Longueval. We did not rest there long. The fighting of July 10 and 11 had given us Mametz Wood and Contalmaison. On July 12 we rectified our line at minor points on the right and left. One day only was spent in preparation for the new attack and before daybreak on July 14 we struck again: struck on a front of about 5,000 yards and everywhere shattered the German defences and won what history will recognise to have been as brilliant a success as British arms have ever achieved.

For those who were there, in touch with what was going on, it was a wonderful and thrilling day, and so crowded with unforgettable experiences that, writing that same evening, I said that already the morning seemed weeks away.

By 3 o'clock in the morning, while it was still night, we—three other correspondents and myself—were at a certain point which we knew would be the best vantage ground from which to watch the battle; and it is unnecessary to say that by now we knew each ridge and hollow of this region pretty well. It was inevitably some distance from the actual fighting; too far, amid the smoke and twilight of the morning, to see the front line of our infantry going into action, but near enough for our guns to be all round and behind us; and in the darkness it seemed as if the heavens above were full of the

whistle and flurry of invisible wings from the shells passing overhead.

As a spectacle, the bombardment was more stupendous than any that we had yet seen, and our men engaged in the fight as well as the German prisoners all said that they had known nothing like it. As we learned later, on no other occasion in the battle did our artillery do finer work.

It was a thick night, the sky veiled in mottled and hurrying clouds, through which only one planet shone serene and steadily, high up in the eastern sky. But the wonderful and appalling thing was the belt of flame which fringed a great arc of the horizon before us. It was not, of course, a steady flame, but it was one which never went out, rising and falling, flashing, and flickering, half dimmed with its own smoke, against which the stabs and jets of fire of the bursting shells flared out intensely white or dully orange. Out of it all, now here now there, rose like fountains the great balls of star shells and signal lights—theirs or ours—white and crimson and green. The noise of the shells was terrific, and when the guns nearest to us spoke not only the air but the earth beneath us shook.

All the while overhead, amid all the clamour and shock, in the darkness and no less as night paled to day, the larks sang. Only now and again would the song be audible, but whenever there was an interval between the roaring of the nearer guns, above all the more distant tumult, it came down clear and very beautiful by contrast. Nor was the lark the only bird that was awake, for close by us, somewhere in the dark, a quail kept ceaselessly urging us—or the guns—to be *Quick-be-quick*.

Far off to the right the shimmering in the sky told us where the beautiful French guns were busy. On the left the region of Oivillers-la-Boisselle was like a volcano in violent eruption. But it was on the ground immediately before us that the chief interest centred, for there, between 3 o'clock and 3.30, the great attempt was to be made to drive home our successes of the past 10 days by a smashing blow at the enemy's second line.

Hardly had we been fairly confronting that line for 24 hours.





THE VIRGIN OF MONTAUBAN—THE ONLY THING LEFT INTACT IN HER VILLAGE.



We had worked—oh, how our men had worked!—during those precious hours to get ready for this new attack. To the enemy we hoped that it would seem incredible that we could yet be ready. Surely, he must be saying to himself, the contemptible little Army will need time to consolidate itself and sit down to consider before it dares to come on again. We had done all we could to confuse him by the ferocity of spasmodic bombardments which had given him no rest, and we had worked, worked, worked; and I believe, when the history of this war comes to be coolly written, that the rapidity with which we delivered this new and tremendous blow on the second line, with the intricate troop movements which took place in the darkness of the night of July 13—14, will be recognised as a triumph of generalship and of organisation.

The whole front was to be smashed through. Beyond lay the villages of Bazentin-le-Grand and Bazentin-le-Petit, each with its great sheltering wood, and we knew what these woods might mean. How much of the front should we really be able to break? Should we get through at all or would it be a sheer physical impossibility? And then, these villages and woods, with, as the ultimate high-water mark of our hopes, the end of the long rise culminating in the commanding position of High Wood. If only we could dream of getting there! It was a suspense which amounted almost to torture to watch an attempt such as this being made, and to be quite unable clearly to see what went on; for that, under the conditions of a modern battle, is impossible. When once your men have gone forward through the smoke and the enemy's *barrages*, everything is mystery, except in so far as they may be able to notify their positions and their needs by pre-arranged codes of rockets, and so forth, or as runners with dispatches may be able to get back through that deadly zone.

We could read the signs, however, fairly well. We knew when, at just before 3.30, our men went forward and we could follow our artillery fire as it was pushed back to let our men go on. We could guess the enemy's awakening to the situation by the frenzied storm of shells which he poured between us

and our front line. We knew that our men had gone through, and we saw that they did not come back.

By 4 o'clock the sky began to lighten. Dimly against and through the clouds, as soon as there was any hope of seeing anything, our first aeroplane came droning low overhead straight across the raging belt in front of us, an extraordinarily impressive sight. Behind us, in the twilight, our kite balloons began to ascend, alternately engulfed in clouds and clearly visible. Where had been all blackness and flame before us, the earth began to differentiate itself from the sky, with some faint colour showing in the grass and the dark mass of Mametz Wood and the pale lines of trench and of Contalmaison's ruins. Over to the right, towards Longueval, we saw the glow of a great fire, with huge flames licking up and a circle of red reflected in the clouds above, and it stayed and grew. Nearer to us on the left we were lighting signal fires behind our lines, while in the growing light the flash of the shells began to pale and the wreathing banks of smoke grew more visible. More aeroplanes passed overhead; always our own, never one from the enemy's side. Still the deafening roar of the guns went on, though it seemed as if there could be nothing left to break or kill, and when, by about 4.30, it was almost full daylight—though without any sign of a sun—the clamour and the turmoil were not one whit less terrible than they had been each minute since we came. And still, whenever their voices could be heard, the lark sang and the impatient quail went on urging, *Quick-be-quick! Quick-be-quick!*

We knew that our men were through; and we believed that they had not come back. But it was only later, when bulletins from this division and from that, from one corps and another, came in that we began to understand how splendid—how incredible—our first success had been. We had failed nowhere. We had swept the whole much-vaunted German second line, in spite of all its long fortification, over every rod on which we had attacked it. We had gone on—more than once our men having to wait impatiently for our artillery fire ahead of them to push on—into and through both Bazentin-le-Petit and



Bazentin-le-Grand villages ; and both woods were ours. We were in Longueval. And before noon we heard that our advanced patrols had even touched High Wood itself.

Whether we could hold all these was another matter to be proved hereafter. The essential fact was that we had struck at the enemy where, after two years of preparation, he had, during the last 10 days, massed men and guns and machine guns to resist us—all that Germany in all her strength could do—and his front had broken and splintered into bits before us.

Not that we learned these tidings all at once ; for, after returning to our quarters for a short interval, we—one other correspondent and myself—pushed out again to see how far we could follow up on the heels of victory. An hour before noon we were out again beyond where we had been at dawn, and after that the day was a bewildering chaos of experiences that one can never forget, threading one's way through all the amazing sights of the British Armies in motion, so gigantic and so superbly orderly ; past and among batteries where the detonation of each gun smote one with a definite and stunning shock ; through the dust and interminable rhythmic processions of marching men, of horses and guns and transport columns ; over successive lines of trenches and through ruined villages which a few days ago were German ; meeting details of prisoners being marched back and our own wounded. And the heat, the dust, the noise, the suffering, and all were glorified by the thrill of victory that was in the air.

The plan of the war correspondent is, on such an occasion, to push up with your motor-car as far as the regulations or the enemy will let you go. Then you leave the car in some place where it is least likely to get in the way of our traffic or the enemy's shells, and go on foot. We went by the way where the wounded were dribbling back to the first dressing station. It is always a dreadful sight, and grows none the less dreadful by familiarity ; the lightly wounded coming walking down, their wounds in head or limb hastily done up in a handkerchief or with the bandage of an emergency dressing

by themselves or by a comrade, those more seriously hurt but still able to limp or walk being helped by another with an arm round the waist; some carried pick-a-back; saddest of all, those who can only come on stretchers, some unconscious, some able to move an arm or to look up and smile—they will always smile—but terrible sights all of them.

Happily the losses in this attack were less than we had any right to expect. In the first part of the day they were almost illogically light. In the afternoon, when the enemy seems to have in a measure rallied from the first shock and when we came up against the more strongly fortified of the positions behind his front lines, we suffered more severely. But for the tenth time in these later operations of this war it was shown that in a victorious and successful attack it is not the attacking side which loses most seriously. There is no doubt that we killed and wounded far more of the enemy than were killed or wounded among us; and, in addition, there were the prisoners.

I myself saw that day about 800 prisoners, all taken by one of our divisions, and mostly of 16th, 190th, 91st, and 184th Regiments. Something over 300 were in one barbed-wire "cage," all captured in the early morning. Then we saw several smaller parties on their way down, and, finally, a detail of 70 who were being employed at the dressing station to act as stretcher-bearers, etc., carrying our wounded. Late in the afternoon we saw something over 700 together whom, to be on the safe side, I assume to have included all those (except the party impressed for Red Cross work) whom we had seen before. These had been collected and were being marched along a railway track, a whole battalion in strength; and they were good to see.

One strange thing was to see the German wounded and our wounded coming on after attention at the dressing station, in ambulances together. There was absolute impartiality in their treatment. I saw in one ambulance five of our men and three Germans; in another two Germans and the rest all ours—these all being slightly wounded and able to sit up side

by side. In another I saw a British and a German officer together.

One of the first things which prisoners want to do after they are taken and fed and rested is to write home, and there was hardly one letter so written which did not testify to the writer's astonishment at the kindness with which he had been treated. There were some here who would have changed the method and have meted out to our prisoners the same treatment as we were given in Germany. But I believe that the vast majority of Britons will hold that we were and are right. The German will probably remain a German; but it is best we should continue to be ourselves. It is our precedent and not that of the Hun which is going to influence posterity; and if we fell entirely to his level the future of humanity would be dark.

July 14 is France's Day. We had celebrated it gloriously. In speaking of the gallantry of our men that day, I wrote in *The Times* as follows:

"It is an extraordinary and, I believe, unprecedented thing in operations of such magnitude and fighting of so terrible a character that, not yesterday only, but ever since this battle began, there have been absolutely no stragglers. One hears the same of every battalion in each division on all parts of the front. And in saying this I am not merely flattering national pride or endeavouring to impress neutrals or strike terror into the enemy or anything else. I am merely stating the simple fact. Our men have never flinched, town-bred or country-bred, miner, clerk, factory hand, farmer's labourer, and all—duke's son and cook's son alike, they have done their job, so far as human beings could do it, with a gallantry and a determination which has never faltered."

A curious incident occurred in connection with that paragraph. Some three or four days later several of us, largely strangers to each other, were sitting in a room where a number of newspapers lay about. Among the company was a Brigadier-General, a stranger to me, who was reading a newspaper. Suddenly he laid it down and, addressing the company at



large, said: "That is true: extraordinarily true!" Asked for an explanation, he said: "What this chap has written in *The Times*"—and he proceeded to read aloud the paragraph which I have quoted. Then he went on and told us how, in the fighting of July 1 and 2, he had had details sent out to round up stragglers of his brigade. They had watched and scoured the country behind the lines and at the end of two days they had caught *one man*—and he was wandering wounded and gibbering mad from shell-shock.

I tell the incident now not to insist on the accuracy of my writing, but lest readers should think, as we feared at the time that they might think, that the war correspondents on the spot exaggerated the splendour of the behaviour of our Armies. We did not exaggerate. I heard the same evidence from scores of Battalion, Brigade, and Division Commanders.

It is necessary to explain briefly the importance of the day's achievement—not its moral importance but its actual military and strategic advantage. Going on from our former successes we smashed in, almost in our stride, as it were, the German front over the whole area at which we struck. That in itself was much. But, if you have a contour map of the region, you will see that, from the low line—the shallow valley of a little tributary of the River Ancre—which runs eastward from below Albert by the villages of Meaulte, Becordel-Becourt, Fricourt, Mametz, and Carnoy, the ground from a general level of about 250ft. rises steadily towards the north-east. It is full of dips and hollows, but in general the height has risen to about 300ft. at the lower end of Mametz Wood. The high point to the north end of the wood, between it and Contalmaison, is nearly 350ft. It is about 400ft. where the German second line ran, and it is 420ft. and 430ft. at Bazentin-le-Grand and Bazentin-le-Petit. Still ascending, it touches 450ft. on both sides of the lower end of High Wood and, just at the top of the wood and between it and the village of Martinpuich, it reaches the greatest height of about 470ft. From that point it begins to fall away again. By Courcellette the altitude has already decreased to 420ft. At Flers, on the right, it is



the same, and at Gueudecourt just beyond it has sunk to less than 350ft. It does not again touch the height of the ground about High Wood for a long distance.

So far, then, since these operations began, we had been fighting uphill; not steeply nor always perceptibly; but a very little rise, especially for artillery and observation purposes, is all-important. Now, if we could enthrone ourselves firmly on the ridge which was crowned by High Wood, the enemy would be downhill below us. He would no longer command all our positions, but we could command his. One understood why he had made the ground over which we had fought one continuous fortified position. We knew from a multitude of sources that he never believed that we could carry it.

One heard during the day from wounded men, from prisoners, and from officers who saw bits of the fighting all sorts of confusing scraps of accounts of what went on here and there. Apparently in the dark we carried the front line trenches everywhere in that first triumphant rush. It is said that at one point a short stretch of trench was left untouched, our men sweeping by on either hand, and the men in it had later to be bombed out or taken prisoners. Our losses were comparatively very small, and so keen were our men, so far were they ahead of schedule time, that they had to wait till the artillery in front of them (which, of course, must be worked by the clock) lifted to the German positions beyond and enabled them to go on.

Beyond the lines the faces of the two Bazentin woods were very strongly held with machine guns and rifles. Here our losses were more serious, but still, as such things go, the price we paid was light. One heard of 15 machine guns on the face of one small wood and of six being captured in the corner of another. It was still not daylight, and apparently we overwhelmed and irresistibly overran the enemy before he could pull himself together. He must have known that we would soon attack upon this line, but apparently the actual attack with its tremendous impetuosity took him more or less by surprise. That the guns had done their work admirably was the universal

testimony. The prisoners spoke of the shelling as having been indescribable, and the enemy casualties from artillery fire before the actual attack must have been very heavy.

The most dramatic incident of all the engagement, however, was that some of our cavalry, after more than 18 months of waiting, came into action, not on a very large scale, but effectively, and with success.

As we went up in the darkness we passed the cavalry where it waited, every figure motionless on its horse, for the signal to go forward. Knowing, as one had known, how they had longed for an opportunity to do their proper work, in their immobility and silence, they seemed the very embodiment of patience and restraint. Later in the day they worked up, and, after some difficulty, got across the trenches, and made their way to the neighbourhood of the bottom of High Wood, covering the left of our advance on Longueval. Here they came under machine-gun fire, and lost some horses, but the casualties to men were immaterial, and, best of all, they got their chance.

It was to a troop of the Dragoon Guards and one of the Deccan Horse that the chance came. The enemy was sniping them from among growing corn, and, Dragoon Guards on the left and Deccan Horse on the right, they went through those cornfields joyfully, the one with the lance, the other with the sabre. When the horses really came on them the Germans, it is said in many cases, threw themselves down, and literally shrieked for mercy. Some clutched desperately at horses' legs as they went by. Both lance and sabre did their work cleanly and thoroughly, and, with the exception of 34 prisoners whom, between them, they brought back, there were no Germans alive of those who had been among the corn.

When they had done their little job the cavalry sent their horses back, and turned in and dug trenches for the infantry to take over.

## VII

### THE VICTORY OF JULY 14

AFTER a great attack it was only possible to arrive at a clear understanding of what had occurred by talking to the men who had actually done the fighting.

The days following the great advance one spent in getting in touch with the troops which had been engaged at various parts of the line, which is not always such an easy business as gentlemen at home might suppose. Personally I first (on July 16) found the troops which had the right centre in the attack, whose temporary Divisional Headquarters were in a dug-out some twenty feet below the surface, proof against anything less than a direct hit from a 15 in. shell. By the right centre of the line I mean the section from just west of Longueval to, and including, the village of Bazentin-le-Grand.

Here the German front line, consisting mainly of two parallel lines of trenches, on both the right and left hand portions, offered a fairly straight front, the middle being curved into a concave bay. On the straight portions our artillery preparation had pretty well obliterated the wire defences, but they were intact along the front of the bay; and in this bay the enemy had, as we learned from captured maps, apart from the experience of the troops, mounted six machine guns. I found that we already had three of those machine guns and were at the moment digging out the others—with the help of the map to show just where they were buried.

Our attack was delivered as soon as the artillery bombardment was lifted off the front line. Both on the right, towards

Longueval, and on the left, in front of Bazentin-le-Grand, our men went into and over both lines of trenches without a check. In the centre the uncut wire and machine guns in the bay held them up for some little time. Happily, in front of the German line at this point, midway in what had been No Man's Land, runs a shallow sunken road, into which our men were able to drop and where our wounded had cover, so that they fared better than was usually the case where British wounded were compelled to lie in the open within reach of German machine-gun fire.

While the troops before this bay were thus delayed, those on both sides had swept on over both lines of trenches. On the right a Scottish battalion, coming up in support, finding the Germans still holding the centre, dropped into the trenches and bombed along until the machine guns were silenced, and such Germans as were left in the trench surrendered. Over the whole front of this central area, then, we were able to push on.

The village of Bazentin-le-Grand had been almost pulverised by our preliminary bombardment. It had been heavily shelled at intervals throughout the preceding two days, and over 2,000 shells were thrown into it in the last twenty minutes before our attack. It ought to have been a very formidable obstacle, but such of the enemy as had survived the bombardment were quite unable to offer any material resistance.

As usual, both in the first and second line of trenches and in the village itself, there were deep dug-outs, which, however, we now understood how to handle better than we had done a fortnight ago. One huge cellar under a farm in the village was estimated to be able to hold 1,500 people. When our men took it, it was found to contain a large number of German wounded, who were afterwards evacuated and brought back.

On this bit of the line our men took 550 prisoners (not counting the wounded referred to), with 23 officers, including one Regimental Commander. They also got two heavy howitzers, besides the machine guns mentioned. Altogether they did a very thorough and satisfactory piece of work. Their





OUR MEN ADVANCING.



casualties were only moderately heavy, no more than a fraction of the losses which they inflicted on the enemy, and they completely carried out their share in the programme.

Of the next day (July 17) I spent a large part with the men who had been the immediate neighbours of those troops on the left, visiting them where they lived for the moment, in that dreadful country which a few days ago was German, in holes and burrows which, deep though they might be, trembled to the shock of the guns around them.

The immediate task which these men had been set was to clear the Germans out of Bazentin-le-Grand Wood and the village of Bazentin-le-Petit. They had already done magnificent work in the earlier stages of the battle, for it was they who carried the formidable angle of the German first line from a little west of Mametz to Fricourt and successive positions beyond, including trenches which became famous as Danzig Alley, Bright Alley, Fritz Trench, and so on to Bottom Wood.

In the advance, of July 14, the front which they had to attack was very irregular, a zigzag line with two sharp salients in front of Bazentin-le-Grand Wood. The front trenches were protected with two lines of wire entanglements. The support line was about 150 yards behind, also wired, running through the middle of the wood and in front of the village.

The attack, planned for shortly before 3.30 in the morning, was preceded by a veritable hurricane bombardment, lasting only a few minutes but of terrific intensity. The attack was delivered immediately the artillery fire lifted, and with splendid impetuosity. It is needless to remark that the men did not themselves say this. One gathered it only from what one battalion told of another and, still more, from what they had done and the time in which they did it.

The men themselves seemed generally anxious to give most of the credit to the artillery. It is certain that our guns, here as elsewhere, had done magnificently. The wire was cut and practically obliterated over almost the whole of this bit of front, so that we struck the trenches almost without a

check, and the trenches themselves had been battered into unimaginable shapes.

The troops on the right were across the trenches and into the wood by 4 o'clock, while it was still dark. In less than an hour and a half thereafter they had worked all through it. As was the case so often here, individual Germans in machine-gun positions and other strong points showed the utmost tenacity, and hung on until they were killed. Snipers had hidden themselves in the tree branches (a terrifying job, seeing what shelling the wood had been subjected to), and had to be individually cleared out as daylight came.

Meanwhile the battalions on the left were being equally successful. They had swept over the trenches and across the intervening open space, in spite of machine-gun and rifle fire, and had fought their way into the village by a little after four o'clock. The village was defended chiefly by machine-guns and fortified positions along its edges. When these had been rushed, the interior of the place itself was but a jumble of ruins and battered masonry, which offered no formidable resistance, or none that was of any use against our men. By shortly after 5.30 the whole of the village was in our hands, the first men to reach the top of it being some of the Royal Irish.

The enemy delivered two counter-attacks on the village, the first of which had a temporary success, driving our men out of the upper part. The success was short-lived, however, for inside an hour we had again thrown them out, and the whole village was in our hands. A second counter-attack was simply crushed by our guns, and never came near succeeding.

By 9 o'clock in the morning, or after five-and-a-half hours' fighting, both the right- and left-hand troops had done their immediate work, and had connected up on a line which ran through the cemetery, east of the village, to the cross-roads above Bazentin-le-Grand. At this point they joined up with the troops whose achievements have been mentioned above.

From this line, in the afternoon, they pushed out towards High Wood, though they had to advance up the open slope



against machine guns in the corners of the wood. They reached the wood, pushed half-way through it, and brought out 150 prisoners. Seeing that we were not to be in possession of High Wood until September 15—or two months later—this was an extraordinary and audacious performance. The whole day's work of these troops, indeed, was extremely good.

On the third day I found those troops which, still further to the left, had had to deal with that portion of the German front which covered and included the big wood of Bazentin-le-Petit, and I heard the Commanding Officer of the Corps to which they belonged declare that, so admirable were they, that no Regular troops, no troops in the world, could have done better.

They had been down in the region of the Quadrangle, and were marched up in the evening before the attack to the new line. As they came up by Mametz Wood they passed through heavy shell fire, and while they waited for the moment of the attack, along the northern edge of the wood, the 5<sup>9</sup>'s dropped among them almost without ceasing. It made not the smallest impression on their *moral*, however, and when the time came—at 3.25 in the morning—they went out with a rush, on the very edge of our *barrage*, across No Man's Land to the German trenches.

The enemy's line here ran about fifty to seventy-five yards in front of Bazentin-le-Petit Wood, and was protected by the usual double lines of wire. Our guns, however, had accounted for the wire, and, before the enemy had realised that our fire was lifting from his front line, our men were pouring over the remnants of the battered parapets on top of him. Two waves went ahead, and as soon as they had swept the front line clear two others followed. In that front trench, besides prisoners, one battalion bagged five German machine guns, as well as trench mortars and other spoils.

The right of the attacking force got through this part of the programme with comparatively few losses. The left suffered more severely, being raked by machine-gun fire from positions towards the Villa Contalmaison.

Behind the German front line ran the great wood, which itself was spanned at intervals by three successive lines of trenches, each with its separate wire protection. These were taken, one after another, in a series of rushes—if the word “rush” at all describes the progress of a body of men, going as fast as they can, in the dark or dim light of the early morning, through a wood so dense, so choked with fallen timber, and so full of huge shell holes that it was all climbing and jumping and scrambling and sprawling. Whatever their method of going along, they got there.

The men waited in one trench while our guns from far behind them pounded the next, then pushed and staggered forward as soon as the guns had lifted, while the artillery went to the next. Then the process was repeated.

With alternate waits and rushes, it took three hours to get through the wood. It was full of Germans, dead and living, and at the upper end machine guns were posted which searched the open spaces between the wrecks of trees as our men came on. But—it was the same story as we heard again and again in this battle—nothing stopped them. By soon after 7 o'clock they had cleared the top of the wood and had taken 300 prisoners.

The Germans who were taken there said they believed that of all the troops which were in the wood (the prisoners represented six different regiments, but there is no knowing how large were the contingents from each) not thirty men succeeded in escaping alive.

The pick of the prisoners was the Colonel of the 91st Regiment, who was caught at the bottom of his dug-out. It was a nice dug-out with stairs which went down twenty feet to the first storey, and another flight as long to the second storey below. And the Colonel was found at the very bottom. On another officer taken was found an Order of the Colonel which set forth that, while his second-in-command would see to the bringing up of reinforcements and take charge of the fighting above, he himself would “stay in the wood and hold it to the last.” He held it from the bottom of a rabbit

burrow forty feet below the surface. Certain of the prisoners talked with great frankness about that Colonel.

After a short wait in the last line at the top of the wood, the final rush was made on the top, or north-west, corner of Bazentin-le-Petit village. Here we got another 200 prisoners, making 500 in all.

At the top of the village junction was made with the force which had cleared it, as already described, from the southern end, a couple of platoons of Germans being incidentally squeezed between them and wiped out.

It is difficult to convey to anyone at a distance the desperate character of the fighting which went on in these woods. It was perhaps worst in the dark, but whether in the dark, in broad daylight, or in the twilight of dawn it was always terrible. The enemy had been in possession of these woods for a year and a half, and he had used all his ingenuity in strengthening them by running trenches across and barbed-wire entanglements among the trees, making deep dug-outs and strong positions at the corners and in all advantageous points. The woods were commonly extremely dense, while always our guns had flung down trees in all directions and ploughed the earth into pits and ridges. In nearly all the woods, also, the Germans had peculiarly strong positions at the upper end—that is, at the end which we should be last in reaching—manned with machine guns and fed by communication trenches from their lines beyond.

Bazentin-le-Petit Wood itself contained over 100 acres. Through it, as through others, ran open drives, cut for purposes of forestry, and the same railway line as went through Mametz Wood. But these drives were so strewn with fallen timber and ploughed by shells that they hardly differed from any of the rest of the wood, except in so far as the enemy could sweep them rather better with his machine-gun and rifle fire.

That we went on clearing wood after wood, as we did, was an amazing testimony to the superior fighting powers of our men. If the Germans on the average had been any match for our men in individual fighting we could never have done



it. One peculiarly sad feature of this woodland fighting was the difficulty of removing the wounded, whether our own men or those of the enemy. Even if they could be found, they could often not be got away, and many had to be left to lie for long periods suffering and, perhaps, to die before they could be rescued.

This attack of July 14 on the German front had in general been delivered on a line from southward due north. We have followed the course of it everywhere except on the extreme right, or east and north-east. On the left the attack did not extend beyond the Contalmaison—Pozières line. To the left of this extremely stubborn fighting was continually going on in and about Ovillers-la-Boisselle; but this region was not included in the scope of the advance of July 14, and the village of Ovillers-la-Boisselle was still only partly in our possession.

On the extreme right we finally captured Trônes Wood, attacking once more from Bernafay Wood and clearing it, never again to withdraw from it. It had seen as prolonged and sanguinary fighting as, perhaps, any part of all this blood-soaked battlefield.

Above Trônes Wood lay the larger Delville Wood and the village of Longueval. It was probably this extreme north-eastern corner of our advance that was the scene of the most desperate and most glorious fighting of all that glorious day. The troops which went forward here were Highlanders—the Argyll and Sutherlands, the Seaforths, the Camerons and the Black Watch, with Gordons and South African Scottish in support—and I had the good fortune to hear the story of their fighting of July 14 and the three following days under peculiarly impressive circumstances. On the day after they were withdrawn from the line I was present while the Commanders of the four attacking battalions gave to a Staff Officer the accounts of their respective shares in the work. In a little tent in the wilderness, we sat—seven of us in all—on the ground or on overturned boxes, while each Battalion Commander told his tale and the Staff Officer took notes. Combining



their tales, without differentiating one battalion from another, I will try to give a summary of the story as I heard it.

The Germans have always feared the Highlanders. They have better reason for fearing them now than ever they had. There has been nothing finer in this war, or, I believe, in any war, than the way in which the Scotsmen, after four days of unimaginable strain, with a gallant handful of South Africans, in a hastily made line, met body to body and beat back a force of either nine or ten battalions of fresh German troops. It is a big thing to say, but there is nothing in all Scotland's fighting history of which Scotsmen have more right to be proud than they have of this incident of Longueval.

The earlier stages of the attack, which began, here as elsewhere in the line, just before dawn on the morning of July 14, can be lightly passed over. The front line, following on the heels of our bombardment, almost mixed up with our own shells, swept the German trenches. On the left we had some trouble with one machine gun, which we took. The Germans were in great strength in their trench and in their dug-outs, out of which they poured to be killed or taken prisoners, only a few escaping—to be accounted for by the troops attacking further to the left.

There was a short wait in the front trench until our *barrage* lifted from the second trench beyond; then, again immediately on the heels of it, our men rushed the second trench in the same way, this second trench being about one-third of the way up through the battered ruins of what had been the village of Longueval.

The right and left of the attack went forward abreast and were simultaneously into the enemy's first trench. Then the right swung round and bombed down the trenches to that side (incidentally getting three machine guns as they went), while those on the left, as soon as the *barrage* ahead of them had lifted, swept on down one side of the main street of the village, clearing it step by step.

One speaks of Longueval and Delville Wood as if they were two separate positions; but, as a matter of fact (what

the maps do not show), the wood engulfs the village, or the village is so embowered in trees that it is part of the wood. At the place where the two merge together, or where the buildings of the village cease and the wood proper begins, the Germans had made some particularly strongly fortified positions, with, besides machine guns, two field guns, which fired at point-blank range from about 150 yards away as our men reached the edge of the ruins.

Desperate fighting raged around here for some time. Some of the supporting Gordons came up through the enemy's curtain fire with few casualties, except to one platoon, which was totally wiped out. As soon as they arrived all troops proceeded to dig in and consolidate the ground that had been won on a line running eastward through the top of the village, across the corner of the wood south-eastward, and then south towards Waterlot Farm and past it to the outer line of Trônes Wood, where they established a post and connected up with the troops by whom the wood was held.

So the situation remained till the afternoon. During all this time they were subjected to heavy shelling with apparently every kind of weapon that the German owns, with guns of all calibres, and gas shells and lachrymatory, lyddite, shrapnel and high explosives. Our men not only "stuck it," but, under the storm of shells, they worked out in the evening around three sides of the fortified position before them and then bombed and rushed it, taking the machine guns. The field guns the enemy had gradually withdrawn and got away.

The next day (July 15) was again spent in consolidating the positions won and in fortifying certain points which proved invaluable afterwards. Again our men were subjected to the same terrific bombardment. On the day before, though they had worked down past Waterlot Farm, as has been explained, they had not dislodged the enemy from the ruined farm itself. On this second day they did so. They were unable to remain in the farm under the murderous fire to which it was subjected, so they made a line around it and constructed a strong post covering it from 150 yards away.

On this day the South Africans came through them to take up the task of clearing out the wood. It is not possible to describe their share in the fighting in detail, but they behaved with the greatest gallantry. They cleared the wood, and held it for two days, though they were unable to hold it under the withering fire which was poured upon it three days later, as we shall see. Two days (July 16 and 17) were spent without material change of position, the South Africans working through the wood and the Scottish troops holding the line which they had won.

At 8 o'clock on the morning of the 18th the Germans began a bombardment of the whole of our positions, which all those who saw it say was worse than anything which they had known before. It continued for seven or eight hours without any rest. It would be useless to deny that under it our losses were heavy. Our newly made trenches were absolutely battered out of existence. As the day wore on small bands of the South Africans came back out of the wood, forced out not by the bombardment alone, but by the machine-gun and rifle fire with which the enemy infantry, advancing from the north, was searching the wood downwards from its upper end. As these small bands reached the line of Scottish trenches, not a man went farther. They dropped down side by side with the Highlanders and waited while the hell raged on.

At last the enemy infantry appeared. It was soon after 3 o'clock—more than seven hours after the bombardment began—when, on the west side of the wood, they came in view of the men on the left of our line, who had a machine gun. That machine gun did immense execution. But not on the west side of the wood only, but through it and from all sides the enemy came on, wave after wave. Before their overwhelming numbers our men fell back to a reserve trench which had been made some few yards in the rear. Here, gathering all the men together that they could—fragments of battalions, scraps of companies, shreds of platoons, Scotsmen and South Africans together—they rallied, and from there, a mere handful



though they were, they charged from their trench and counter-attacked and drove back the enemy masses.

It was an incident which it is impossible to describe and difficult to imagine. If the enemy counter-attack had succeeded and he had pierced us there, the situation might have been most critical. The slope below was dotted with our field guns, which had been pushing up since the first day of the battle. If the enemy had got through in any strength he would have been among our guns and in the rear of our line to the left. It was certain that he must not be permitted to break through. Our thin line could never have withstood him in its hastily improvised trench, already half destroyed. Every man would merely have been wiped out. So they took the heroic resolution. Shell-shocked and wounded, sound or hurt, these men, who had had four sleepless days and nights of continuous effort and fighting, somehow went forward. Unfortunately, one can get accounts of it only from the men who were in it—and they, being Scotsmen, mostly will say very little. But it must have been such a sight as is not often seen in war.

Happily, the strong points—there were four of them—which the Highlanders had made in the last three days all held. At the critical moment, also, a party of South Africans, with Lewis guns, came up—few, but a precious reinforcement for our little force—and inside the edge of the wood other South Africans still hung on to the line of what had once been an open drive, now known as Buchanan Street. And, by that fortune which helps brave men to do the impossible, they won. The enemy fell back, in spite of all his numbers. And that night our men, Scotsmen and South Africans still together, lay in the line of their original objective; and that line was never afterwards relinquished.

It is impossible to describe such a thing as this. I heard the various Commanders piece together their shares of the account of the engagement. On such an occasion a Highland officer is even more formal and less ornate in his language than at ordinary moments; and I, the one outsider, sat and



heard the almost incredible tale of which one after another of these men reluctantly told his bit. And I could only sit in silence, and did not dare to say a word of what I thought of it! It is a tale which—better told—Scotland should know by heart.

In the attack of July 1 I have said that the Newfoundlanders were the only Overseas troops engaged. In the attack of July 14 the South Africans had the same honour. It happened by the chances of the day that in each case the Overseas contingent had an extremely stern task to do. We have seen how magnificently the Newfoundlanders behaved. The South Africans did no less gloriously. No mortal troops could have fought with more gallantry and stubbornness than the South Africans at Delville Wood, and the official praise which was given them for their "splendid gallantry and dogged determination" was amply earned.

## VIII

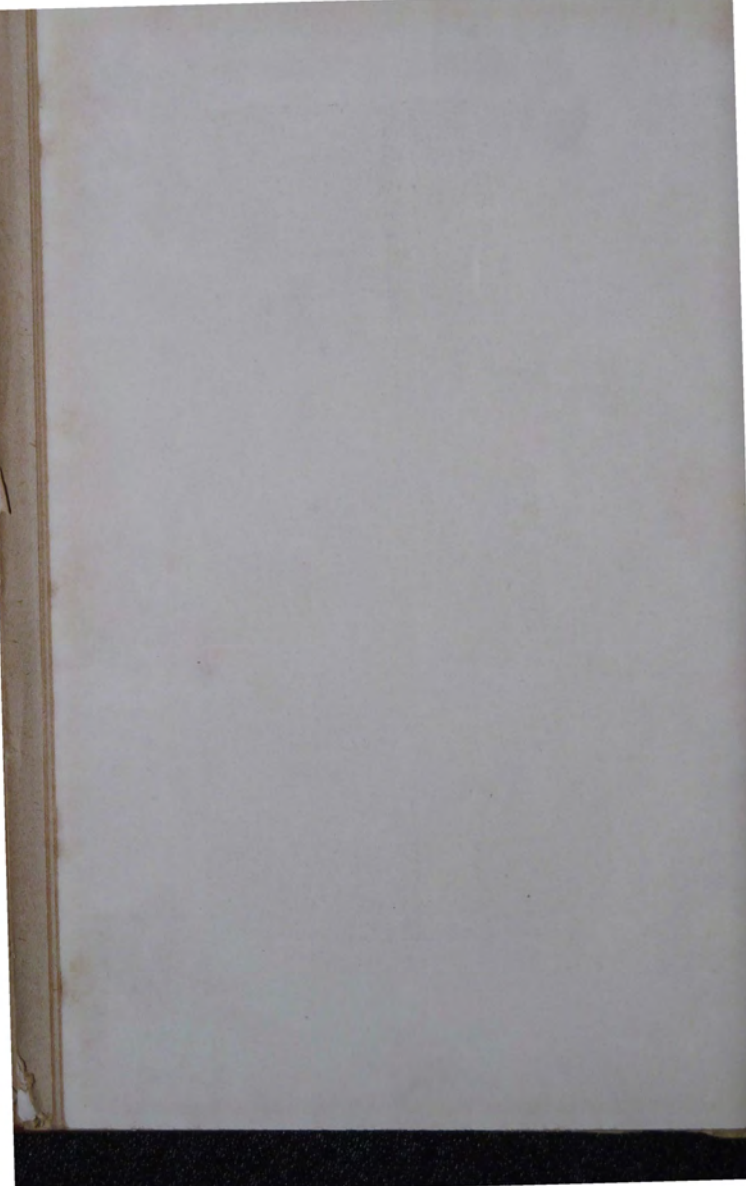
### OVILLERS-LA-BOISSELLE AND POZIÈRES

THE brilliant events of July 14 and the succeeding days were followed by a period of comparative quiet on the greater part of the front ; one of those necessary lulls in the course of a great battle when the defeated party is nursing its wounds and rallying its broken strength in a fresh line of defence, while the victor consolidates his newly won position, brings up his guns, rectifies irregularities in his front, and masses his forces for the next blow. The lull is only comparative. Inevitably fierce local fighting goes on at points where one part of the advancing line has pushed further forward than the troops on either flank or where the enemy has hung on successfully to isolated positions which remain to be reduced. In the present case, moreover, the attack had not extended over the whole length of the front, but on the extreme left progress was made by a process of steady independent pushing which carried our line relentlessly up the slope from Ovillers-la-Boisselle and Contalmaison to and beyond Pozières to the very summit of the ridge where it was crossed by the Albert—Bapaume Road.

We have seen how the desperate fighting at Longueval and Delville Wood had left us in the possession of the village, but of only a part of the wood, the western corner of it where it touched Longueval. On the right, the line now ran due southward along the eastern part of Trônes Wood. On the left of Longueval we made no attempt to hold the extreme advanced position which we had attained in High Wood. To do so would



ALL THAT IS LEFT OF THE CHURCH AT POZIÈRES.





have given us an untenable salient so long as the maze of trenches and fortified positions in the open country on either side of it were in the enemy's hands. The summit of the ridge at this point ran due east and west, through the northern end of High Wood. From there and from the high ground on either side the enemy looked down on our advance, and it was to take nearly two months of hard fighting to dislodge him.

At noon on July 15 I chanced to be in an advanced artillery post, while the operation of withdrawing from High Wood and straightening our line was in progress. Throughout the morning our troops had been falling back—dribbling back in detachments—from the wood and from various isolated positions which they had occupied on the preceding day. The movement was not interfered with, and no casualties were incurred. Inevitably, after such an advance as we had made, the situation at various points was obscure, small units were out of touch with their neighbours, communication was very difficult, and it was hard to ascertain in places where our positions ended and those of the enemy began, and what troops occupied which trenches. As late as three o'clock in the afternoon parties of our men were still coming back from High Wood—strolling across the open—and, even later, aeroplane reports told that men in khaki were still digging in along and holding part of the road running south-eastward from High Wood towards Longueval. Great care had to be taken during this period that our guns did not shell our own men, and only gradually towards evening did the situation resolve itself and we had finally established ourselves on the appointed line which ran just north of the villages of Longueval and the two Bazentins.

This line marked an advance of about two miles due northwards from our original positions before July 1. More than two-thirds of the slope of the ridge was ours, but the summit lay, roughly, still about a mile ahead of us, beyond Pozières on the left, at the top of High Wood and to the north and east of Ginchy. We had broken through the German main first line on the entire front from Ovillers-la-Boisselle to our

junction with the French, and the main second line from west of Bazentin-le-Petit to Longueval. The main third line, two miles further back, ran before Flers and Le Sars. Meanwhile, across the ground ahead of us, in front of High Wood, the German perfected a "switch" line, connecting with the still unbroken part of the second line near Pozières on the left and running thence eastward to a junction with the third line near Flers. With innumerable minor trenches and fortified positions everywhere, this "switch" line became the backbone of the enemy's defences between us and the summit of the ridge.

The last half of July passed without any advance on a grand scale, such as those of July 1 and 14, but it was a period of daily fighting, often desperate and strenuous, in the course of which, on the left, we forced our way up to, through and beyond Pozières; in the centre we ate our way steadily toward and into the "switch" line, and on the right we pushed up to a position whence we could attack Guillemont.

A brilliantly conceived and excellently executed attack with moderately heavy strength in July 17 gave us another 1,300 yards of the German main second line from west of Bazentin-le-Petit to within 500 or 600 yards of Pozières on the east.

The troops engaged in this were—as in so much of the best that was done on the Somme—stalwart English County regiments, with whom were some Irish. When the great attack of July 14 was made they were resting on a line by Contalmaison. That attack, it will be remembered, covered a front of about 5,000 yards, the west or left of which was at a point about 1,800 yards east of Pozières. That is to say, that that length of the German main second line, between Bazentin-le-Petit and Pozières, was not attacked on July 14, and our nearest point remained that distance from Pozières.

During the days preceding that attack, however, this part of the German line had been bombarded impartially with the front actually to be attacked, the bombardments generally being short, but of great intensity, delivered at irregular intervals.

This spasmodic pounding was kept up through the day and night of July 15, until early in the morning of the 16th the new attack on this link in the line was delivered.

Our guns had done their work well. In the stretch of 1,200 yards against which the new attack was made, eight points had been selected, at which the barbed-wire defences were utterly destroyed. After a particularly fierce and short bombardment our men went over immediately behind our shells. The trenches were very heavily manned, but they were rushed without a serious check at any point. Our fire had meanwhile been lifted on to the second line of trenches beyond, and, as soon as it ceased, that was rushed in the same way and with equal success. The whole 1,200 yards of new front was in our hands with comparatively small casualties and very heavy loss to the enemy, a large number of prisoners being taken as well as machine guns. As soon as our men had made good their footing in the trenches they bombed along to the left and improved their position by another 100 yards, which brought them to a point within a little more than 500 yards of Pozières, where, as the trenches could now be raked by fire from that place, no further advance in that direction was attempted.

In the days that followed, however, the troops here were busy pushing out saps and capturing and consolidating communication trenches towards the north-east in the direction of Martinpuich. Altogether, a very important—even necessary—piece of work was done neatly and with complete success.

The approach to Pozières by the right wing of the Fifth Army from the south and west was a much more gradual process, and intensely concentrated fighting went on day after day along the left of the Bapaume Road up from Ovillers-la-Boisselle. The latter village itself had been most desperately defended by troops of the Prussian Guard, a garrison of which held out in one strongly fortified position, with bombs and machine guns and rifles, until compelled to surrender by lack of food and water. The British troops which captured the place were men from the English Midlands and Western Midlands—Gloucesters, Worcesters and Warwicks—and the



doggedness and courage with which they pushed the attack could not have been surpassed.

I visited Ovillers-la-Boisselle shortly afterwards and the completeness of the destruction of the place bore witness to the severity of the struggle which had taken place there.

As far as La Boisselle one could go with reasonable safety along the main Albert—Bapaume road. La Boisselle, on the right of the road, was no more than a flat layer of pounded grey stones and mortar on the bare face of the earth. Of anything like a village or individual buildings there was, of course, no semblance. On the left of the road the ground dipped steeply down for fifty yards or so, then slowly rose to what was called Ovillers-la-Boisselle, because that was where the village of that name had stood; but, if La Boisselle was almost obliterated, Ovillers-la-Boisselle was non-existent.

Standing on the edge of the white road in the glaring sunshine, with the roar of our own guns behind one and the other guns ahead, one felt oneself the only landmark in a waste. The whole earth's surface, before and around, was torn with shell holes and seamed with lines of trenches, all white, because the soil here is chalk. Such land as there was between, unscarred, was almost bare of vegetation, with only here and there a thin coat of sickly grass or a dusty tuft of cornflower, mallow, or white camomile. Opposite, crowning the gentle slope before you, a few ragged stumps, fragments of tree trunks some ten feet high, with bits of splintered lower branches sticking from them, stood gaunt against the sky and marked where Ovillers used to be.

Heading for Ovillers, we—for an officer was with me—left the road and went down across the torn and blasted earth to the white line of what was once the German front line trench. It was a trench no more. It had not been much of a trench by the time our guns had done with it at the beginning of this battle. After that, it was pounded day and night through all the desperate fighting which went on for the possession of Ovillers. Since then, the enemy had devoted a certain number of shells a day to knocking the poor remnants of it about a



little more. It was a futile occupation, because no one, except an inquisitive visitor like myself, would dream of walking along it. The parapet was mostly strewn all over the ground. In places it was mixed with, and filled up, the trench, so that you went on the level of the ground. Then a few yards might be decently intact, so that, half choked with rubbish as it was, it gave you shelter, perhaps, waist high. It, and the ground around, were littered with equipment. Cartridges, used or unused, and unexploded bombs and bits of shells, or whole shells, "duds," were everywhere beneath your feet. In the hot sun the chalk was intensely white and the heat beat back on you from the baked earth, and the air was thick with the dreadful smell which belongs to battlefields and with the buzzing of flies. It was truly a vile place.

Threading one's way along this dreadful path one came at last to a parting of the way where an old German sign still stuck up from the fire step of the trench, bearing an arrow pointing to the right and the words "Nach Pozières." We turned and went on, following the blind windings of the stifling trench, either walking in it or beside it—for it did not much matter—till we passed some ragged bits of tree-trunks and were in Ovillers.

What first told me that we were in the village was a hole in the ground a few yards from the trench which, being square and lined with brick inside, was evidently not a shell-hole. It was a cellar; and once there must have been a house above it. Looking round you saw that mixed up with the kneaded earth was a quantity of broken brick and stone. This continued, with here and there a ragged tree-trunk sticking up. Certainly, then, we were in the village. There are one or two other villages, as Guillemont, which are almost as utterly destroyed as Ovillers-la-Boisselle, but none is more destroyed.

No village could have been more destroyed, because there was nothing left but the cellar which I have mentioned and two or three others like it, mere holes in the ground and *minus* quantities, so far as they were buildings at all. Of superstructure to the earth there was none. One point there was which

The hideousness of such a region is beyond words, and little things impress themselves on one's memory. As we issued from the trench to cross the bit of blasted ground towards the road, a country where it seemed that nothing but the flies and the trench rats could live, a gorgeous swallowtail butterfly, all buff and velvet-black, came and sat on a single stunted cornflower blossom, to spread its wings for us to admire. So it is that the larks sing among the guns, as if Nature was determined to prove that not all that man could do can wholly banish beauty from the earth.

The troops which fought their way up from Ovillers to Pozières were Kentish men and Londoners, especially certain Royal Fusiliers, which were recruited chiefly from the Stock Exchange, Lloyd's, the Baltic and Corn Exchange. No troops could have borne themselves better. The men from the London Exchanges and desks were very severely tested and bore themselves with as fine a gallantry as any troops which have been fighting in this battle—and there could be no higher praise. For some ten days they had almost continuous fighting from La Boisselle upwards, along and below the Bapaume road. The enemy held an enormous advantage in position, but the Fusiliers never failed to make ground steadily, almost inch by inch, with bomb or bayonet or clubbed rifle, until by July 23 our positions were near enough to Pozières to attack the village.

The attack on Pozières itself was made by the Australians, but certain Territorials co-operated by pushing up on the extreme left, or west side, on the further side of the Bapaume road, where they carried in succession a series of strong positions which the enemy had thrown out in defence of the village on that side.

As for the attack of the Australians, it was made with great spirit, perfect coolness, and complete success. No effort was made on the first day to rush the whole village. Advancing north-westward from the direction of the Villa Contalmaison, the Australians had three distinct obstacles to overcome in three successive fortified lines—on a sunken road or track

improvised as a line of defence, running roughly parallel with the Bapaume road ; in a formidable line of trenches, similarly parallel ; and, finally, the road itself, which cuts straight up the middle of the main part of the village.

They attained each object with admirable precision and comparatively light losses, only having suffered at all heavily in one part. At the first point they met with little resistance. At the second it was more formidable, and here they killed a great many of the enemy and made many prisoners. Then in the final rush they had to clear the ruins of that side of the village, which they did in splendid style. There was bitter fighting, which continued into the night, when nothing but the width of the road separated the heaps of ruins held by the enemy from those occupied by the Australians.

Three days of very severe fighting followed before the whole of Pozières and its defences, with the strong position at the Cemetery to the north of it, were in our hands. The place was extremely strong, not only by reason of the defences in the village itself, but because immediately behind it ran the double trenches of the German main second line. We had worked up on the east side, as you know, to within about 500 yards of the place ; but for that distance to the right of the village, as well as running behind it, the trenches were still in the enemy's possession. They were well supplied with communication and support trenches. Beyond these trenches again and commanding our advance was the summit of the bridge at the Windmill. It was one of the positions, like Friecourt, La Boisselle and Thiepval, which the Germans had believed to be impregnable.

Perhaps no troops better suited to the work of clearing it could have been found than the Australians. The savage hand-to-hand fighting that went on among the ruins of the village gave them abundant opportunity to show both their courage and their individual initiative, and it was work at which the Germans were no match for them. When in occupation of the village, they were subjected to very severe shelling with every kind of gun that the Germans possessed,



but it entirely failed to shake their *moral*, and they beat off many counter-attacks with great steadiness. Relentlessly they forced their way through the ruined positions, and by the evening of July 26 they had established themselves on a line running through the Cemetery to the north of the town, where they joined hands with the Territorial troops which had kept pace with them, fighting their way up on the left of the village. It would be impossible to praise too highly the magnificent behaviour of the Australians throughout the operations in this stage of the battle.

The Territorials had had four days of very testing work. They were evidently well handled, and fought with discretion as well as courage. They made a lot of ground on the first night, and each day, almost each hour, thereafter they continued to forge ahead, now rushing a bit of trench and bombing along it, now working round and capturing a machine-gun post. For a time one or another strong point held them up, but never for long. Before they made junction with the Australians at the top of the village, they had reached and penetrated the main German line just below the Cemetery, where they took a bunch of prisoners. From that point they worked to the right and cleaned out all the trench down to the Bapaume road.

Throughout these operations, the troops on the right of the Australians had also been keeping the enemy very busy. They bombed along and captured the whole of the 500 yards of the German second line trenches to a point due east of the village. Beyond these trenches, running northward, were a number of other trenches, one of which, Munster Alley, saw as fierce fighting as almost any trench in all the battle area, some parts of it changing hands several times. On the day when the capture of Pozières was completed, we seem for a time to have had the whole of Munster Alley in our possession, and some of the troops attacking here appear to have actually crossed the Bapaume road in the rear of the Germans' second line and to have gained a footing at the Windmill. Subsequent events, however, showed that this highest, most exposed



spot on the crest of the ridge was quite untenable until all the ground on both sides and well beyond it was won. Even after we had the place in our hands we held it only by posts around and commanding it. There was much hard fighting before it definitely and finally became our ground.

Even more sanguinary than the fighting about Pozières was the struggle which went on simultaneously for Delville Wood.

Terrific as our shelling of the enemy's positions was in the earliest stages of the battle, it continued steadily to increase in intensity throughout the operations. There were, of course, times of comparative quiet and times of supreme intensity; but the general tenor was a continuous *crescendo*. The Germans had greatly increased the number of their guns upon this front; but all their massing of artillery was matched and over-matched by the increase in weight of our own fire. And, terrible as were the bombardments to which various positions were subjected at various times in the earlier stages, nothing in the first month of the battle equalled what went on at Delville Wood. The soldier's sobriquet of "Devil's Wood," had come to be horridly justified.

The advance of July 14 and the fighting of the next few days had given us possession of Longueval and the corner of the wood adjoining it. Desperate fighting went on daily for positions still held by the enemy just north of the village, especially in certain orchards on the north-west of the wood. Again and again (as in the attack on the Scottish troops already described) the enemy flung masses of troops against us, attacking both from the north and from the east side of the wood. His losses in some of these attacks were very heavy. Not only did he not win back any ground but slowly we took ground from him by the sheer superiority in *moral* and individual fighting power in our men. On the days of the final capture of Pozières—on July 26 and 27—we again attacked there in force and drove the enemy back to a line 500 yards north of Longueval, and out of all the wood except certain fortified positions on its extreme fringe on the east and north-east side. At the same time, pushing due north from Bazentin-

le-Grand we again penetrated High Wood, this time not to retire. The highest ground across the upper end of the wood the enemy still held ; but we grasped and occupied the lower part and thence consolidated a line along the road south-eastward towards Delville Wood.

Two months were to pass before either High Wood or Delville Wood was wholly ours. In both the Germans clung to their remaining positions with great determination, and there has probably never been any form of warfare more terrible than that which went on in these woods. How blind and confused the situation was for a long time in Delville Wood was shown by an incident which occurred in the middle of August, when a German prisoner came down from there who had spent fourteen days in a dug-out behind our lines. He described himself as one of a party of nearly a score who had originally taken shelter in the dug-out, but all the others had died one by one, some killed by the German shells and the rest perishing of sheer privation. The last man, faint and weak with hunger, finally crawled out and attracted the attention of some of our machine-gun men. They took him and nursed him and fattened him up until he was fit to be sent back to the rear.

Apart from the danger and nerve strain from the shelling or other kinds of fire, the mere physical labour of the wood fighting was tremendous, and nothing but perfect fitness and their splendid *moral* could have carried our men through. A "charge" in modern warfare, heavily encumbered as the men are, is more often a crawl. Even in the open it may be no more than a slow walk (except in the case of a sudden prepared dash on the enemy's trench), with scrambling in and out of shell holes and big "crump" craters and constant stealthy taking advantage of every scrap of cover afforded by each little unevenness in the ground, with now and again a staggering rush of a few steps in between. In these woods, with the dense undergrowth, the ground ploughed up by shells and shattered trees heaped in all directions, it would have been hard work for an able-bodied man, even unburdened

with rifle and equipment or other impedimenta, merely to make progress. To go through, as our men sometimes had to do, after the strain of two or three days' fighting and in the face of a machine-gun and rifle fire which searched every interstice in the woodland, while heavy shells were bursting all around them, was a truly appalling task. And the saddest feature of it was that it was sometimes a human impossibility to get our wounded out.

Nothing could have exceeded the pluck displayed by those who were charged with the task of caring for the wounded, and the whole of our Red Cross Service was a model of organisation and heroic self-sacrifice. But our men had inevitably often to be left where they lay, not only for hours but for days, perhaps within sight and hearing of their comrades, who were quite unable to render any assistance. Many died thus from mere exposure and exhaustion; not of our men only but Germans no less. On the other hand, there were extraordinary examples of human vitality, when men badly wounded, without care or nourishment, somehow managed to survive for five or six days until the time came when it was possible to relieve them.

What the total loss of life was in the struggle for possession of these two scraps of innocent woodland, it is impossible to say. It is probably safe to guess that in the fighting in and about them the two Armies together suffered not much short of a quarter of a million casualties. The woods themselves, as we saw them later, even after the dead had been buried, the captured or derelict guns removed, and much of the larger litter of the battlefield taken away, were spectacles almost inconceivably shocking.

## IX

### OUR WONDERFUL ARMY

THE fighting of the month of July had attained certain definite results. We had wrested from the enemy something like twenty square miles of ground with nine villages. This, however, signifies little. The achievement was not to be measured by geography. The essential fact was that the great object of our offensive had already been attained. The pressure on Verdun had been definitely relaxed and the threat of a great attack on Russia had been averted. Both from before Verdun and from the Russian front, as well as from all other places in the West where troops could be spared, the Germans had been compelled to hurry new Divisions to the Somme. For the first time since the recovery after the retreat from the Marne, the initiative had passed out of Germany's hands into those of the Allies. In the crucial theatre of the war the Central Powers had been confessedly thrown on to the defensive. The crisis of the war had been reached.

The moral effect—on ourselves, on the enemy, on all the Allies and on neutral countries alike—was enormous. For a long time past Germany had been sedulously encouraging all over the world the idea that England, under pretence of needing time for preparation, was purposefully leaving the fighting to her Allies. There had been open sneers in neutral countries, signs of growing impatience and discontent even among some of the Allies themselves. All this was ended.



Great Britain had reached out her hand on land, as upon the sea, and was sharing to the full the sacrifices which France and Russia had been compelled to bear since the beginning of the war. The change in the tone of the Press of the world in its comments on the attitude of Great Britain in the war was immediate.

Equally sudden and complete was the alteration of the point of view in Germany. It was noticeable in the Press, but still more evident in private communications, as in the letters from their friends at home to German soldiers which fell into our hands when the men to whom they were addressed were captured. There was no more talk of victory. It was as if the German people had suddenly awakened to a realisation that such things as the hewing of a way to Paris, to Calais, to London, were dreams. Discussion now was not of victory but of resistance. No one now sang of the mailed fist, but only of the heroic stubbornness of the men who formed the wall of steel which protected Germany from being crushed by the immense superiority in strength and numbers of her enemies. It was not merely the German Divisions fighting on the Somme but the German people which now consciously found themselves on the defensive.

The effect on Great Britain and on our Armies was no less marked. We had passed from sheltering behind breastworks pounded by the enemy's guns to the attack. We had shattered to pieces the German main first and second lines of defence and had captured almost by the score positions which Germany herself had believed impregnable. Our Army now knew—as it had long believed—that in anything like equal fighting it could beat the Germans. In two years it had had no chance of square fighting. The chance had come and the result had been to fill our troops with confidence. We had waited long, but it was our turn now. The following lines, written by Capt. the Hon. R. Gorell Barnes, who had earned in peace times a reputation as a writer of charming verses and was now a Captain in the Rifle Brigade, excellently reflected the spirit of the Army itself. Captain Gorell

Barnes was wounded a few days after he had given me copy of the verses :—

#### A HYMN BEFORE ACTION.

We, who have clung for long, long months  
 To battered lines of knee-deep mud,  
 Fixed targets for your slope-set guns  
 To drench the ooze with British blood ;  
 We, who have toiled through winter's rain  
 With sandbag, shovel, plank, and wire,  
 Revetting marshy parapets,  
 Building protection from your fire,  
 We have weapons now, O Huns.

Rifles, ah ! yes, but worthier still  
 How like you thrust and stab and blow ?  
 And you shall find for all your guns—  
 The earth is ploughed with ours, you know—  
 That we can jab the silent sword  
 With hands exultant, freed at last  
 From digging, digging night and day.  
 The months of holding on are past :  
 We are coming now, O Huns.

We, who have crouched as you sailed by  
 Above our furrowed, pock-marked soil,  
 Spotting our weakness for your guns,  
 See no one of you now to spoil  
 Our free enjoyment of the skies :  
 You fire blindly from below ;  
 We force you fiercely up the hills,  
 And from the last grim crest you go.  
 We are rising now, O Huns.

We are rising now, a nation's tide,  
 And you must dig and wire and quail,  
*Your* turn at last beneath our guns,  
*Your* turn to find defences frail.  
 We are bursting in, we are breaking through ;  
 The great sea sweeps your barriers down.  
 You urge anew your claim on God,  
 But He is silent as you drown.  
 Look to yourselves, O Huns !

The Somme Valley, August 15, 1916.

These verses, which were incorporated in one of my dispatches to *The Times*, were posted by the Commander of the Battalion of the Rifle Brigade where all the men could see them before going into action.

More important than anything else, however, was the thrill of joyous pride which went through the Empire at the revelation of the quality of its new Armies. There was no war correspondent, I believe, among those then on the Somme who did not feel himself hopelessly unequal to the task before him, the task of making plain to England and the world the heroism and the achievement of the British troops. In the middle of July I had written as follows :

To some readers it may have seemed that my dispatches on the battle have been too matter-of-fact, and have invested the subject with too little of the glamour of war. The fact is that there is no way in which to describe in splendid generalities such fighting as has gone on here. One can tell—as I have told—of the brilliant success of the British effort as a whole, but the actual progress of the battle can only truthfully be handled as what it is, that is, as a series of intense and concentrated struggles for small positions, all, of course, as each works out to its victorious conclusion, fitting together into one great whole. In the future we may be able to look at the whole mosaic. For the moment one has only the little separate cubes of colour, and even of these one must be careful how one puts two or three together lest the enemy should see more of the pattern than we wish him to see.

What I hope I have made plain, however, is that there is no measure of pride which the people at home may take in the performance of their Armies which is not justified. You who are mourning need have no misgivings. In so far as pride can console grief, you have consolation to the full. Your boy behaved magnificently. Perhaps you will say that I write without having heard of him or knowing where he fell. If he had behaved otherwise I should have heard of him. He would have been the one exception, and we should all have heard of him. But there were no exceptions.



I have read, or heard, the reports of battalions, brigades, divisions, corps, and have listened to the tale of this fight and that from the men who were in it, from comrades in battalions to right or left, and from those who, from behind, held their breath and watched. And, without exception, everywhere it has been the same story: "There were no stragglers"; "There was absolutely not a straggler"; "Not one straggler—None—None—None!"

Soldiers will know what that means. And never, perhaps, have men been put to a severer test than to advance, as battalion after battalion has had to do, through shells bursting so thickly that they made almost a solid wall, so that to those watching from behind whole waves of men have disappeared simultaneously behind a bank of smoke and tossing earth, while beyond the ground was swept with machine-gun and rifle fire from, it might be, only fifty yards away. Yet one after another, wave following wave, our men have gone into it without one faltering. It might be laughing or cheering, or, with set teeth, silently—but they have gone. And only those have failed to reach their ultimate objective who fell on the way.

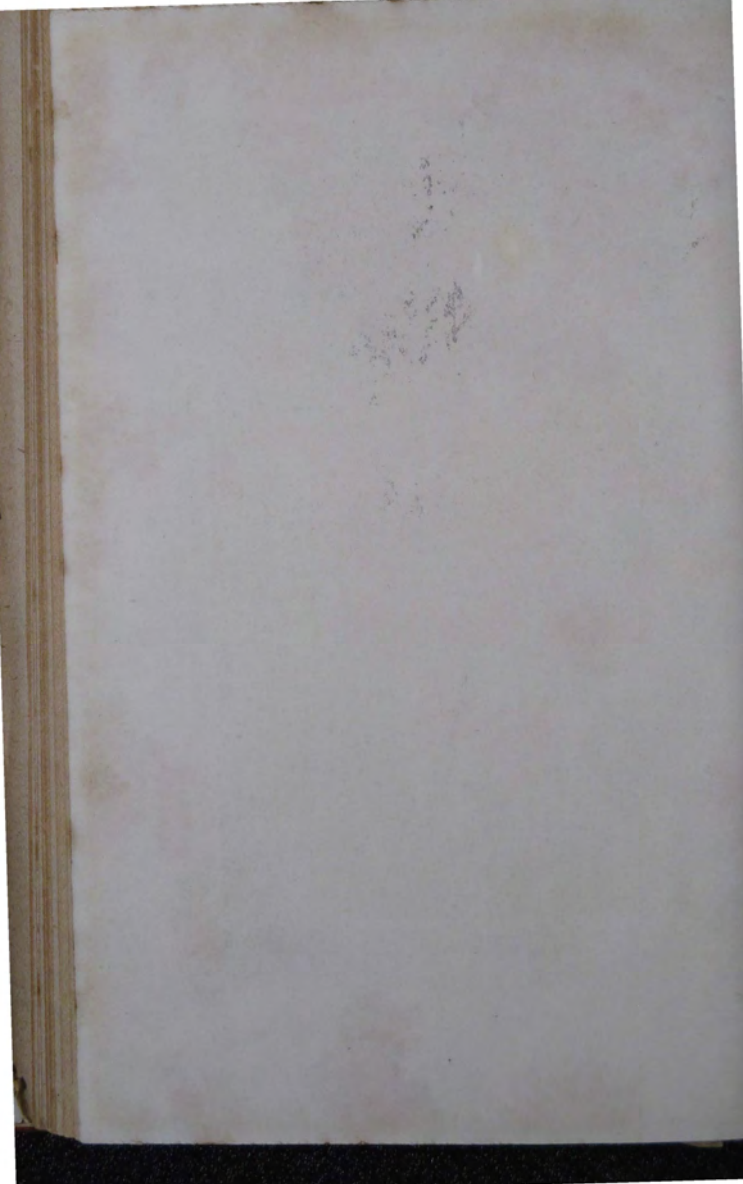
Not once but half a score of times troops have gone forward with orders to reach a certain point—a wood, perhaps, or ruined building, a bit of trench or mere spot upon the map. They have gone and been lost to sight until half an hour, an hour, or two hours later tidings have come that they were there. And so they were—the shattered remains of half a company; a lieutenant and seven men; twenty men under command of an N.C.O.—all that were left had got there, though behind them the enemy might have closed up and the supports had been wiped out upon the way. So it was with certain Inniskillings; with men of the Essex Regiment; with men of the Queen's, and the Sherwood Foresters and Newfoundlanders. So it was with some Lancashire troops, and with some of the Middlesex. So it has been everywhere. Whatever they had to face, those who lived went through. There have been a dozen Balaclavas.

Fathers and mothers who have lost their sons, wives who have lost their husbands, boys and girls who have lost their





HIGHLANDERS GOING UP TO THE TRENCHES.



fathers or brothers, all can be well assured that he whom you believe to have been a hero was a hero indeed. History will do justice, as we cannot now, to the men who have fallen here, and in years to come men and women in all parts of the British Dominions will swell with pride as they say, "He fell at Fricourt," or at Mametz, or Contalmaison; in the attack on Serre, on Thiepval, on Beaumont Hamel, or La Boisselle.

"The Somme"—if that is what this battle is to be called, and whatever its ultimate issue may be—is a name that regiments will speak as they now speak of "Waterloo," or "Albuera," or "Badajoz."

Some day the story will be told of how the Devons fought when they were enfiladed from a certain wood; of the splendid self-sacrifice of some of the Suffolks; how the Royal Welsh Fusiliers cleaned out a maze of trenches with bombs and bayonets; how, when some Scottish troops were held up by overwhelming numbers, some Warwicks came along and the two went on shoulder to shoulder and took in half an hour more prisoners than their combined strengths. So Irish and Welsh troops, side by side, staved off two desperate counter-attacks, and, as the second broke and fell back, they leaped together from their trenches—and when they had done there was no enemy left.

There was a dreadful place where Gordons fought, and afterwards, upon the ground, Scot and German lay together, each impaled on the other's bayonet. On another day, in another part of the field, our men could not get on because a certain trench was held in overwhelming force and bristled with machine guns—and a handful of the Border Regiment broke into the trench at one end and, yard by yard and traverse by traverse, they bombed and bayoneted and clubbed their way along, killing many times their own number of the enemy.

The Germans also, in certain ways, have behaved with great bravery. In some ways their intense discipline has failed of its object. Their military writers have always claimed that one thing which that discipline would do was that it would keep a man going and able to fight after he had been subjected

to shell fire which would unman any troops, of whatever spirit, whose discipline was less overmastering. This has been proved untrue. The enemy, in many cases, has morally broken down under our artillery bombardment and has surrendered in a fashion which British troops have not done and would not do. Also, in straight fighting, they are no match for our men, and every man in our Army is convinced of it. On the other hand, individuals and small parties—especially machine-gun men—have held on to hopeless posts, with nothing but death before them, with a tenacity of which we or any troops might be proud. Such was the case in Ovillers-la-Boisselle.

What I said after the first day's fighting still holds true, namely, that it is the machine guns which have caused by far the greater part of our casualties. And those casualties, as we already know, are heavy enough. One thinks with sorrow of the losses of some of the Ulster troops, of certain Lancashire Regiments, of the Middlesex, and the Newfoundlanders.

And they have all behaved alike. Hands from the Staffordshire potteries and the Lancashire mills, Welsh miners, Highlanders, and men from London shops and offices—there has been nothing to choose, only difference in opportunity. Every man declares that those whom he saw fighting were the best of all ; but there have been no best.

Of course there will be criticisms afterwards, and wise men will say that this or that should have been differently done. And the wise men themselves will disagree. But what no man will ever dare to say is that our soldiers, officers and all ranks alike, have not, to the limits of their opportunity, done everything that brave men could do. In the last fortnight they have won not one battle, but twenty battles, and in them all I do not believe that one man died shamefully or saved his life by turning coward.

Nor was it only the men in the fighting lines of whom the Empire had just cause to be proud. No less of a revelation



to us who had been at the front before the beginning of the "Great Push" was the organisation behind the lines. Nor was it merely the mechanical magnitude of that organisation; but the amazing spirit, the courage and tirelessness with which every man, it seemed, worked in every auxiliary department of the Army were on a par with the spirit, the courage and tirelessness of the men in the fighting line.

The Dispatch Riders were a constant source of wonder and admiration. Their missions were often of the most perilous, and the mortality among them was considerable. Behind the lines one saw them all day and everywhere, pounding along on their motor-cycles, soaking wet and cased in mud, or, in dry weather, covered with dust and grime, so that their features were quite indistinguishable, somehow threading their way through all the blocks and intricacies of the traffic, among horses and guns and lorries and columns of marching men. And at night, wherever one was in the stillness or through the noise of the guns, somewhere on the nearest road the ceaseless purring of their machines went on. Individually, I presume, they slept sometimes. Collectively, they never stopped—the constant playing of their shuttles going on day and night through all the complicated fabric of the moving armies.

Then there were "Signals" (though the Dispatch Riders were technically "Signals" also), who looked after the telephone and telegraph communication, whether the Army was moving or at rest. On them, when our line pushed forward, depended the maintenance of connections with the headquarters in the rear. Generally, it was safe to assume that the enemy would be *barraging* the intermediate space as heavily as he could.

I never spoke to a Brigade or Divisional Commander after an advance without his paying the highest tribute to the bravery of the men who had worked on coolly in spite of whatever fire the enemy poured upon them. More than one Commander, in expressing his admiration, said, "I don't know how they did it." Some day proper recognition will be

given to them. Meanwhile, one can only say that they showed themselves—through everything—worthy of the men with whom and for whom they worked.

And the Transport! Our men, perhaps, had pushed with superb audacity across the open, under a storm of fire as they went, to rush some wood or trench or village. They had forced their way in and held it. But the way by which they came was still swept by a withering fire, increased in all probability by the heavy *barrage* which the enemy was now throwing across the open to prevent reinforcements from coming up. To send new battalions of infantry across that space would, until some other point, whence the enemy's machine guns and rifles commanded it, had been cleared out, have been merely to throw those battalions away. Our little handful on ahead must, for a while, hold that place unaided, and they might have to hold it so, not for hours, but for days. If so, supplies must be got up to them—and supplies always went!

More than once prisoners reported that they had been without food or water for some days because nothing could reach them through our artillery fire. I have no hesitation whatever in saying that in like case our men would have had their rations. I heard only one instance where advanced troops of ours in a certain wood really suffered because supplies did not reach them. No matter what the obstacles were, our transport always went through.

Of course, there were losses—sometimes of a few individuals only, sometimes in the wiping out of a unit. But it made no difference. The food and water had to be got up and it was got up. And there was no need of compulsion or of discipline. It was one of the extraordinary things about these men of ours that, with nothing said, they went about whatever job lay before them as if it were as much a matter of course as had been their daily peaceful task at home.

No one in all the Army, again, did braver things than scores and scores of our runners, or messengers, who took back

dispatches of all sorts from the advance to the supports, to bases, or headquarters. A Brigade Commander who, with his men, had just been through one of the grandest episodes of all this battle, said to me about as follows :—

“In the old days, when a message had to be taken through the enemy’s fire, a volunteer was called for, and we all know stories of how the regiment has watched in breathless anxiety while the messenger went, perhaps getting through, and perhaps not. But if he did get through, he probably received the Victoria Cross.

“Our runners ought all to receive the Victoria Cross. They do not magnificently volunteer, and they have not the glory of knowing that the regiment is watching them. It is in the regular course of their duty, and they go without a word and without fuss, the only difference being that the fire that they have to go through is more often than not vastly worse than any which the men who so splendidly won the V.C. in the old days had to face.”

I do not believe that he exaggerated. The thing went on every day. And any of us who had had misgivings in the past lest the fibre of the British people might be softening had cause to be ashamed. Never had we had surer ground for confidence in the quality of our race. Whatever danger we, as a nation, may have been in of growing soft, we assuredly had not begun to soften when this war came. It found us still sound.

However familiar one became with it, one never ceased to be struck by the curious air of competence which every man in our Armies seemed to carry with him. There was, in contrast with some Continental Armies, little evidence of command, yet each man—civilian though he might have been but a few months ago—went about his work as if he had been born to it. It was no mere aggregation of amateur soldiers which tested the whole strength of Germany; it was an Army, admirably organised, which already, and of right, assumed the bearing of an army of veterans.

And as yet I have said nothing about the R.A.M.C. or



the stretcher-bearers. I knew one case in which one battalion lost in one afternoon twelve out of its sixteen stretcher-bearers.

More than once in the course of the Battle of the Somme I heard it suggested by officers of rank that a new Order should be instituted for stretcher-bearers, and men acting in similar services, which would have approximately the distinction of a Victoria Cross. To give a "V.C." to all who deserved it would make the honour too common; yet any lesser honour was too little for scores and scores of these men. Similarly, to tell tales of the gallantry of individual stretcher-bearers would be to do an injustice to all the rest. An incident witnessed by several people occurred on the Albert—Bapaume road. The Germans threw a number of shells at the road every day. A big shell dropped right in the road at the moment when a party of stretcher-bearers came along carrying a wounded man. The shell just missed them, and they were swallowed up in the cloud of dust and *débris*. Onlookers took it for certain that they were gone, but slowly the dust cleared away and out of the haze emerged the stretcher-bearers, not varying their pace, and apparently unaware that anything had happened, intent only on not jolting the wounded man whom they carried. Their deliberateness, as they came out of the swirl of dust and smoke, was indescribably impressive. I asked one of the stretcher-bearers how they managed to keep plodding methodically on, as they always did, regardless of shells around them and seemingly concerned only with the care of the man they carry. He said at once, "Why, when you've got a wounded man to carry back, you *can't* think of anything but him." I believe it was true.

And the chaplains were, perhaps, the most insubordinate—the only insubordinate—men in the Army, for when they were commanded to stay with field ambulances and dressing stations they kept turning up in the front-line trenches and going with the men where they had no right to be. There were many battalions in which the padre was known to



be one of the bravest officers of the lot ; too many, also, which have no padre now.

And, besides all these, there was the whole amazing organisation " behind the lines." The world at large is beginning to understand that the production of the British Armies in the short space of time which it took was something of a miracle. It was. But the mere accumulation and equipment and drilling of so many million men was not, when one saw the whole, what struck one as the really miraculous thing. It was that all these men, thus accumulated, equipped, and drilled, should all be parts of this wonderful machine.

The Germans had persisted that, even if we could find the men, we could not make the machine which they had been perfecting for forty years and more. But it was there, operating with perfect smoothness: a machine which, in its mere mass and intricacy, almost staggered the imagination. One could not then and cannot now speak of details of the system for fear of saying something which should not be told, but it was stupendous in its proportions, with the methodical handling of the men in their hundreds of thousands, of all their equipment and supplies, food and miscellaneous baggage and ammunition, and the endless trains of guns, guns, guns, and shells by millions upon millions, all brought from England and all there in their places, or moved from place to place with the rhythm of clockwork. One could not convey any idea of it, nor grasp it in its entirety; but day by day the immensity of it grew on one, and one realised how trivial beside it had been anything that British military organisation had had to do in the past.

That was the real miracle; not the mere millions of men nor even their bravery, but this huge, frictionless machine of which they were a part. One talks of the size of this or that commercial enterprise, or engineering scheme, or industrial organisation. The biggest of them is the tricking out of a doll's house compared to the thing which Great Britain put together in the course of twenty months,

## X

### THE WORK OF OUR AIRMEN

AT the end of July I was lucky enough to obtain permission to go up in one of our aeroplanes to get some idea of what the world and the battlefield looked like from above. The permission did not include leave to fly across the lines, but only to move about over our own territory, where the chance of encounter with an enemy machine was small. That was privilege enough. Under any conditions, one's first flight in an aeroplane must presumably be a thrilling experience, but it is not given to many to make their first flight at such a time and amid such surroundings.

It was a day of bright sunshine, with a little haze, but less than there had been on any day for a week past, with a deep blue sky across which little clouds floated, sending their shadows, curiously small and distinct, chasing across the sunlit land below us.

We kept below the clouds—barely scraping one, as it were, now and again—at from 3,000 to 4,000 feet up, both because extra height would have meant less visibility and because if we were likely to meet the enemy anywhere it would be at higher levels, and it was not an occasion when an air-fight in the upper sky was being invited. So we flew comfortably low, and below us lay spread all the beautiful land of Picardy.

It was truly a beautiful land as seen thus, like one wide picture, and what surprised my inexperience most was the

wonderful clean-cut neatness of the landscape, with its endless chessboard pattern, as if the whole earth had gone to bed in the sunlight under a glorious patchwork quilt. It is all cut into little parallelograms, of infinite variety of breadth and size, of the golden maize colour of ripening grain, the various shades of green of growing crops, and flaming handkerchief patches of mustard blossom. There are no hedges, so it was all as clean as brushwork without any pencil lines between. The roads were all superlatively white and clean, and in the orchards the little round trees stood obediently in their regular rows.

The villages, too, from up there, were glorified. As you go through them down on the mere earth are you made aware of their squalor and the disrepair which is the inevitable concomitant of war. But from above you saw only nice rain-washed roofs and tree-tops, the church spire reaching up to you, and the street, very wide and white and sharply cut, running handsomely through it all.

And the little bits of wood, until you reached the line of devastation, were all compact and woolly, so that you might have picked up any one in a block, and everything was so orderly that you forgot to be sorry that you could not see the sheets of flaming poppies, or patches of blue cornflower, or other lesser bits of colour, all of which vanish before you are up 3,000 feet. It is really a much more beautiful world as the birds and the angels see it.

Next to the neatness and beauty of it all one marvelled most at the emptiness of the white roads. For some four weeks I had spent many hours each day upon these roads, and nothing could have seemed more preposterous than to call them empty. From above one I saw all the usual things—the long trains of lorries and horse transport, and the columns of marching men, with much more space between the ranks than you would suppose until you look down on them from above, and the individual vehicles—but what was so surprising was the immense extent of white road left on which there were no vehicles or men. One began

to understand how the enemy could throw as many shells as he did behind our lines and do so little harm. There was so much room in which things could fall and hit nothing but the earth.

Before one, as we flew, the whirling propeller blades made a barely perceptible blur in the air ahead. Down below, on both sides, the air was clearer than any crystal, and the sun—for it was in the middle hours of the day—beat straight downwards upon farmland and towns, woods and orchards, pond and little stream, white roads and black railway lines, villages and hospitals with the great Red Cross painted in huge dimensions on the open ground (for the information of just such craft as ours) between the huts or lines of clean white tents.

We did not, as has been said, cross the lines, nor even go near enough to tempt the possible fire of an enemy gun. Parallel to the line we passed from north to south and again from south to north. There was no clean-cut edge to the belt of desolation: only the patchwork of ripening grain and flaming mustard and growing crops ceased. There was an intermediate country of indeterminate greens and browns; and then the waste.

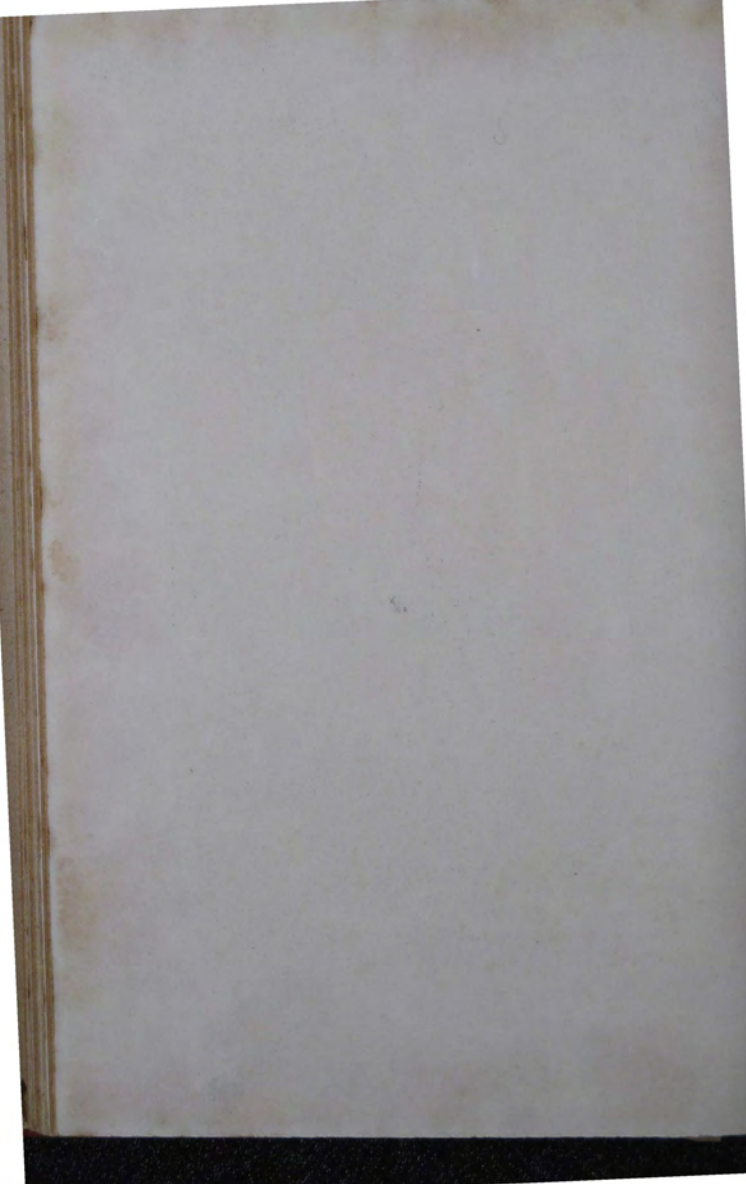
As one flew over the nearer outlying trenches on our side they were strangely distinct. When you walk along the edge of a trench on earth it is all untidy, with the irregular parapet, the wandering line of the trench itself, and all the rubbish littered near. From above it was as cleanly cut as if it were made with a sharp penknife cutting into cardboard; the line of the trench itself black, with the white line of parapet beside it. Beyond, the trenches not immediately below one were all blurred in perspective, all merging into the mixed yellow and brown and dulled green of that dreadful strip of land across which our men had recently gone so gallantly.

Beyond was the terrible belt of smoke. Smoke, too, rose here and there on this side of the belt, and from where we were shrapnel and high-explosive shell alike seemed to be





ANTI-AIRCRAFT AT WORK.



bursting on the ground. No sound of gun-fire or shell explosion reached one through the noise of one's own propeller and the whistle of the wind. Like the farmland and the villages it was all part of a painted picture.

One thing which the experience made me understand, as I had not understood before, was the amazing value of aeroplane observation. Proofs of it one had in many stories which one heard, and in the beautiful photographs with which our Flying Corps kept the Army supplied. Those photographs are wonderful in their detail, but still more wonderful was the clearness with which each detail down below stood out before the eyes.

Another thing which it taught me also was the joy of flight. It was, my pilot told me, a bumpy day, and I was glad. I knew that we bumped, certainly, and found that there are two kinds of bumps. In one you sensibly hit something hard, as a boat is buffeted by a sea. In the other you find nothing beneath you; but you drop, the bottom having fallen out of things, as when a lift begins unexpectedly to descend. I became familiar with both varieties of bumps and disliked them equally, and should have been disappointed if the expert had told me that it had been smooth.

They had told me that I should hate it when we banked, but they were wrong. It was merely strange and infinitely novel, while as for the landing, which they said was worst of all, there can be no more gloriously exhilarating thing in life than that steep glide, when the propeller drops its note to a gentle purring, and the machine sweeps, like some fairy motor-car, dropping, with the clutch out, on frictionless bearings down the face of a hill of oil, from cloud-level to tree-level, to grass-level, there to land, with hardly a jar, and bound again and rush across the open space of turf, swinging round in a gentle curve until she stops with her nose to her own hangar like a well-handled horse pulling up at his own doorstep.

Another thing which I learned was the great difficulty of seeing another machine in the air. I saw none. But when

I landed there were three within sight from the ground against the sky. Others also, it seemed, were about which were not in sight. I have said that the chance of encounter with an enemy machine behind our lines was small ; but it happened that that was one of the rare days when the Germans plucked up courage enough to come and had luck and skill enough to avoid our patrols. As we climbed out of our machine, an officer of the Royal Flying Corps strolled up, and—

“ See anything of the Boche ? ” he asked.

“ No,” replied my pilot. “ Is he around ? ”

“ There are five machines reported over and coming this way.”

It was interesting to know that we had been so near to excitement, and I was entirely glad to have missed it. Nor was anything more heard of the enemy machines.

My trip was only a trivial incident. But it increased tenfold my already great admiration of the men who handle these machines as my pilot handled mine, who take them up to three and four times the height to which I went and do not stay on this side of that dreadful line of desolation, but pierce it and keep patrolling, day by day, those upper regions over the enemy's country, to find him when he rises there above the clouds and beat him down to earth again.

War nowadays, in most of its aspects, is a terrible, sordid thing. But this fighting of the airmen is more than the warfare of any ancient heroes, and comes nearer to the battling of the old gods than anything that men have done or dreamed.

The rest of that day I spent about the aerodrome, having lunch and tea there and listening to the amazing “ shop ” of the flying men. It happened to be a peculiarly interesting day because a squadron went on a journey of seventy miles over enemy territory to bomb a certain railway station. Four machines went to do the actual bombing, four others accompanying them half way on the journey, to engage any German machines which might be encountered and prevent them from interfering with the main object of the trip.



It is immensely interesting to watch a squadron starting off on such an enterprise, but vastly more thrilling to see them come home. It is during the time that his men are away that the Commanding Officer has the most anxious time that he has to go through that day. I shared, in minor degree, the anxiety of such a vigil.

They went, very cheerfully and with almost no words said, on what was evidently a long and dangerous flight over the enemy's territory. A large flight of our fighting machines, soaring in the sunlight, into and beyond the clouds, is a sight more beautiful than any flock of birds that fly. They had all disappeared into the distant blue, and nothing then remained but to wait. Would they attain their end? And if they did, how many would come back? It is nervous work waiting, even for an accidental outsider, but for the Commander —!

An hour passed before it was reported that the escort was returning. In the constant coming and going in the skies above a great aerodrome, it is a mystery to the layman how quickly, while yet a speck hardly visible to the naked eye, one machine is recognised from another. But before the unpractised eye could see them the return of the wanderers was already being hailed: "There—up there—just over the big cloud—the first one passing through the small white cloud now—get a line straight above that tree!" And at last you saw them, white and seeming translucent against the sun, one—two—three—four! Already the whole sky was full of the whirring of their engines, and, growing gradually larger, one by one the beautiful things swung round in a perfect half circle, banking gracefully as they turned, and then in one long straight glide slid sweetly down to come slithering across the grass and stop within twenty yards each of its own hangar.

Everything was well so far. They had left the others far over there, they said, all headed for their goal and all going strong. They had met no enemy and had no shadow of untoward incident. Excellent news, so far; and then came

the second wait—longer and worse than the first. We talked of all sorts of things; but all the time our minds were far away beyond the noise and smoke of the battle line.

At last they came; not all together and still in formation like the earlier flight, but one singly and after some minutes another and then another and another, with each wait in between growing more nerve wracking, till at last the tale was complete. They had all come home safely, and they had done what they had been sent to do—as the way of our airmen is—down to the last detail.

Arrived at their destination, they had dropped down from the dizzy heights at which, on such an errand, they fly, and then, methodically one after another, they had done their work. From that height an airman's trained eye can watch the course of his bomb in clear weather until it actually strikes the ground. So they had seen them fall; they had seen them strike the railway trucks and station and the *depôt* where the stores were kept. Each had had his object and each had found it. They had seen the bombs—explosive and incendiary—strike true, they had seen the wreckage and the smoke and the flames, and they knew that their work had been thorough. And only the last had been fired at.

At less than 2,500 feet an anti-aircraft gun should have little trouble in finding an aeroplane. Perhaps the men with the "Archies" were having their after-luncheon nap. Probably they had had beer to drink—and the day was very hot. So all our machines but one had dropped their bombs—not hurriedly, but with precision—before the enemy's guns spoke—and then they spoke harmlessly.

"Oh, yes; they came pretty near," the pilot of the last machine said casually in reply to my question; "nothing unusual." For these men to have the shells exploding "pretty near" about their ears is a daily incident. They merely report it, saying that they were fired at by a gun at such-and-such a place much as if they said that they had lunched there.

Shortly before this I had spent another day at a different aerodrome learning the details of the fight in which Lieut. McKubbin, with his observer, Sergt. Waller, had caused the death of Immelmann. The veteran among the machines at that aerodrome was a certain F. E. battleplane, which had—for I counted them—over 230 bullet holes in its planes, gathered in the course of its career, some being made by German anti-aircraft guns and some by the machine guns of enemy airmen.

It was one of the absurd chances of war that the great Immelmann (for we can afford to call him that) should have been brought down by a man who had never been in an aeroplane before the previous February. McKubbin, when I saw him, was in hospital, though his injury was not received in the historic fight but in another encounter a week later, when he had brought down, again with Waller as observer, his second victim. The bullet—one of the latest armour-piercing bullets from the machine gun in the German aeroplane—had entered McKubbin's shoulder, passing down through the muscles of his arm and remaining lodged in the forearm. The bullet was by his bedside as he lay there. His comrades of the Flying Corps, of course, rejoiced that he should have put an end to the career of the famous enemy airman, but from the professional point of view it was a much finer feat when, with his right arm ripped as it was, in spite of pain and dizziness and loss of blood, he had brought his machine, with the observer safe and sound, beautifully to earth in its home aerodrome. In the opinion of our airmen it might have fallen to any one of them to bring down Immelmann. But to do what McKubbin did in the later encounter, when he got his machine so cleanly to earth and then collapsed as it landed—that, indeed, was a performance of which any flying man could be proud.

He looked to me, as he was, very young: all the younger, perhaps, because he was an extreme blonde and additionally pale after his injury and some three days in hospital. He seemed to think that having got his enemy in that particular



fight was rather a matter of course. It was just an extraordinary piece of luck that that enemy was Immelmann.

He went up on that fateful morning for his usual daily patrol, with Waller, in his battleplane. They saw Lieut. Savage patrolling his adjoining beat and also they saw, far overhead, three Fokkers. By this time McKubbin's machine was some 8,000 feet up. The Fokkers, after their custom, had been waiting behind their lines at a safe altitude. Just as McKubbin saw them, one of the three dived and went down to earth, while the other two dropped straight for Lieut. Savage. Both McKubbin and Waller supposed that the third machine was only going down in order to get below and join in the fight from another angle. But their business was to go for what they saw, and that was the two Fokkers which were dropping, like hawks on their prey, on the other British machine.

Lieut. Savage had also dived to avoid the first rush of the two attackers, so that the actual fight took place at a height of about 5,500 feet, and down at one sheer drop for 2,500 feet went McKubbin to join in. It is a dizzying thing even to think of, the two birds of prey plunging through the almost illimitable space on the quarry below and McKubbin sweeping after them to his comrade's help. As he drew near, he knew that he was already too late to bring help; only retribution remained. He saw Lieut. Savage's machine get out of control and then go plumb down to earth. Evidently the pilot himself had been shot by the foremost of the two Fokkers which had dived straight down for the tail of the British machine. McKubbin followed no less straight. Before Immelmann had begun to steady himself from his victorious plunge, McKubbin was on him. He took no chance of firing from safe distance, but went straight in, confident in Waller's nerve, and it was not until he was almost touching the other machine that Waller fired. At the very first round, the enemy was hit. The machine seemed suddenly to bank, turned clear over on its right side and then went down like a stone.



Meanwhile the second Fokker had swung round and in its turn was coming for McKubbin. The latter swerved and circled to get inside the enemy : but no shot was exchanged. McKubbin, of course, did not know who was in the machine which had fallen ; but doubtless the occupant of the other Fokker did and, knowing that Immelmann was gone, he had not either the heart or the nerve to continue the fight, but dropped down after his lost comrade.

It was all a very gallant and very thrilling affair. In the fight of the following week, when McKubbin and Waller flew one of five British battleplanes which met five Fokkers and brought down two of them, while all our machines came safely back, except for McKubbin's injury to his arm, the thing was on an even more heroic scale. But it had not the glamour of the fight which was Immelmann's last.

McKubbin was born in South Africa, where his father was connected with the South African Railways at St. Johannesburg. Waller, an Englishman by birth, had spent some years in the United States and Canada, and had some difficulty in getting home when the war broke out to join the Air Service. He then registered a vow that he would not go home again until he had brought down a German aeroplane. He had, when I saw him, brought down three ; but did not yet want to go home.

At the squadron aerodrome, when I was there, two large wreaths of flowers lay on the ground stitched up in canvas. One was for Lieut. Savage and the other for Immelmann. That night it was the intention that they should be dropped by aeroplane into the enemy's aerodrome, and this, I afterwards heard, had been successfully done.

There was, at the time, much discontent in England because the War Office was so tardy in allowing McKubbin's name to be known. But the policy of avoiding all advertisement of individuals had and has, I believe, the cordial support of the men of the Royal Flying Corps. The man who brought down an enemy machine—even an Immelmann—did not necessarily do anything more gallant than what every man

who went up over our front did every day. While the French and German *communiqués* were announcing each successive triumph of the individual aviators who had vanquished notable numbers of enemy flyers, it was only, as it were, by accident, when he came to England to be officially decorated, that the British public learned that in Captain Ball we had a champion with a much longer list of victories to his credit than any other airman in the world. In their policy of reticence the authorities had and have the entire support of the men of the Corps. It is not jealousy or churlishness or any other unworthy motive which inspires that policy, but a very chivalrous spirit of comradeship and *esprit de corps*. No other Service, in Great Britain or elsewhere, has established for itself a finer code than has the Air Service; none lives up to its code better.

As for the gallantry of our flying men throughout the Battle of the Somme, it is difficult to speak of it without becoming absurd in overpraise. Here is the story, paraphrased from the official reports, of a typical raid which took place in September:—

The point of attack selected was Libercourt, about forty miles into German territory from the Somme front and about twelve miles south of Lille, on the main Lille—Douai line of railway. At Libercourt a branch line from the direction of Lens joined the main line from the west, and a similar branch line from the same general direction came in a few miles lower down at Ostricourt. Such a point was evidently of the greatest importance to the enemy's troop movements at a time when he was continually shifting masses of men from all the northern parts of his line down to the Somme and taking the shattered Divisions back to rest.

Close by, at distances of from three to five miles away, to north-west, north and north-east, were three German aerodromes—presumably placed here to assist in the protection of the important railway junctions—at Provin, Phalempin and Tourmignies. If our men were to be undisturbed at their work upon the railway, it was necessary to keep the

occupants of these aerodromes quiet; so the first step was to send small patrols of our airmen to visit each of these and keep it in order. They seem to have had a gorgeous time. It was one o'clock in the day and the German airmen were probably thinking of lunch when suddenly on each of the three aerodromes bombs began to fall from the clouds, crashing into the hangars or plunging into the open ground. Immediately after the first bombs which scattered ruin, other bombs began to fall, not dangerously explosive but emitting thick clouds of fumes and smoke, blinding and bewildering the men below, till each aerodrome from above looked like a boiling pit. Into this turmoil the airmen above kept at intervals dropping high-explosive bombs, as the official document says, "to show that they were still there," lest any German airman should pluck up heart to try to rise above the welter on the ground. At the Provin aerodrome it is known that a hangar was destroyed; and at Phalempin a fire was started which spread to the village and was still burning late that evening. The chief object of the attacks on the aerodrome, however, was not destruction so much as to keep the German flyers quiet while our other aeroplanes did their chosen work. So successfully was this accomplished that those aeroplanes were neither attacked nor shot at during the expedition.

Soon after 1.30 a train was seen leaving the junction at Libercourt, running southwards towards Ostricourt; and this was what our airmen wanted. Two of our squadron dipped from out of the sky till they were only 800 feet above the devoted train, and, as they dipped, they saw another train coming along the branch line from Lens to meet the main line at Ostricourt, and this two others went off to deal with.

Both trains, as it proved, were loaded with troops, and they had a dreadful time. On the first train six 20 lb. bombs were dropped. The engine was hit and thrown from the rails and, as it went, the impetus of the train behind it telescoped the two or three leading carriages. The troops



average " was at a time when every day our men were flying over every point of importance within thirty miles of the front and sometimes reaching places seventy miles away. They were dropping bombs on railway lines and depôts and munition stores and columns of transport on the road. They dipped down low to use the machine guns on marching troops. They attacked and destroyed the enemy's observation balloons. They even slid out of the clouds and—audacity could go no further—engaged and routed the anti-aircraft guns themselves!

As for the way in which they bullied the enemy's machines when they could get at them, a few specific examples from another week's reports will illustrate it. On September 1 Lieut. B. "encountered a formation of twelve Rolands." Naturally, Lieut. B. got away as fast as he could. Did he? Read this:—

He climbed and, getting to the rear of the formation, dived in amongst them, firing one drum. The formation was broken up. Lieut. B. then got under the nearest machine and fired one drum at fifteen yards under the pilot's seat, causing the machine to plunge to earth south-east of Bapaume. Shortly afterwards some more hostile aeroplanes came up in formation. Lieut. B. attacked one, which went down and landed in a gap between two woods. Several other machines were engaged with indecisive results and, having expended all his ammunition, Lieut. B. returned.

It was careless of Lieut. B. not to have more ammunition about him; but what is one to say of a man like this, who spends a happy day in tackling, first twelve enemy machines and then "several" more, diving into them like a hawk into a flight of pigeons and simply scaring them all over the sky?

And that same evening another man took a hand in the game of fluttering Volsces. This was Lieut. L. The covey which he ran into had only eight birds. He picked out one—doubtless the old cock, though the report does not say so—which "went down in a spin" (you know how a bird does it sometimes) "falling near Bapaume." The neighbourhood



of Bapaume seems to have been fairly sprinkled with damaged enemy aeroplanes that day.

Another day Lieuts. V. and B. (not the same B. as before), "encountered six enemy machines near Cambrai." Then follows :

While he was diving at the hostile patrol leader, three hostile machines dived on to the tail of Lieut. V.'s machine. One of the enemy machines was engaged by another pilot while Lieut. B. engaged another and fired two and a half drums into it as it passed across the tail of his machine. This enemy machine made a vertical dive with a stream of smoke pouring out behind. Lieut. V. turned and opened fire on the third machine with his front gun, firing about twenty rounds at it. The pilot turned and got under the tail and Lieut. V. also turned and fired another twenty rounds into it, after which it was seen to dive vertically out of control and to turn on its back. The remaining hostile machines dispersed and were seen to land west of Cambrai.

On another occasion one of our machines, with Lieut. Q. as pilot and Lieut. W. as observer, was attacked by four of the enemy, but "turning sharply emptied one drum into the nearest at twenty yards' range," when the enemy turned on his side and fell. The pilot "then attacked another machine which was just above him, and his observer got in a drum and a half at close range. The Roland turned a complete cartwheel on its right wing tip and fell out of control."

This sort of thing went on all the time. Sometimes the enemy comes down "spinning." Sometimes in a "spiral." Sometimes "diving vertically," or they simply "crash." Capt. C. one day ran into two parties of the enemy, one of four machines and one of three, and he bagged a bird from each. Then three lieutenants (M., C. and B.—still another "B.") got mixed up with "a number" of hostile machines near Puisieux, and the "number" was reinforced by a new detachment of three more during the fight. They are only sure that they got one of the enemy, but there is reasonable ground for suspecting that they got more.

A delightful story is that of one of our men (yet a fourth

Lieut. B.!) who pretended to be in trouble in the air and came fluttering down in the enemy's territory in the most irregular and dissipated fashion, like a tumbler pigeon, so that the enemy never thought of firing at him. Quite by accident, of course, he came tumbling close by an enemy observation balloon. So near did he get that he almost touched it. A minute later the astonished enemy saw their balloon in flames and the presumably crippled British machine sailing serenely away.

These little exploits were only incidents in the regular daily work of our flying men. Their most important job was spotting enemy gun positions and other things so that our own guns might get on to them. On one day 132 targets were thus "dealt with." On another day our men went bombing an aerodrome and they saw the enemy wheeling all their machines out of the sheds—which they knew would be bombed—so our men dropped a little lower and bombed the machines in the open. Another time they went for a factory, and "a big explosion occurred." Then it was a railway station which was "hit in several places." Or they came down and used their machine guns on the soldier workers massed about a pithead, or on "the enemy's support lines" or "the second line hostile trenches south of Beaumont Hamel."

One does not wonder that the Germans in their trenches hated our aeroplanes. An illuminating document on this subject was the diary of a German lieutenant of the 180th Regiment, which was the regiment who had held Thiepval. We captured the diary when we took that place. Here are some extracts from it :—

August 22.— . . . Many of the people look like corpses. And then these exhausting duties ! Men cannot work at all. Yesterday a sentry fell from mere weakness and the evil smell.

August 25.—Thiepval and Hill 141 represent a hell that no imagination can picture. Shelters are destroyed and uninhabitable. Trenches exist no more. One lies in shell holes which change hourly—no, each minute. The heaviest shells come whistling in each minute and close

this one up and unearth the dead. All communication is above ground and therefore the losses are startling. Wax-yellow, without expression, the stream of wounded goes by. Warm food is not to be thought of. One takes iron rations which the stomach can scarcely digest.

To-day we had a tremendously heavy bombardment which surpassed anything I have ever seen. Who can say if it was our own or the enemy's artillery? Our own artillery has always shown an inclination to shoot short. We stand here under the most severe artillery fire ever seen by the world, directed so accurately by twenty-nine captive balloons and about thirty aviators, that they bring under fire every shelter and every junction of a trench. Against that we have six captive balloons which venture up a bare 600 metres high for fear of the enemy's aviators. At the same time they are so far behind, to get out of the way of the enemy's naval guns, that our artillery can scarcely be said to have aerial observers. How ironical is the sentence used in the English *communiqué* of the 21st inst. :—"To-day the German aviators showed a livelier activity. Some even dared to cross the lines." The bitterness is that it is perfectly true. All these visible signs strengthen the British moral.

August 31.— . . . There are thirty-four English captive balloons and one German to be seen. That is a fine state of affairs! In addition there are about fifty aviators climbing overhead.

Here is an abstract from a captured letter :—

There are no trenches in the front line position. The men lie to a large extent in shell holes. The enemy aviators descend to a height of about 30 metres and fire on them with machine guns and signal with horns. The enemy's aviators are far superior, especially in numbers. Our airmen are powerless and are put to flight as soon as the enemy machines approach our trench lines.

And there were many to the same effect. I also heard prisoners talk with the utmost contempt of their own Air Service. They said that if an officer wanted to get fat he joined the Flying Corps, the officers of which did nothing but go and sit in the theatre at Lille with their breasts all covered with medals. It was doubtless unjust. We know that our flying men have had a most chivalrous regard for their enemies in the air. But the bitterness on the subject among the German troops was universal, and this bitterness probably helped not a little to incite the German aviators to the desperate attempts which, late in the autumn when the weather



grew more hazy, they made to recover some measure of their lost air supremacy. They did not in any serious degree succeed, but the early winter saw much savage air-fighting about the battlefields, in which we continued always to keep the upper hand. Partly owing to the greater audacity of our men, partly because of the great prevalence of westerly winds which always drifted machines, as they fought, over the enemy's country, the Germans had a great advantage in the fact that crippled machines, friendly or hostile, were always more likely to fall in their territory than in ours, and their anti-aircraft guns had a hundred opportunities to come into action where ours had one.

In spite of everything we kept the dominion of the air. In the early stages of the battle, when the Germans had the advantage of positions on high ground, giving them the direct observation, the advantage was largely neutralised by the splendid work of our airmen. Later, when we had driven the enemy from the ridge and he had no direct observation at all, our aviators so prevented his machines from spying on our positions that the German artillery was practically blind and could fire only by the map. What was true of our airmen was no less true of the French, and every man in the Allied Armies recognised that a large part of our success was directly due to the flying men.

Nothing written on this subject, however, would be complete without a word of praise for the observers in our kite balloons. Their work was of the greatest value and it involved great physical hardship as well as danger, not only from the enemy's aeroplanes and long range guns, but also from the possibility of the balloon parting from its moorings in a gale and being carried towards the German lines. This happened in, at least, one instance in the course of the Battle of the Somme, and the occupants barely saved themselves by dropping with their parachutes to land just behind our front trenches.

The grotesque and unwieldy shape of the balloons (generally known in the Army as "Ruperts") made them a constant



subject of frivolity, but the sight of the long fleet of them floating serenely above our lines, whenever the weather made observation possible, while, perhaps, no single German balloon was visible, was comforting and constant evidence of our air supremacy.

## XI

### WEARING THE GERMANS DOWN

THE first half of August, like the latter part of July, was a period of drought and intense heat. All roads and lines of communication were choked with dust, and marching in the daytime was extremely trying. In the trenches the heat was stifling and over the whole front, especially in the woods, the number of unburied dead made the air loathsome to breathe. No epidemic, however, showed itself and the health and spirits of the troops continued extraordinarily good.

We had broken through the German first and second lines. The next definite objectives before our main front were the tier of villages on the further side of the ridge, namely, Courcellette, Martinpuich, Flers, Lesbœufs, and Morval. These, however, were at a distance varying from one mile to two miles from our lines, and between us and them lay the crest of the ridge itself, with what may be considered its crucial points, from left to right, at the summit by The Windmill beyond Pozières, at the upper end of High Wood and on the bare plateau to the north and east of Ginchy.

On the extreme left of the front lay Thiepval, also on a high spur of the ridge, and on the extreme right the village of Guillemont, lower than Ginchy, but crowning a bare slope, extremely difficult of approach, with, beyond it, a long fold in the ground or gully, which was swept from the enemy's positions about Leuze Wood, in the direction of Combles. The whole month of August was spent in the slow work of



GERMAN PRISONERS IN ONE OF THE "CAGES."





pushing methodically up the last stages of the general slope and especially out beyond Pozières on the left and to Guillemont on the right.

The fighting was not spectacular like that of the great crashing attacks by which we had broken through the first two main lines of defence ; but it called for the very highest qualities in our men, and I believe that it was in the steady, remorseless pounding of those weeks that our Army really came to know its own strength and that the chief injury to the German *moral* was wrought. How much importance the enemy attached to the retention of his positions on the ridge was shown (as in many other things) by the wording of an Order of the Day of General von Gallwitz, dated July 30, which was found on the person of a captured officer :

Within a short space of time we must be prepared for violent attacks on the part of the enemy. The decisive battle of the war is now being fought on the fields of the Somme. It must be impressed on every officer and man up to the front line that the fate of our country is at stake in this struggle. By ceaseless vigilance and self-sacrificing courage the enemy must be prevented from gaining another inch of ground. His attacks must break against a wall of German breasts.

Another similar Order declared that the English must not be allowed to advance except "over heaps of German corpses." To do the Germans justice, they fought for the most part stubbornly during these terrible weeks. They had all the advantage of ground and of long prepared positions. But the courage and determination of our men were irresistible. Over the "heaps of German corpses," against the "wall of German breasts," day by day they went on. The gain of a day might be only a matter of a few yards, one isolated position or a small bit of trench ; but there was always gain. Every day, also, we took some prisoners.

Before the middle of August Germany had taken pains to inform the world that the Allied offensive on the Somme had exhausted itself. As a matter of fact, there was no time when the German Higher Command must have been more acutely conscious of the steady increase in the weight of our

pressure. For a month the two Armies were like a pair of wrestlers locked body to body with every muscle tense. But there was never an hour's doubt as to which Army it was which was slowly forcing the other back and squeezing it to death.

There were no such thrilling moments as those which followed the victory of July 14. As for "breaking through" in the sense in which the public understood it, as if the German line of defence were only a thin fence or crust through which our troops might burst to romp about a defenceless territory beyond, I have already explained that this was not among the objects—or visions—with which the offensive was undertaken. None the less, after July 14 there were many who wondered whether the thing might not have been possible—whether, without our hoping or intending it, we had not in truth come nearer to piercing finally that outer crust than had seemed conceivable. Not till the war is over shall we know how near to it we actually came. We know, however, that the German machine was then subjected to a greater strain than it had ever expected to be called upon to stand.

Other days equally full of triumph and exhilaration were to come. Meanwhile, before any new great attack could be delivered on the main front, we had, through the month of August, to force our way bit by bit to within striking distance of the objectives of such an attack. The Germans, since the beginning of July, had much increased the number of their guns upon the Somme front, and, in August, we knew that there were of all calibres some 1,120 guns—and possibly more which had escaped observation—opposed to the narrow British front alone. Our artillery, however, still outnumbered theirs and, with the supremacy in the air which we had seized and maintained, it had an advantage in observation which went a long way to neutralise the enemy's superiority of position. And we can confess now that we had learned much in the course of the fighting, so that the co-operation of infantry and artillery, the synchronising of bombardment and attack, was appreciably better in the later stages of

the battle than it had been at first. We had come to be more cunning fighters and to attain our objects at less cost.

In the month of July our casualties had been much heavier than those of the enemy. This was not the case in August. Later, there were many conspicuous cases wherein the German losses vastly exceeded ours. Against our relentless advance the enemy kept flinging counter-attacks which did not stop us but cost him dearly. In the Report of General Sixt von Arnim, which was captured, reference was made to the unsuccessful counter-attacks which "cost much blood." In various other German documents we read instructions—almost lectures—on the proper methods of counter-attacking which betrayed an almost agitated consciousness that the methods then in use were not a success, but that something more was needed if resistance to our advance was to be effective.

Prisoners whom we took now began to speak in terror of the character of our artillery fire and of the magnitude of the German losses. Letters and diaries found on the persons of captured officers and men told in terms of horror of the sufferings of individual units. Thus we heard of a battalion which lost two-thirds of its strength in one day and of a company which came out from one of our attacks with only two men left. The Colonel of a regiment officially certified his losses to have been 1,800 men of a total effective strength of 2,600. "We are suffering colossal losses," wrote another man. Both in the documents which we captured and in the conversation of prisoners there was a new note of distress and alarm. This attack of the English was to have been easily beaten off and short-lived, but in the second month of the battle, so far from showing any evidence of slackening in the vigour of our offensive, our pressure grew more and more severe, giving the enemy no relief by day or night. More significant still, in the first week of August we heard for the first time of German soldiers surrendering in considerable batches after only a feeble resistance.

This occurred conspicuously in an attack to the north



and west of Pozières, which was delivered at the unexpected hour of nine o'clock in the evening of August 4. Undoubtedly the enemy was in a measure taken by surprise. We captured about 1,000 yards more of his main second line, and in all pushed our front forward about 500 yards on a front of nearly two miles. The prisoners, some 500 in number, were from the 17th and 18th Reserve Divisions, IXth Reserve Corps; and the majority of them surrendered with extraordinary readiness.

The main thrust northward from Pozières was made by the Australians, who fought, as always, magnificently. They had English troops—men of the East Kents, East Surreys and Sussex—co-operating on their left, who also behaved with the greatest dash. The line on which they had to advance was on the extreme left, from a point above Ovillers-la-Boisselle, almost directly towards Mouquet Farm, which, with its shattered trees around it, was in these days a conspicuous object from all that part of the front, standing as it did on ground only some twenty feet lower than the highest point of all the ridge, which was slightly to the east along the Albert—Bapaume road. Their immediate objective was a strongly fortified line of trench running diagonally across the ground about half-way between our front line and the farm. Besides this main trench there were a number of support trenches and so forth in various directions, and the approach was covered by machine-gun fire from positions on both the right and left.

Just before the time set for the attack the enemy shelled our line heavily with his favourite gas shells, which, as usual, gave our men the inconvenience on a hot evening of putting their gas masks on. The weapons used in the attack were less rifles or bayonets than bombs, some of the attacking troops even leaving their rifles behind and going, with bombs only, as light as possible. Our men got through the enemy's *barrage* under cover of our own artillery bombardment, which was magnificently handled, and while some jumped into the German trench and bombed along it, others ran



along the top, getting what cover they could from the parapet or other inequalities in the ground to protect them from the machine guns, and bombed down on the Germans below them. There seems to have followed a short space of very exhilarating fighting.

The Germans, who habitually had large quantities of their bombs so laid out ready that they could be used immediately with a minimum of movement, fought in places stubbornly, but when our men came romping along the top of the trench, attacking them from above, it was too much for most of them, who bolted for their dug-outs. When there, many of them tried to play a trick with which we were by this time getting familiar.

These dug-outs had connecting passages and many exits. When a British soldier called to the inmates to come out, they would shout back that they could not because they were tending wounded. Earlier in this fighting, in such a case, our men might trustfully have gone down into the hole, and men coming in single file down steep steps with the light behind them are at a disadvantage against a dozen or a score of well-armed men waiting in readiness for them in the dark. If our men resisted this bait, there was a fair chance that during the parleying which ensued the Germans might escape by another exit. It was the enemy's own fault, the fault of his trickery, if in the later stages of the battle, after the second or third summons, instead of going down, our men sent in a bomb ahead of them.

The difficulty of getting prisoners out of these dug-outs was often considerable. The inclination of the British troops was always towards humanity, to spare men's lives, if they could, and take prisoners peacefully. Very often the mere terror of the Germans made this difficult. On one occasion a German had found refuge in a dug-out which opened from the trench, but he was too panic-stricken either to stay entirely in or to come out; because, if he stayed in, some one might throw a bomb in after him, and if he came out—well, there were Germans who still believed that the English

ate their prisoners alive. So every thirty seconds or so this miserable man rushed to the entrance of the dug-out, protruding his head and shoulders ("like a hermit crab," as I heard it described), and waved his two arms in token of surrender frantically in the air, then bolted down the burrow again. It was so irresistibly comic that no one had the heart to interfere. For twenty minutes or thereabouts the wretched German kept up his alternate brandishings and evanishments, while more and more British soldiers came along the trench and crowded round to watch. He was performing to a full house and was quite out of breath when at last an officer had pity on him and, at his next appearance, took him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him out of his shell. Otherwise he might be running up and down those dug-out steps yet.

Two other Germans, again, once refused to come out of a dug-out which, besides its proper entrance, had a hole, made by a shell, in the roof. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to have bombed them through the hole, but it is not an easy thing to go down the steps into a dug-out where enemy with rifles are awaiting you. So after some shoutings down the hole our men decided to let them alone till they grew hungry, a guard being set at the door and at the hole above. With periodical conversations through the chimney the situation remained unchanged for some five hours. Then it chanced that some other German prisoners came filing down the trench; and the guard at the door had the happy idea of sending some of them down to fetch their compatriots up, and this, with a nice admixture of persuasion and force, they did.

While on the left we were forcing our way almost by yards up the slope from Pozières, on the extreme right very hard fighting went on in the direction of Guillemont, where our line ran from the bottom of Delville Wood by Waterloo Farm south-eastward almost to the outskirts of Guillemont and thence at right angles south-westward to the eastern

face of Trônes Wood. I have already told of the terrible character of the fighting in Trônes Wood. It is so horrid a subject that one hesitates to speak of it ; but war in all its details is horrid. In the hot days of August, so dreadful was the smell from the unburied dead—some German, some British—in and about the wood, that troops on first going into the area were, almost to a man, made deathly sick. Many men had to be invalided, solely from the effects of the smell, and some were rendered permanently unfit for service. For months afterwards, after all the autumn rains and into the winter, when everything possible had been done to clean up the awful charnel house, the atmosphere still remained—here, in Delville Wood and High Wood—unspeakably noisome.

In former wars we know that to places such as these carrion-feeding birds—crows and vultures especially—have flocked in great numbers. In the spring of 1915 I myself saw great flocks of hoodie crows on the Serbian battlefields of the preceding winter, where the dead, men and horses alike, had been imperfectly buried. No such birds have flocked to the battlefields of the Western front. Perhaps one would not expect vultures to be drawn so far as Picardy ; but carrion crows are indigenous. Presumably it is the gun fire of modern warfare which keeps the scavengers away.

It has already been said that the approach to Guillemont over the exposed slope, swept by fire from all directions, was extremely difficult. The village itself was by now non-existent, looking only like a lighter area blotching irregularly the high ground at the top of the gentle rise. Strong trench lines, however, ran in front of the village, and among the ruins were concealed machine-gun positions and deep dug-outs. The ground over which attack had to be delivered, moreover, was completely dominated by the enemy from both the north and east. There was very severe fighting here in the closing days of July, when we twice attacked the lines before Guillemont, but without breaking our way into the village. The determination of our men was, perhaps, nowhere



better shown than in the stubbornness with which we ultimately forced our way in, the whole of the operations at this season being conducted under the burden of intense heat.

A very dashing assault on the lines before the village was made from the direction of Trônes Wood on August 8, the troops engaged being chiefly Lancashire men—King's Liverpools and Liverpool Irish—with some Scottish Borderers on their right and some of the Middlesex Regiment on their left.

The attack was made soon after 4 a.m. on August 8, when it was still dark. The Borderers on the extreme right of our movement did very well, carried the trenches opposed to them, and pushed forward on to the high ground due south of Guillemont, gaining a very useful piece of territory at small cost. Their left, was, however, hung up in the darkness by a hidden trench, the existence of which had not been expected, and failed to get farther. On their left again, however, were the Liverpool Irish. They went clean through the successive lines of trenches opposed to them right into the village of Guillemont, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy on their way. Their right, of course, would now be unsupported, owing to their neighbours on that side being hung up. Not getting any touch with the troops on their right, in the darkness and confusion of the ruined village, they lost their direction—an extremely easy thing to do where there was nothing but a layer of battered brick spread over some irregular portion of the earth, without any landmarks or guiding signs.

Having once got lost, instead of holding on to the portion of the village nearest to them, these men, their Irish blood now up, worked through the whole place till they got down to the extreme south-eastern corner of the village, and there they proceeded to dig themselves in. It was an audacious thing to do, for they were a mere island in a hostile sea, with the whole depth and width of the village between them and their nearest friends and the enemy all round them. Some of them by a miracle got back again next day and on the day



after, across the enemy's trenches and through our, as well as his, artillery fire. The remnant which did not get back were ultimately taken prisoners.

The Middlesex also made some gain to the north of Guillemont, due east from Waterlot Farm, capturing a machine-gun position, with the guns, near the station. The immediate crest of the ridge here, however, was practically untenable by either party, and we rested in a trench just on this side of it.

Our line was now close to Guillemont on the north of the ruins and, on the west of it, about half way between the village and the edge of Trônes Wood. The difficulty now lay chiefly to the south of the village, in the region from Arrowhead Copse, by Maetz Horn Farm to the junction with the French near Angle Wood, the lie of the ground here, with the low wooded ravine which ran out from the last named place north-westward, being peculiarly adapted to defence. It would be impossible to describe in detail the continuous struggle which went on here for nearly a month, when slowly, in hand-to-hand fighting, we drove the enemy out of one position after another. In attacks on August 13 and 17, by sheer hard fighting, we made notable progress; and then we hit the enemy very hard indeed on August 19.

Throughout all this period, however, there was no day when there was not fighting of the sternest possible kind, on a larger or smaller front, somewhere along the line, no day when we failed to make some advance or to take some prisoners. Around Guillemont, east of Pozières in the Munster Alley region and to the north and west of Pozières to Mouquet Farm, the struggle was especially severe and continuous. Somewhere we were always buffeting the enemy, always forcing him back, and round the whole half circle of the front our guns were never silent by night or day. The Germans were now learning to the full what it meant to be pounded unceasingly by superior artillery. It was not only his front trenches, but the entire area behind his lines—every railhead, every billeting centre, each line of com-

munication—was subjected to the punishment of an artillery fire such as the world had never seen, unless it was at Verdun. Even the struggle at Verdun was now being eclipsed by the Battle of the Somme.

In the desperate hope that our offensive would exhaust itself and that they could yet save the final crest of the ridge from our advance, the Germans hurried up new troops and flung them against us in counter-attacks. Against one narrow section of our line in three days from August 6 to August 8 alone, they made three heavy attacks besides some ten minor ones. In the main attacks the enemy used battalions of the 63rd and parts of the 162nd and 163rd Infantry Regiments, as well as part of the 84th Reserve Regiment. The attacks were originally planned for August 5, but were countermanded, and were finally delivered on August 6 and 7. That of the former day was completely and disastrously repulsed. In that of the following day the enemy advanced over some 800 or 1,000 yards of open ground, where he suffered very severely from our artillery fire, and on approaching our trenches he was caught by our machine guns, and the attack simply withered up. Only in one or two places did parties reach our trenches, and of those who did so, such as were not killed were made prisoners.

What the total enemy losses were we do not exactly know, but we know that the 3rd Battalion of the 63rd Regiment lost 400 men out of a total of 550. Something like the same proportion of casualties probably prevailed in all the troops engaged.

These particular attacks were directed against our front where it ran just beyond the old German second line from a point immediately north of the cemetery above Pozières on the left to a little beyond our positions at The Windmill on the right. This the Germans regarded, and rightly, as one of the crucial points upon the ridge, giving us, if we held it, command and observation of all the slope beyond. Not only would we have Courcellette and Martinpuich, as it

were, at our feet, but the trough of the valley, with Miramont and Warlencourt, would lie open as a cup before us, while all the opposing incline by Thillois and Bapaume would be visible to us.

Similar counter-attacks, no less weighty and equally futile and costly, were made against other parts of the line. It was, perhaps, the only way in which the Germans could hope to hold us back from the final capture of the ridge, but it was very costly. It did, indeed, "cost much blood." They had to push in new troops to the attack, only to withdraw them, shattered, to give place to yet others, with unexampled rapidity; so that by the middle of August, after six weeks of fighting, as many German Divisions had been used as were employed in the whole of four months' fighting at Verdun.

Our operation of August 19 was not a simultaneous attack along the whole front. The whole front was, indeed, involved in it, but the attacks were made independently in the various Corps areas at different times, from three o'clock in the afternoon until after six o'clock in the evening.

Beginning for the purposes of narrative on the extreme left, though there the attack was later in time, it was there that perhaps the largest and most important gain was made. Here we pushed on a front of about 1,000 yards due north, clearing out the whole elaborate system of the German front line with all its support and reserve and emergency trenches, till our front was about 1,500 yards north of Ovillers-la-Boisselle, and almost exactly due west from the cemetery above Pozières. The troops engaged here were chiefly Warwicks. The whole ground won was a perfect nest of dug-outs, and how strongly they and the connecting trenches were held was shown by the fact that 600 prisoners, including a dozen officers, fell into our hands; and there is no doubt that the German killed and wounded much exceeded the number of prisoners. The casualties on our side were hardly half of 600. The men themselves, with whom I talked, spoke with the greatest enthusiasm of the work of our artillery,



which had pounded the enemy positions most unmercifully before the attack was delivered, *barraged* the ground ahead of them, as they advanced, to perfection, and, finally, helped to smother and obliterate a formidable counter-attack. Heavy guns and field guns alike seem to have done admirably.

So completely had the German trenches been battered that our initial attack was delivered in plain daylight over the open ground almost without casualties. What losses were incurred were at individual strong points in the course of the advance, one of which held out when all the trenches around it were gone. It was only by working close up to it on every side and bombing it that it was finally reduced. This was, however, no case of a couple of machine guns and a handful of men holding off a battalion; no Thermopylæ. For when the white flag was hoisted there filed out unwounded to surrender no fewer than six officers and 244 men.

Having made themselves masters of the first main trenches, our men set to work to bomb along the communication and support lines with short rushes across the open to clean out a shell hole or an outlying bit of trench. It seems to have been a gloriously confused and exhilarating day—"just like ferrets after rabbits," as one officer described it—with extremely successful results.

On the right of here a long trench, known as Skyline Trench, ran almost due north-west to the quarry, some 300 yards south of Mouquet Farm. The name "Skyline" implies the location of the trench; and, swept as it was by fire from every direction, nobody could occupy it. The enemy had long since ceased to try, and we had no desire to begin. So for a long time it lay unused and derelict, our front running parallel to it some 200 yards on this side and the Germans' similarly parallel about an equal distance on the other.

The end of this trench, I have said, ran up to or rested on the Quarry, which was really a quarry, and deep and thoroughly fortified. That, while the Englishmen were at work on their left, the Australians were busy capturing.



The Australians' push carried them a distance, roughly, of about 300 yards on the average on the whole circuit from the Quarry to the Albert—Bapaume road beyond the Windmill, a distance of something more than 2,000 yards. It must be understood that such names as Mouquet Farm and The Windmill were by this time mere names for spots on the map. You cannot flatten out a quarry with big guns, so that there remained a recognisable, if damaged, quarry. There was no farm at Mouquet, but only a certain area of battered brick and stone, and the windmill was merely a hummock on the skyline.

Beginning with the capture of Pozières itself, the Australians had now taken over a mile of the main German second-line system with minor trenches and strong points innumerable. No rood of the ground which they had fought over was not honeycombed with every kind of defence which German ingenuity and industry could invent and make perfect, but nothing stopped them.

To the east of the Bapaume road, in the Munster Alley region, we also on the same day thrust forward in the direction of Martinpuich, breaking through another stretch of the German "switch" line and adding new ground to the right of Munster Alley, so that our front ran from a point some 700 yards east of the old German second line, towards Martinpuich, on a line south-westerly to some 200 yards above Bazentin-le-Petit, thence swinging north-westerly to the middle of High Wood, across which it passed, coming out at the eastern side, then turning south-west again to Delville Wood.

There we made considerable gain, first on the west side of Delville Wood, where we pushed our line forward some distance north of the orchards, whence it ran along the edge of Delville Wood, just inside what was left (and that was little) of the outermost trees, and then, issuing from the Wood at the east side, almost due east half-way to Ginchy.

This last fact implies one of the most notable gains of the day. We took at a rush all the ground due east from

Waterlot Farm to a line half-way to Ginchy, and in getting it we took also 211 prisoners.

The ground here was a mere maze of tangled trenches, to which we had given such cheerful names as Beer, Ale, Hop and Vat trench. Among them there was very stubborn fighting, but on the whole the cost of our success was comparatively slight. It was the same story as we had heard so often now since this battle began, of the invariable superiority of our men over the Germans whenever they could get at them. The troops engaged here were English county regiments, and they did as gallantly as it is possible for men to do.

South of here we not only broke through the trenches directly west of the village of Guillemont, but forced our way in, to capture and hold the Quarry on the edge of the village and part of the ruins to the point where once the church stood. Of all the villages in this shattered region none, perhaps, was now more utterly beaten out of any semblance of a village than poor Guillemont, of which not a wall now stood even a few feet high.

From Guillemont on the south we also pushed forward, thrusting out our line till it ran almost due south to a junction with the French at the head of the ravine which had been very gallantly carried by our Allies four days before. In making this advance, again, we had to clean out a veritable labyrinth of trenches, exposed to machine-gun fire from strong points and redoubts on either side. It was as staunch and determined work as was done anywhere, and part of the reward was the taking of seventy prisoners.

At only one point in all the circuit of the front did our attack approximately fail. This was in the sector to the east of High Wood. The following day I spent with the men who were engaged here, gathering the details of how it happened.

In the centre of this particular section of the line was a battalion of the Suffolks who went clean through the trenches opposed to them. The main enemy trench had been so

battered by our guns that it gave but little protection, and the Germans had sheltered in dug-outs, not of the usual sumptuous description, because this line was recently made, but deep enough to give security against anything but a direct hit from a heavy shell. As our men came on, the Germans tried to stop them with machine-gun and rifle fire, but had not the courage to stand the charge, and long before the Suffolks were within bayonet or bombing distance they scrambled out of the trench over the parapets and bolted.

Our men saw them bolting and did some good running shooting at them as they went. Arriving at the trench, they tumbled in and soon accounted for the plucky few who had stayed to meet them. The trench was a perfect litter of German rifles and discarded equipment, and when our men started to try to improve the battered trench by digging, they had to stop because everywhere where they dug they turned up German dead, killed during our bombardment of recent days, and hastily buried by their comrades in the trench.

From the trench we got two machine guns and five unwounded prisoners, three of whom fell to one small but plucky sergeant; and many of our men went on beyond the trench and cleaned the lurking Germans out of shell holes, where they hid. Here it was, unhappily, twenty yards on the further side of the trench, that one of the best officers in the battalion was killed.

Meanwhile, both on the right and left of the Suffolks, our attack was held up, on the right by the difficulty of getting over a sunken road, which was deep and very strongly fortified, and on the left by machine guns in High Wood. The Suffolks, then, found themselves isolated, holding an undivided middle of a trench with the enemy on either side, while the machine guns in the edge of the wood swept the trench from one end. And, as has been said, it no longer gave them shelter.

The number of bombs which men can carry with them in an attack is limited, and, as the enemy came bombing



from both sides, those which these men had were soon used up. They found a store of German bombs, and they used those up too. And then there was nothing for it but to get away; for they were a very small force and the Germans, in overwhelming numbers and with unlimited bombs, were coming on from either side. One man—one man, be it noted—with the last of the German bombs, was left on either side to keep the enemy back as long as possible till the others got away. So little hurried was the exit that they brought their prisoners with them, and, while one man at either end held the enemy back, the rest just leaked away in the middle by way of shell holes and a sap. The last of the bombs used up, the two last defenders followed; and then the Germans from either side, being close together, began to bomb each other.

It went on quite a long time—for when you are bombing over a traverse in a trench you cannot see who the fellow is who is bombing you—and those who saw it described to me how first one party of the enemy would drive the other back a bit and then be driven back itself. And while it was still going on a German aeroplane came down to see what the situation was and was brought down, falling in flames, by one of our machine guns behind.

This was the unsuccessful incident of the day. How little were our men depressed is best shown by the remark of a non-commissioned officer to whom I spoke:—"Lord, we can get the trench whenever we want it. I'd ask nothing better than to go back and get it now."

This, in outline, is the story of the battle—or of the six several battles—of August 19. It is impossible to make the story picturesque, because the operations themselves were fragmentary and none of them included in its objective any landmark—such as village or wood—which figured upon a map. Everywhere it was but the cleaning out of a nameless maze of trenches, which we did by sheer driving power and individual gallantry. Viewed in entirety, it was one of the most successful days of the whole battle. In addition



to the ground won we took close upon 1,000 prisoners and a number of machine guns and other booty.

Above all, it confirmed our confidence in the superiority of our men over the individual German. In this it was more convincing than a similar success, measured in terms of ground won, would have been in one grand attack. We beat the enemy not in one fight, but in six. Even, as we have seen, at the point where we were least successful our men came out of this fight laughingly triumphant, while at many places the Germans showed undoubted cowardice and surrendered ignobly. So conspicuous was this that our men declared that the Germans must practise "surrender drill." Only so could they have given themselves up with the disciplined promptitude which they sometimes showed.

That demoralisation among the German troops was still only local was evident; but we began to get daily evidences that it existed on a scale that was new. Among one batch of deserters who came over was a man wearing the Iron Cross. There are occasions when the Germans bolted so that our men literally hunted them as if it were some kind of sport. One heard many stories, some pitiable, some absurd, of the Germans' behaviour on surrendering. One major who was taken said that he hoped he would be allowed to have his own servant with him, as the servant would be surrendering with the next batch! Another German fell on his knees and offered his captor a three-mark note if he would spare his life. "And I hadn't the heart, when I took the note," said his captor, "to tell him that it wasn't worth threepence!" A batch of five prisoners pressed their watches in unison on the private to whom they surrendered. Illuminating was the tale of the German who came forward to give himself up holding out before him a double handful of all his worldly goods, as a bribe to his captors to spare his life. He was so terrified and piteous, believing that he would be killed, that it was almost impossible to talk to him until he had been taken into a dug-out and his confidence restored

with whisky and cigarettes. Then he called to his comrades and induced some of them to come over too.

Often, of course, the Germans fought well and to the end, but as a general rule, after their first resistance was broken, as the pressure became more than they could bear, they would whimper and grovel in a way which filled our men with amusement and delighted contempt. This thing occurred continually, and the German showed himself beyond all doubt of baser metal than our men. After a few days of good treatment as prisoners they would pluck up courage amazingly. But, for all their courage, they displayed in crises a craven spirit which our men, I believe, would never show.

What was sadder was that while he was too often a coward, the German also even more showed himself, whenever he got the chance, a brute. From the beginning of this battle, all the war correspondents, I think, sought opportunity to give prominence to every instance which they could find of chivalrous conduct on the enemy's part. They were very few. To his first stubbornness in defensive fighting we bore ample testimony, but that is another matter. As the battle went on, it seemed to us out here as if at home there was something of a tendency observable to be over-lenient to the Germans, to magnify each case where British and German wounded helped each other, and, as our British way is, to strive to regard our adversaries as sportsmen and gentlemen. They were and are nothing of the kind.

Individuals there were among them, of course, who were humane and gentle-hearted, and had the chivalry of brave men. But in the mass they showed themselves a brutal and uncivilised enemy.

Heaven knows, I would not make war more hideous than it is. But we must be under no misapprehension as to the character of the German. He was damned daily in his own handiwork. The British Army learned it and knows it—even though nothing will ever make the individual British soldier other than gentle to the individual enemy who is at his mercy.

There were so many cases of the Germans deliberately playing machine guns on our dead and wounded as they lay in the open that, in spite of occasional instances where they showed humanity, the practice may almost be said to have been habitual. They also turned their machine guns on batches of their own men who had surrendered, as, conspicuously, in one of the operations near Ginchy. That they often had orders to take no prisoners we know from many sources. Here is an extract from a simple and obviously sincere letter found on one of the prisoners whom we took:—

Now, for the first time, we are really in the war; before it must have been child's play. We are on the Somme and, indeed, not in the best part, but in a very exposed position. We were relieved on the 12th (eight days and nine nights ago) and unfortunately we leave here to-night at an hour not fixed, in spite of our numerous sick men, who must also go with us. The whole Division—in fact, the whole Corps—has diarrhoea; but what can you expect after eight days without hot food? We have been parched with thirst and lie in cold earth-holes at night. The whole battlefield was full of dead, and there was a great heat during the day. We are indeed no longer men, only, as it were, half-living creatures. And now we have been three days in rest and able to drink nothing but dear wine. Our departure was concealed from us. We have lost so many comrades who fell in the eight days or were wounded, and now we have to go up to the line again. We have here real English in front of us now and have orders to take no prisoners, but to dispatch them all with the bayonet. That would not be so bad, but they always get prisoners from us too; and what would they then do with them? Here the English shoot at us steadily day and night—uninterrupted gunfire, causing so many casualties. Then they always attack again and always make a fresh attempt in spite of their heavy losses. There lie in the Deville Wood, which we and the English have occupied, thousands of dead. And the number of flies and the smell . . . ! These days I shall never forget in my life—what we had to endure there. One would hardly think it possible what men can endure.

We found on a captured officer a letter in his own handwriting, written just before he was taken, in which he said that he expected soon to be fighting and intended that his men should take no prisoners but should kill all the English who fell into their hands. But there was only too much evidence to the same effect.



It is pleasanter to think of the driver of the British motor ambulance which was full of wounded Germans who, going along the road, met a British soldier, also wounded, but whose hurt was slight. The soldier asked to be taken on to the hospital, but the driver declined on the ground that the ambulance was already full and each of the Germans was more seriously hurt than he.

An interesting incident of this period of the battle was the visit of King George in the second week of August. In the course of his visit his Majesty was, on August 10, under fire, when he went over the newly captured ground about Fricourt and Mametz, inspecting the German trenches and entering dug-outs. The hill from which the King watched the shelling was named, and will probably always be known as, King George's Hill. At other points on the front, as in Béthune, the King was also within range of the enemy's guns. It is needless to say that his Majesty was received with immense enthusiasm everywhere, and his visit was very highly appreciated by the Army.

The King was visited by President Poincaré and General Joffre at Sir Douglas Haig's headquarters, and I have rarely seen a more beautiful sight than the scene before the house on a beautiful summer day, with the green banks, bright flowers and shady trees, when the brilliant group passed between the lines of the guard of honour of the 17th Lancers which bordered the sweeping gravel path.



## XII

### TOWARDS THIEPVAL

ON August 22 I witnessed as magnificent a demonstration of the power of our artillery as it seems to me possible to conceive.

One of the great achievements of the general advance of August 19 had been, it must be remembered, the performance of the Warwicks, when they forced their way for a distance of something like a thousand yards along the old German first main line northwards from Ovillers-la-Boisselle. This section of the line we had failed to take in the frontal attack of July 1. We had, indeed, overrun the front trenches at almost every point, but we had not been able to hold the ground won, and since then we had rested in our original line on the other side of the valley. From above Ovillers-la-Boisselle we were able, on August 19, to attack the trenches from the flank, and, fighting our way with bomb and bayonet and rifle-butt, we had crumpled and rolled up the whole first-line system to within about 1,500 yards of Thiepval. It was the first step in the advance on and capture of Thiepval itself, which was one of the most brilliant episodes of the battle.

The attack of August 22 was the second step, when we again drove our way northwards, shattering and beating down everything in our path, for another 400 yards. By this advance we gained possession of the southern face of the Thiepval salient, joining up with the gallant little outpost

at the Leipzig Redoubt, at the extreme western nose of the salient, the capture of which had been the chief success on this northern part of the front of the very first day of July.

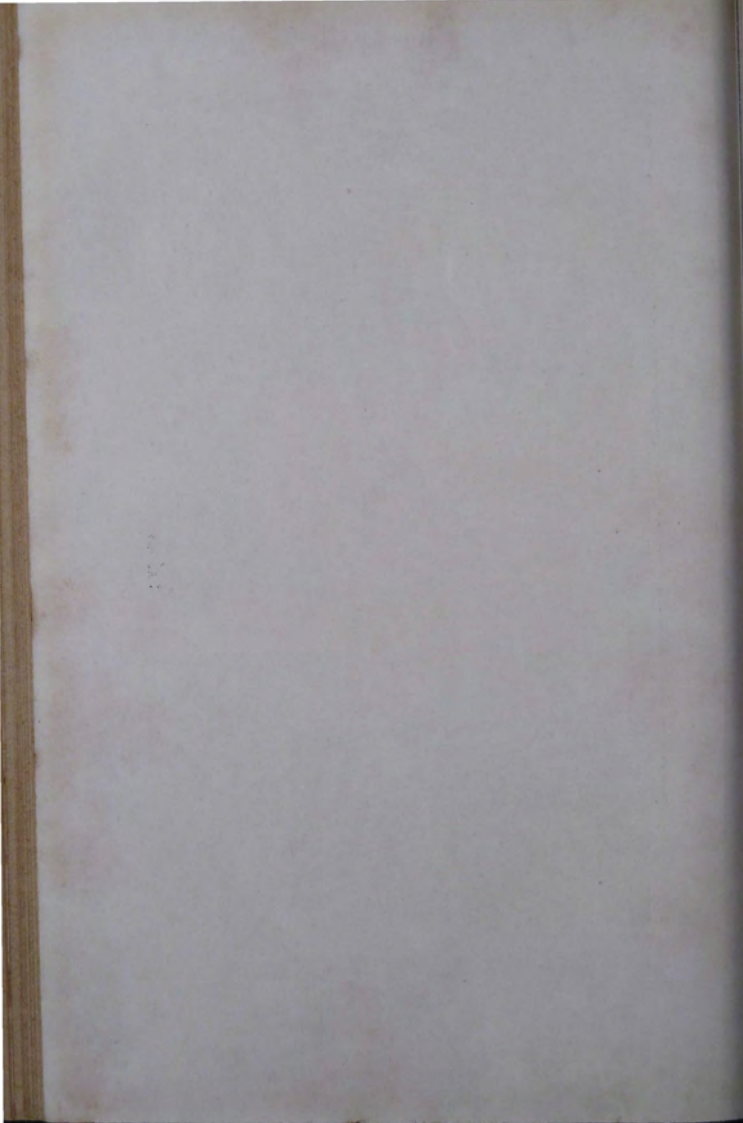
It can now be acknowledged that before the Battle of the Somme we had not understood the full use of artillery concentration for purposes of attack against machine-gun defences. How should we? The French—incomparable artillerists that they were—had begun to understand it, having learned their lessons at Verdun. The Germans, having held the overwhelming mastery of us in gun-power for a year and a half, had never grasped it. They had reached their high-water mark in the bombardments at Verdun and in June at Ypres and the Vimy Ridge. They were terrible but, as we know now, they were far from being the most terrible possible. We, having sat under the sullen pounding of the German guns for so many long months, first came into possession of an artillery superiority on the Somme. On the first day of the battle our shelling at certain points was worse than anything that Ypres or the Vimy Ridge had seen. From the very start we bettered all that the Germans had achieved. It is unthinkable that we could at once have attained to perfection; and it was wonderful that we came so near to it.

Every day then since the beginning of the battle we had improved. More and more our artillery seemed to grow conscious of its power and to achieve new possibilities in the right use of it. In hammering our way to Thiepval we did approximately attain to perfection, as such perfection can now be humanly regarded. Nothing that even the French have done has exceeded the excellence of the British artillery work in these attacks.

Machine-gun defence as now developed had introduced a new problem for an attacking force. The German lines bristled with machine guns, concealed and protected in every possible way, and if even one gun was free to work with an open field before it, it might hold up a whole battalion.



FEEDING THE GUNS.





The bombardment preliminary to an attack must therefore, if possible, be so terrific that nothing—not one gun—could live under it. In practice, however, this might be unattainable. Whatever fire is poured upon it, a machine gun may be buried so deep, so protected and concealed, that nothing can reach it. Out of fifty guns hidden in a given area, some two or three will almost surely survive. All that they need is to have some few seconds, after the bombardment has ceased, to emerge from their concealment and get to work. *It is necessary, therefore, that they should not have those seconds.*

To attain this, the infantry attack must be practically simultaneous with the bombardment. There must be no interval; but the infantry must actually be on the spot before the bombardment lifts, on the heels of and mixed up with their own shells. The French, as I have said, were the first to endeavour to attain this. It is dreadful, because a certain proportion of the attacking force must be inevitably killed by their own guns. But it is better that even ten per cent. of a battalion should thus sacrifice themselves than that the machine guns should be given time to mow down the whole battalion. It was this combination of an overwhelming concentration of guns with a practically simultaneous infantry attack that made our successive dashes upon Thiepval so supremely successful. To an onlooker the spectacle was as splendid as it was terrible.

It was my good fortune to see the attack of August 22 under the most advantageous conditions possible, and it was a thing to which no description can do justice, and thrilling beyond anything in my experience.

We had made our way beforehand to a place where, well hidden from the enemy's view, we could lie in holes in the face of a slope, with the German front line trenches, captured two days before, just on our right. Below us, so near that one could have thrown a stone into it, was a narrow spur of ragged trees, the end of what had once been a wood. Immediately on the further edge of these remnants of trees

ran our first line trench, from which our attack was to be delivered, and, from 300 to 400 yards beyond, running directly across our line of vision on the opposing slope, were the German lines along the lower side of the salient; the front line, against which the first assault must fling itself, another line beyond, and, in between, the dimly marked wavering courses of communication trenches.

It was all as plain as if you looked out on your own grounds. In the sunlight of a perfect summer evening each detail of the ragged trees and the bare slope beyond, brown, with jagged yellowish lines and all pitted with shell craters, and here and there patches and belts of green where some sickly grass still grew, was beautifully distinct. Straight ahead of us, beyond the top of the slope, another fringe of blasted tree trunks, with a few shattered branches, showed where Thiepval lay out of sight.

The attack had been fixed for a time near six o'clock, and, starting early in the afternoon, we were ensconced in our hiding places well before that time, so that we had leisure to familiarise ourselves with every detail of the field of battle. A young officer crouched by my side who knew the country like a map of his own drawing. From a battery some miles behind us our guns were dropping great 9·2 shells methodically into the enemy's trenches just in front. About one shot in three fell full in the front-line trench. Half of the rest hit fairly the communication trench which ran back from it. It was pretty shooting, closer on its target from three miles away than the average man would get with a cricket ball from thirty yards.

Other guns of various sizes spoke at intervals, great spurts of sand and smoke, brown and grey-black intermingled, flinging up into the air now here, now there, from all over the slope in front of us, with sharp explosions of white shrapnel smoke in the air suddenly blotting out a bit of the view. Nearer, to right and left behind us, was the occasional *cr-r-r-rump* of the enemy's big shells as they burst. But all this was no more than what happened all the time along

all this front, by night and day. It was "quiet," with no hint of anything extraordinary about to happen.

The young officer and I had found that our families were acquainted, and, in the intervals, we talked of things at home—of Cheltenham and cricket and India and Westminster School—always with our minds half occupied with thoughts of the passing minutes, when suddenly he said: "My God! Look there!"

I looked where he pointed and there (when it was still a quarter to six) out from the trench just beyond the ragged trees below us khaki figures were crawling in the bright sun.

Two—four—six—a dozen here; another batch further to the left; still more beyond. They went slowly, on all fours, pushing their rifles ahead of them in their right hands, their middles strung round with bombs and waterbottles and haversacks and harness of various sorts. But why were they not killed? They were well out from the trench: they were a quarter of the way across No Man's Land. They were half way to the enemy's trench. And still they went on. On the right, one of our machine guns began growling, in short sharp bursts—perhaps to distract attention from those crawling figures—but otherwise nothing happened. We guessed now that just at that part of the line the nearer side of No Man's Land must be dead ground, invisible from the enemy's trenches; but if a German aeroplane had been on the alert—if they had had a kite balloon observing here—if any German had raised himself above his parapet to look, those dare-devil figures in brown must have been seen. But there were no eyes up above and men hereabouts did not casually raise themselves above their parapets.

It was a thing that made one hold one's breath to watch. Every moment we thought that they must be discovered; but still our g's went on punctually thumping the same length of trench from their hidden lairs three miles away. The other guns spoke no faster and no more slowly; the sun shone on and, except a kestrel hovering in the air just



before us as we watched, nobody seemed to be aware of those men down there—just a handful of Gloucestershire Territorials who were engaged in a stalk more thrilling than any lion-hunter ever knew.

Suddenly one of the crawling figures rose to its full height and then pitched sideways, to the right, full length upon the ground. A simultaneous movement ran through them all. Some scrambled a yard or two quickly and disappeared. Others suddenly shot out full length upon the ground and did not move again. For a moment my heart stood still, for I thought that they had been wiped out; but the young officer by my side said "They have got good cover there," and then I understood. Some of them had dropped into shell holes, others, having some small bump of ground before them, had stretched out flat. The former had disappeared from view; the others did not move. The only one who stirred was the one who had stood up and then fallen; and he lay cross-wise to the line of the others and tossed his arms. Poor fellow! It was the beginning. I looked at my watch and it was already within a minute or two of six o'clock; and it seemed that for those minutes everything was preternaturally still. Then it came.

I have said already that no description can do justice to it. In the course of my life I have seen many gigantic things, like typhoons and prairie fires and forest fires, and most of the great volcanoes and some battles and that last awful night in Antwerp. But merely as a spectacle, for the splendour and the power of it, I doubt if anything ever eclipsed what went on then for the next twenty minutes. The young officer beside me sat muttering "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" For me I wished to shriek, to bite my fingers, to do I knew not what. And all one could do was to drum one's heels on the ground and gasp.

How many guns we had at work I do not know, and could not tell if I knew. Hundreds—thousands—millions—I do not know. But they began all at once, breaking suddenly on the sunlit silence almost with a single crash. In ten



seconds hundreds of shells had plunged upon that one devoted spot of earth; in twenty seconds it seemed that there must have been thousands. Hurricanes, whirlwinds, thunderstorms, and gigantic conflagrations; bring them all together and concentrate them all in a ring of a few acres, and you will have only a suggestion of what went on immediately before our eyes. One almost sobbed from sheer exultation; for the overmastering sensation was astonishment at the power of it—at the power of British artillery and the splendour of its accuracy. I do not think that one shell dropped three yards on this side of the German trenches; and I do not think there was one stretch of ten square yards on and beyond the trenches, over all the area attacked, on which a dozen shells did not fall in as many seconds.

Of course it was a small area. We could concentrate here on less than 1,000 yards the guns which ordinarily have charge of miles of enemy front. So terrific was it that, above all the roar of the explosions, the sound of the shells passing overhead filled the ears with a shrieking louder than any wind. As for the ground where the shells fell, it simply was not. Rent and torn in every direction, it heaved itself into the air, not in spurts or bursts, but universally in one great duststorm. There was no ground, no trench, no brown earth or green; nothing but chaos, swirling and incredible, until the smoke grew and blotted even chaos out.

Then our front trench sprang to life. Pouring over the parapets and scrambling as best they could across the uneven shell-pitted expanse of No Man's Land, the khaki figures streamed, not in disorder, but fairly evenly spaced, thin wave behind thin wave. No veterans (but these men were veterans now) could possibly have been steadier and more eager than these troops.

From the right-hand end of the trench the men leaped and headed straight across the open, gently rising ground; and here they had but a little way to go. On the left, below us, the space between the lines was wider, but we had watched our men crawl out fifteen minutes before and now they

had no further to go than their comrades on the right. As the latter poured over their parapet, I saw the figures stretched flat on the ground jump to their feet and out of shell holes the others who had disappeared rose miraculously. From extreme right to extreme left the whole of No Man's Land was dotted with the khaki figures moving forward.\*

No man can run very fast with his rifle and equipment and the bombs and other impedimenta which he carries, even on level ground. But when the ground is seamed and scarred with shell holes, the difficulty of progress is multiplied. So it always seems that our men go forward slowly, and only by a miracle, it appeared, could those dotted figures, going so brazenly in the sunshine, ever hope to win across. But the miracle came to pass. One second man I saw fall—just crumpling up as he walked and staying, a motionless heap, upon the ground, but along all the rest of the line of the attack I saw not another fall. Others must have fallen, because almost immediately Red Cross parties were at work, and when one had time to look closely one saw that there were other dark, huddled things dotting the open slope. But the losses were almost incredibly small, as if the men had indeed been divinely shielded.

The fact was that along the section of the enemy trenches, under the whirlwind of our fire, it was impossible for any man to oppose us. It was impossible for any man above ground to live. And from elsewhere the dreadful bank of smoke and heaving earth shut out all vision, leaving it clear only on our side. We, indeed, could see each detail, and with never a hesitation, every man striving only to get most directly to his objective, the irregular, broken lines went on. On the left, in the centre, and on the right the men were already in the margin of the smoke. Then they were in it, engulfed and dim. One knew that they must be right among our shells; but they never stopped or hesitated. They reached the enemy's trenches and—scrambling, jumping, climbing—they were on the parapets. There, in the haze,

they loomed up heroically. You could see an officer directing his men with outstretched arm (just as they do it in pictures), and the others—in their steel helmets curiously suggestive of firemen clambering among the fumes of a burning building—running along the trenches' edge or dropping down and disappearing. Still the shells, we could see plainly, were bursting just beyond them. "Why doesn't the *barrage* lift? Why doesn't the *barrage* lift?" we asked; and even as we asked we saw that it had lifted and moved further away.

And now other figures—not of our men—came out of the trench—one, two, three—and they set themselves to run diagonally away across the open ground beyond. We saw some of our men bring their rifles up and fire, but in the density of the smoke beyond it was impossible to see what happened.

Hardly had the first of our men jumped into the trench when other of the enemy began to appear. They did not run away, however, these; but they came towards us, and each had both hands high above his head. They came running, and, as they did so, lifting their feet high to avoid the unevenness of the ground and bits of wire and things, they seemed to skip ridiculously. The first bunch to issue came from towards the left of the attack, and there were something over twenty in the party. Then, from further along, came a smaller party of seven or eight. Then further, again, another party of about a score. Then stragglers in twos and threes; and they all came down towards us holding their hands up high and skipping and making all speed they could, only intent on getting away from that hideous trench as fast as might be.

All these things happened while the noise went on without abatement or interruption. Every gun that we had was still at work. From the front German trench they had lifted to the trench beyond, and from that they pushed on again to the support lines in the rear. As they lifted, our men also swept on. One saw them go on, over the *parados* of



the first line and out beyond, but there the haze swallowed them up as it had swallowed the first fleeing Germans.

All this is only a stammering attempt to describe the indescribable. Even if the noise and the horror and the glory of it did not rob one of half one's senses, its mere magnitude as a spectacle was beyond the reach of words.

It has been said that, in attacking in this fashion, it is inevitable that we should lose some men from our own shell fire. On the other hand, we have seen with what immunity our men went across the open. As a matter of fact, our total casualties in the affair were just under 100—93, I believe, was the exact number. The Gloucesters took 226 prisoners and more than 200 German dead were counted in the trenches.

The visible killed and prisoners alone were more than four times our total casualties. It is most improbable that the enemy's visible killed and prisoners represented one half of his losses; that is to say, that the wounded and those killed behind the front trenches by our artillery must have exceeded the visible killed and prisoners in number. In all, the German losses, therefore, were probably nine or ten times as great as ours.

In the operation of two days before, to which this was a sequel, the Warwicks had taken 600 prisoners with a total casualty of 315. In the two attacks together we had had a total loss—including all the slightest wounds—of 400. We took over 800 prisoners and saw nearly as many dead. It is incredible that, as against our 400, the Germans did not suffer a total loss of at least 3,000. Probably it was nearer 4,000. These figures show how absurd is the statement, frequently made as if it were a demonstrated truth, that in trench warfare the losses in attack must always be greater than in defence. When local conditions are favourable and the attack is as admirably organised as these attacks were (or as, later, was the French recapture of Douaumont, or our assault on Beaumont Hamel) it can inflict immensely greater injury than it suffers. From now on, indeed, through



all the succeeding months of 1916, there were few cases, and those minor affairs, in which our losses were greater than the enemy's. There were repeated instances in which his losses outnumbered ours by many fold.

This was the result of the beauty of our artillery work, assisted by the brilliance of our airmen, and the perfect synchronisation of the infantry and the guns.

The Germans, on the other hand, threw away an immense number of lives in hasty and ill-prepared counter-attacks. It was so after the success of the Warwicks. It was so now after the advance of the Gloucesters. Even more conspicuously was it so two days later when another similar push was made in this same region by battalions of Wiltshires and Worcestershires. In every case the enemy flung counter-attacks against us in the hope of recovering the lost ground. They were infantry attacks, pure and simple, with either a very inadequate artillery preparation, or none at all; and in almost every case they were caught in and smothered by our guns before they reached our position. In no case did they gain anything; and always the German losses were heavy and our own negligible.

The attack of the Wiltshires and Worcestershires on August 24 was in all essentials on the same plan as that of the Gloucesters of four days earlier, and it was as admirably successful. As a spectacle it was only inferior to the other in so far as, taking up the advance where the Gloucesters had left off, it was necessarily so much further away from the observation post on the slope above the wood. Personally, I watched it from another point, a spot on an open road whence one commanded a wide view of the field of operations. The attack was made towards the end of the beautiful summer afternoon and one had again the same experience of the stillness and the sunshine broken only by the lazy pounding of the big guns here and there; the sudden crash, deafening and terrible like the broadsides of all our fleets at once; the upheaving earth and welter of smoke and dust clouds and swirling fumes of every hue, and then, from our

trenches, across the open, straight towards the awful zone of death in front, the irregular dotted line of khaki figures, wave behind wave, moving magnificently to breast the enemy's parapets and be engulfed in the welter beyond.

The breeze, blowing from left to right, was somewhat stiffer than on the preceding occasion, so the smoke drifted more rapidly away and it was possible to see our men more distinctly as they leaped into or bombed their way along the first trench or pushed on beyond it. The smoke in a bombardment such as this is not all of one colour, but white and pearl-grey and black and pale Nile-green and reddish-brown, according to the different kinds of shells used and the kind of earth on which they strike. As each shell bursts on the ground the great jet of black or grey or brown is flung up high into the air. Above, the shrapnel or overhead high explosive unfolded in woolly cumuli of white or drab grey-black. The bursts were so thick that they mingled and overlapped, and one blotted out another. Then the wind drifted it all sideways till everything was blended in one opaque mass, all streaked and blotched in dreadful colours. And the uproar and the horror of the meaning of it all, with the clear sunlight around and the blue sky overhead . . . it all made a picture which no words could convey.

Amidst the turmoil certain incidents stood out. One saw one huge black column fling upwards, in which were things which were evidently human bodies, which rose into the air and fell again. One vast cloud, pearl-grey, lifted higher than any other and hung for a long time in the air ; and we knew that a bomb store or ammunition "dump" blew up. On this side of the seething mass, soon after it began, the enemy commenced to drop his shells about and among the trenches which we had so recently won from him, making a *barrage* in the hope of stopping our supports from getting up ; but the chief damage which he did was to his own men surrendering, who, with their hands held high, came running blunderingly across the open. Onlookers saw some of these

poor stumbling figures blotted out by their own bursting shells.

Afterwards I heard from men engaged in the fight details and incidents which were invisible to a spectator. Perhaps the most striking story was that of one of our officers, who practically cleared out a stretch of the trench by himself.

It seems that in our advance there was a gap in our line which left fifty yards or so of the enemy trench unassailed. Over such shell-torn, ridge-and-furrow ground, and under such fire as was going on, this might well happen. So this stretch of some fifty yards of trench was still occupied by Germans while all the rest on either side was in our hands. The officer in question, seeing what the situation was, charged along the trench from one end with a rifle, firing as fast as he could. He killed the three men in the link of trench immediately before him, pushed in more cartridges, and swung round the angle of the traverse and began again. But the Germans had not a fight left in them, and along the whole stretch they surrendered to one man.

The enemy, it has been said, suffered severely in his attempts to counter-attack and re-win this lost ground. The tale of the counter-attacks is a curious one.

The ground was so torn and battered by our shell fire that, as always, when the Wiltshires and Worcestershires reached the enemy's trenches they were of very little use as trenches, but were in many places quite obliterated. Our men started in at once to repair the positions and to dig themselves in; and while this was going on a runner was sent back with a message to the rear. He got there, delivered his message, and started back, and again made his way through the *barrage* unscathed. But so completely obliterated was the trench that, when he got back to it, he never noticed it. The ground in places such as this is so ploughed up that, after one section of a trench, which was never, perhaps, too deep, has been smashed by a few direct hits from heavy shells, it becomes more or less indistinguishable from the earth around it, which is all



ridge and hole and desolation. Nor do shells, bursting around you as you go, help you to locate your whereabouts.

At all events, this runner failed to see the trench when he came to it, passed on over the holes and ridges where it was supposed to be, and travelled on. At last he came to a visible trench and took it to be the one which he was looking for. Hurrying up, he was about to go over the parapet when, as he peered over, he found it full of Germans ; and not only full, but too full. It was crowded as no trench would be except immediately before an attack was to be launched from it. And all the Germans had their bayonets fixed, and were evidently just ready for a start.

Apparently the runner was unnoticed. In any case, he managed to slip away, and, as fast as possible, got back to our trench, which this time he succeeded in finding, and he gave the news that the counter-attack which was to be expected was about to be delivered in great strength from such and such a stretch of trench. It took a very short time for communication to reach our heavy guns, which opened immediately on the enemy trench, and simply smothered the ground in front of it.

The enemy got out as had been arranged for them, and tried to charge. They met the fire of our guns as they started, and the first wave broke utterly and failed altogether to come on. A second wave started, got a little farther across No Man's Land, and then faltered and broke like its predecessor. And that was the end of the counter-attack. The Prussian Guard had not only failed in its attack, but it had failed to get through our artillery fire so as even to approach our trenches.

For the staunchness with which they withstood and beat back the subsequent counter-attacks, delivered by troops of the Prussian Guard, the Wiltshires and Worcestershires received recognition in the official *communiqué* of the day. They deserved it ; but the difficulty which confronts the unofficial and official writer alike is that any reference to



particular troops seems to imply that other troops did less gallantly, whereas the truth is that almost every brigade, every battalion, every company or platoon was entitled to special mention for every affair in which it was engaged.

General Joffre is credited with the remark that this was *une guerre de capitaines*: a war of company commanders. It has also been called an artillery war and an airman's war and an engineer's war: in each case justly enough. But, when all other arms had done their work, no success was finally achieved, no bit of ground won, until the individual infantry unit had seized, occupied, and held it against counter-attack. Under the conditions of a modern battle in an area cut up everywhere by trench lines and fortified positions, the individual unit is often isolated for long periods from all touch either with its base or with the flanking troops on either side. Immense responsibility is thrown on the officers commanding companies and platoons, on non-commissioned officers, on small sundered groups of men and even on the individual soldier. No quality in our men was more conspicuous, or is more difficult to describe, than that imperturbable self-reliance with which they rose to whatever emergency confronted them and took responsibility as a matter of course, quite unaware that they were heroes. Not seldom the fortune of an operation was decided in our favour by the act of some three or four men who, perhaps, crept up to and rushed a machine-gun post which was holding up our advance, or held a vital point in a trench against a bombing attack by overwhelming numbers of the enemy. In various cases individual soldiers took from 20 to 60 prisoners, and in one instance a soldier took over 100, single-handed.

It had often been asserted that the result of all the elaborate organisation of modern warfare and the stupendous massing of artillery would be to diminish the importance of the individual infantry soldier and to reduce the value of personal initiative. This has been shown to be untrue. Never were the qualities of individual courage, initiative and resource of more supreme importance in warfare. They were qualities

in which the British Army—as well as the French—showed itself increasingly throughout this battle superior, man for man, to the enemy.

For the admirable organisation of these attacks by which, in successive stages, we broke our way to Thiepval a large part of the credit was generally assigned to Brigadier-General Philip Howell, then attached to the IIInd Corps, whose unfortunate end through a random shell was widely deplored. I doubt if we lost any man in the battle of the Somme whose death was more generally regretted.

### XIII

#### GUILLEMONT AND GINCHY

THE last week of August was a week of almost continuous rain. The ground, however, was so dry after the long drought that the wet for a time caused little inconvenience, except for its interference with our aerial observation; the week saw some fierce fighting, especially in the neighbourhood of Delville Wood and of Guillemont, where in the advance of August 22, we had pushed up to the very outskirts of the village. One party of our men, it will be remembered, had actually penetrated temporarily into it and to the further side.

For the Germans the positions on the edge of Delville Wood and in Guillemont were of the first importance, as being the keys to the last foothold which they held on the ridge to the north and east of Ginchy. This area had been the scene of a stubborn struggle since the middle of July and every day saw minor actions here of a desperate character. By a determined attack on August 26, however, we cleared the enemy out of the whole of Delville Wood and from the southern edge of the wood pushed our line forward half way to Ginchy. The attack was preceded by heavy artillery preparation and an extremely hard hand-to-hand conflict took place in the wood.

The enemy, in holding the fringes of the wood, had made himself three lines of trenches, all protected with their usual strong points, and, whatever other qualities the German

might possess or lack, his industry in digging has always been monumental. The foremost trench, well within the wood, was very formidable, well made, and strongly held, and the hideous condition of the wood itself, with its litter of broken tree-trunks making endless barricades, its shell-torn earth, all holes and hummocks, and the dreadful numbers of dead bodies, made approach to the trench an arduous and terrible business. The second trench along the very edge of the wood was shallow and lightly held. The third, in the open beyond, again was formidable. Though it lacked the deep dug-outs which need long time for their making, ingenious use had been made of the dug-outs and positions of batteries of artillery which had formerly occupied the ground, these being strung together by the trench.

In spite of all obstacles, the attack, which was made at five o'clock in the evening, was completely successful. There was a strong point with machine guns at the extreme eastern angle of the wood which delayed the advance there for some time, but when it was finally taken by bombing at short range a garrison of over fifty men fell into our hands.

While it held out the machine guns here could rake the trenches which men of the Shropshires and Oxford and Bucks in the centre of our line had already rushed and occupied. An officer of the Oxford and Bucks with a handful of men seems to have acted with great gallantry in hastily throwing up a parapet or breastwork under very severe fire, which sheltered the trench and enabled our men to hold it.

The delay at this point, however, held up the troops on the immediate left from advancing for a time, and while waiting their time to go on they suffered, from the artillery *barrage*, heavier casualties than other troops engaged in the action. Nowhere, however, were our losses comparable with those of the enemy. Two battalions took 360 prisoners between them. One took 200 with a total casualty list,



including the most lightly wounded, considerably less than this figure, and, besides the prisoners taken, they knew that they killed (for they saw them) over 200 Germans. And this takes no account of the German wounded.

Further to the left, troops of the Rifle Brigade and King's Royal Rifles pushed very gallantly over the ground above the orchards on the north-west side of the wood. They got into the enemy's trench, which was newly made with half-finished dug-outs, with light casualties and they cleared it out with bomb and bayonet. One company officer, "by good luck," as he said, landed in the trench, with a handful of his men with him, immediately between two machine guns, which the crews were trying to get into action. They did not have much time allowed them. Both the guns were taken—as well as another farther along the trench—and one of them was for a time used against the enemy.

When the first main trench was taken, part of our men pushed on over the open beyond, which was full of shell holes containing lurking Germans. One part of the trench was then, for a time, under command of a sergeant-major who had himself been hit in three places in the attack. While he was in charge the Germans endeavoured to counter-attack from an angle, and, rising well to the occasion, the sergeant-major, according to officers' accounts, behaved splendidly, until an unwounded officer arrived with supports, and took over the command. Another heroic story told was of a sergeant, farther to the right in the attack, who caught the enemy bombs and hurled them back again as if he were fielding and throwing at the wicket. He was wounded in the hand and went back for a bit; then came on again, and led a party in rushing a stretch of trench.

Our Lewis guns did most valuable work, being, as always, hurried well up in front. One Lewis gunner, fighting single-handed, with dead and wounded around him, had a duel with an enemy machine gun, and killed the crew, so that the enemy gun was silenced and captured.

One of the extraordinary details reported by our men (and by officers of standing) was that they found in the enemy trenches the bodies of sentries tied to posts. One of these had had his head carried clean off by a shell. Presumably the tying of them was done as a measure of field punishment for some serious misdemeanour.

Against our new positions the Germans flung by day and night as determined a series of counter-attacks as, perhaps, they attempted at any time in the whole course of the battle. At only one point did we lose any portion of the ground which we had won, and that portion was small and its recovery in no way affected the situation or influenced the course of events. As always in these counter-attacks, the German losses were very severe.

While, after this date, the Germans more than once made raids into the edge of the wood, this action of August 26 practically concluded the fighting for possession of the wood itself—fighting which, beginning with the attack of the Highlanders and South Africans on July 14 and continuing for over six weeks thereafter, constituted some of the bloodiest episodes of the Battle of the Somme. By our success on this day, advanced, as we now were, some distance northwards along the Flers road, we were, in this section, fairly over the crest of the ridge. The village of Flers lay in full view below us. On the right, the Germans still clung to the bit of high ground beyond Ginchy, at what was known as the Telegraph, and to the left they held the top of High Wood. But between these points we were now well over the summit and our grasp was surely closing on the whole of the ridge. The capture of Guillemont and Ginchy in the first part of September was the beginning of the end.

Guillemont fell on September 3 and its capture was made memorable by the gallantry of the Irish Division, so that the fame which was won there furnished speakers in the recruiting campaign of the following months with one of the most effective appeals to the Irish imagination. The difficulty of the approach to Guillemont has already been



THE BATTLEFIELD NEAR GUILLEMONT.





described. The rush with which the Irishmen went through the northern part of the village and on to the very outskirts of Ginchy was a brilliant achievement.

Of the village nothing fit to be called a village remained. One wrecked and battered building, apparently a barn, was all that stood among the waste of masonry pounded into the tortured earth. How even a fragment of the walls of that one building stood was a mystery, but some queer chance had kept it tottering on its feet when everything else had not only fallen long before but had been pounded to nothing after it fell. The ruins, however, were full of enemy lurking holes, and all round the edges there were strong positions with machine guns and (especially on the south-western and southern sides) deep dug-outs. Besides the main, formidably fortified trench line running along and before these faces of the village, the ground everywhere was dotted with smaller works and with shell-holes converted into outlying strongholds.

Our attack swept through and over it all without a check. So completely, indeed—attacking to the music of their pipes—did the Irishmen go through the German positions that they hardly stayed long enough to clear them out thoroughly and take all the prisoners that there were to be taken. It was more important to go on and get firmly established on the sunken road. The enemy tried to take advantage of the headlong nature of the attack by bringing machine guns out of holes and hiding places on the flanks and rear of the Irish troops, especially from certain dug-outs in the neighbourhood of the quarry. The Light Infantry, however, who were working through the southern part of the village on the Irish right, took care of them.

Out of one of the quarry dug-outs these latter troops took an officer and twenty men, and the former was so anxious to have his life spared that he did his best to make the British officer in command of the capturing party accept a very valuable gold watch which he was carrying. When the Englishman refused it, the German was still so anxious to

propitiate somebody that he forced the watch upon a corporal, as a token of his regard.

After the village itself was in our hands, savage fighting went on in the ground to the south and south-east, in which our machine guns did very valuable work. There was another (or an earlier) sunken road—always a formidable thing—running southward from the near side of the village. It had been the scene of bitter fighting on more than one occasion. When it was rushed it was found to be almost full of German dead. We immediately got machine guns up on the the parapet protecting the road, and thence it was possible to sweep the ground beyond; and so to contribute largely to the success of the whole operation.

In all, from Guillemont itself and the positions immediately around it, we took 700 prisoners. The result of the operation was that from the lower corner of Delville Wood down to the Angle Wood ravine the whole of our line pushed forward, Light Infantry and Riflemen operating on the right of the Irish, on a front of some 3,000 yards, to a distance of 800 yards, and that night our front rested on the sunken road 500 yards beyond Guillemont close to Ginchy. The whole of what had been the German second main line was now ours from beyond Pozières to our junction with the French.

This advance upon our right was made at noon of September 3. Meanwhile, in the early morning of the same day we had also attacked on our left, both on the high ground from beyond Pozières westward, and also, by direct frontal assault, on the German lines before Beaumont Hamel on the north of the Ancre. The Germans afterwards claimed that this northern movement was the main operation of the day and used our failure at Beaumont Hamel to cloak our victory elsewhere. As a matter of fact, while the attack north of the Ancre was a real attack, it was not intended to be pushed if, as proved to be the case, it failed of immediate success. We have already seen that throughout this stage of the operations, until all the main circuit of the ridge was cap-

tured, it was not the business of the Fifth Army to make sensational advances, but, by keeping steady pressure on the enemy here, to act as a buttress to and pivot for the Fourth Army on its right.

The strength of the Beaumont Hamel position was notorious. It would evidently have been greatly to our advantage if we could at no large cost seize the northern side of the Ancre gateway, where Thiepval, and all the enemy positions on the south, would have been isolated and must have succumbed without serious resistance. The Beaumont Hamel positions had not been attacked since July 1, and it was quite possible that a sudden attack at dawn might find the enemy off his guard. The prize was so great that the coup was well worth playing for.

It came, moreover, very near succeeding. On the left of the attack we swept over the first two lines of German trenches. The right, however, at the extreme angle of the Ancre valley, was held up. The enemy strength, as we already knew and as was to be subsequently proved when the positions were ultimately taken, was always very great here, the subterranean works in both faces of the valley slopes giving safe accommodation to a very large garrison. With this garrison on their right, and exposed, moreover, to fire from the high ground towards Serre on the other side, it would have been useless for the victorious troops on the left of our attack to have held their ground. They were recalled, therefore, and fell back to their original positions, with casualties much less than might have been expected.

The throw here, therefore, failed; but it had been well worth trying in itself and undoubtedly contributed to our success close by, on the south of the Ancre, by dividing the enemy's attention and keeping occupied part of his artillery while we struck at the entanglement of strongholds about Mouquet Farm. Here the attack was made by Australians, with English troops and one battalion of Scots operating on their left; and the success, if less sensational, was as



praiseworthy and almost as useful as that of the Irishmen and Light Infantry at Guillemont.

The enemy positions about Mouquet Farm were held by the Reserve Regiment of the 1st Prussian Guards, and the fighting here was of the fiercest character. Of the farm itself, nothing remained but a waste of pounded rubbish and a few shattered fragments of trees. The enemy, however, had covered the whole area in and around the farm with trenches, isolated posts and deep dug-outs, until it was practically all one fortress. The attack was delivered in the early morning, before it was yet light, and the terrific spectacle of one of the whirlwind bombardments with which we preceded such assaults, as seen through the darkness even from a distance, was a thing quite beyond description. The enemy had learned such lessons from the suddenness of some of our recent attacks that he was now always on the alert; and in this case within a few minutes after our storm started his artillery had opened and put a very heavy *barrage* all along our front line and on the support lines behind. He had got machine guns out in shell holes and every trench and corner of the ruined farm was held in strength. But the Australians behaved magnificently. In spite of rather heavy casualties they pushed on through everything, and the struggle which followed in the dark and in the half light of dawn was of the most stubborn and bloody description.

Before full daylight had come the ruins of the farm were cleared of Germans and we had pushed our line, fighting for every yard of the way, well beyond it on the north and east. About 100 prisoners were captured, or, rather, that number arrived safely at the rear, for a considerable number, as not seldom happened, were killed by German shells in trying to get through their own *barrage*.

Subsequent events showed that the mere clearing of the farm and establishing posts beyond it did not, however, with the subterranean dug-outs, passages and connecting chambers which existed, by any means necessarily mean that the Germans had lost all hold on the place. Of the



prisoners taken in this fight a large number came from one or two especially large and cavernous dug-outs. Some of our men had penetrated into the dug-out and were making themselves at home when suddenly at another entrance appeared a much larger number of Germans who called on them to surrender. "Surrender be d——d!" was the reply. "Surrender yourselves!" And a savage bombing encounter began in the bowels of the earth. It was still going on when more of our men came pouring in and the Germans held up their hands.

Long after this, while we were nominally in possession of all the ground, there is no doubt that the Germans still had access by underground channels to points in our rear. More than once small parties of the enemy appeared behind our lines at night. Sometimes they succeeded in getting away again (on one occasion after having killed an officer) and the exits to their burrows were never satisfactorily discovered. The immediate neighbourhood of the farm was to see hard fighting yet; but the most important and most formidable part of the area was now in our hands, and all evidence pointed to the German casualties having been heavier than ours.

Severe fighting continued on the following days, both about Mouquet Farm, where the Germans launched successive counter-attacks against our line, and also beyond Guillemont, especially on September 4 and 5 about Wedge Wood and Falfemont Farm, to the south-east of that place, and towards the two large woods—in reality only one wood divided by a road—known as Leuze and Bouleaux Woods, in the course of which the Germans at one time delivered a characteristic and most spectacular charge. They came in a solid line across the open high ground from Leuze Wood towards the forked ravine in which lay Wedge Wood. Our men were already in possession of the wood and certain trenches on the slope above. The German line, as solid as if the men were advancing with locked arms, came on to the edge of the dip to the ravine where it met our rifle and machine-

gun fire. The line checked and wavered, then broke in places and finally disappeared, the men who were not killed having thrown themselves upon the ground, finding cover behind the crest of the dip.

In the course of these few days a great deal of rain fell, but not enough seriously to hamper operations. What was more distressing from the war correspondent's point of view was that as our continued success carried the battle over the summit of the ridge it passed into regions where it was practically impossible for an onlooker to get a view of what was passing. At the beginning of July, the fighting took place in the low ground at the bottom of the ridge which was overlooked from the corresponding slope upon our side. Here, from artillery observation posts or from points of vantage on the high ground in the open, one had been able to overlook the battlefield at close range, and we had been able to follow so near behind our advance that we had explored the ruins of Fricourt and Mametz on the day after the former place was taken. As the battle receded up the undulating slope of the ridge, the range lengthened. By descending to the low ground or following up the first stages of the ascent one saw nothing. Apart from the increase in the German artillery fire, which made too close approach distinctly inconvenient, one could only get near the actual scene of the fighting through trenches, where the intensive character of the struggle made it extremely unwise to show too much of one's self above ground. Any view at close quarters ceased to be obtainable, and, except near Thiepval on the extreme left, this fighting about Fallemont Farm was practically the last of the Somme fighting of which any war correspondent was able to write as an eye-witness at a range near enough to distinguish the actual movements of the men. When we finally cleared the high ground above here, near Ginchy, the last of the battle line practically disappeared from our field of vision. Many of our subsequent attacks were immensely impressive to watch from such vantage points as we could reach, merely by

reason of the splendour and terror of the artillery; but one no longer had the thrill of seeing our men go over the parapets.

The capture of Ginchy was effected on September 9. It is impossible to describe the various stages in the fighting which raged throughout the week following the fall of Guillemont, in the course of which we took the positions about Falfemont Farm, broke into Leuze Wood and held a slender foothold there against ferocious counter-attacks; cleared outlying trenches and strong points to which, aided by the topographical details of the ground, the enemy clung stubbornly as part of his second main line of defence and the final safeguards of Combles, and at last drove him out of Ginchy. It was all desperate work, going on unceasingly by night and day, often in torrents of rain and amid a storm of artillery such as, for long sustained intensity, has hardly been matched.

Ginchy fell to the same Irish Division as had already done so gallantly at Guillemont. The two successes, one following the other so closely, made as fine a "right and left" as were ever bagged in the grim sport of war.

As usual in this period of the fighting, however, the attack on Ginchy was not made alone as a disconnected movement. We knew at this time that the German military machine was being very severely strained. Demoralisation was spreading among the enemy troops, and we were well aware how much confusion and apprehension reigned behind the front. It was no time now for isolated blows on a narrow front, but at each attack we threw our weight on as wide a front as possible, and everywhere we felt the whole fabric bending and yielding under us.

On the evening of September 9 we struck on all the front from High Wood to Leuze Wood—nearly four miles—as well as making a separate thrust simultaneously by Pozières. In the latter operation the Canadians, who had relieved the Australians, did very well. They cleared out, largely with the bayonet, a formidable network of trenches which the



Germans had made in advance of Martinpuich; they took over 60 prisoners and staunchly withstood heavy counter-attacks, keeping hold of all that they had won.

The Irishmen's attack on Ginchy was made with the same impetuosity as had carried them past Guillemont a few days before. Officers told me that the chief trouble which they had was in holding their men, who frankly proclaimed their discontent with what they called the "diplomacy" which forbade them to go where they wanted, namely, "to hell and beyond, if there are any Germans hiding on the other side."

A story was told of three insubordinate Irish servants at the headquarters of one of the units engaged. Shortly before the attack on Ginchy began the three men were absent, but a note was found from them left on a table. It said that they had missed the Guillemont "show" (attending to their duties at headquarters) but they could not miss Ginchy too; so they had gone to take part in it. On the following morning they turned up again, very disreputable, dirty and red-eyed, but with grins on their faces which not even discipline could hide. Their officers being Irishmen also, the punishment for their offence was light.

Like the other attacks of the day, the advance on Ginchy was made shortly before five o'clock. The village was very strongly held, with trenches, dug-outs, machine-gun and rifle fire. Certain trenches and machine-gun positions about the ruins of a farm near the centre of the village seem to have been the obstacles which caused most trouble; but the Irishmen took everything that stood in their way with the same irresistible dash. The first rush carried them into the village, where they had to wait for a while for our guns, which still played on the further side of the place, to lift. Before 5.30 a second rush carried them on through the ruins out to the open beyond.

As on many other occasions our machine guns did very good work, both in protecting the attack and subsequently in checking the enemy from counter-attacking. In the



village itself there was fighting, not only with rifles and at closer quarters with bombs, but also hand-to-hand in bayonet encounters. It was the kind of work at which we know from scores of instances in this battle that ours were the better men. And so it proved again.

The total advance at this point was reckoned to be about 900 yards on a front of 1,500, and by the morning of September 10 the Irishmen had made good their hold on all the ground won and had dug themselves in along the north side of the village. A counter-attack that morning was beaten off successfully, and, as always, the enemy lost heavily in the venture.

On both sides of Ginchy we also hit the enemy hard and pushed well forward, both on the east of High Wood, on the left, and towards Leuze Wood, on the right, though in this latter direction there were intricate German defences which, aided by the lie of the land, held out after they were surrounded and were not finally reduced, so that our line here could be straightened, until three days later.

In the fighting of September 9 and 10 we took some 400 prisoners. The reduction of the positions just spoken of increased the number to 700. Since September 1—that is, from before the attack on Guillemont—we had in less than a fortnight captured over 2,000, bringing the total number since the beginning of the battle to nearly 18,000. Those taken in this first half of September were all of the best material that Germany possessed—men of the crack Bavarian regiments and of the Prussian Guard: the fact being that Germany realised now, as she had not realised since the battle began, the critical character of the struggle now going on; and she was throwing in the best troops that she had in the futile hope of stopping us. The capture of Ginchy, with the high ground beyond it, was one of the crucial episodes of the battle. The enemy still held a footing on the summit of the main ridge, namely, in the upper end of High Wood; but, owing to topographical details, the ground there was useless to him for the purpose of direct observation

on our advance. It was from near Ginchy only that for some weeks past he had had such observation. The supremacy which we held in the air made such observation a matter of the first importance to him. When he lost the positions here his artillery became purblind. There was every reason why he should cling to his lines here with a stubbornness which was almost frenzied. That, by sheer hard hammering and superior fighting qualities, we beat him back as we did is the highest possible testimony to our Army.

## XIV

### TANKS

It was on September 13 that I had my first view of a Tank. We had for some time heard rumours of the monsters which would crawl over trenches and shell holes, butt down houses and eat up trees, trunks and all. But so confidential were all communications on the subject that they justified the official sobriquet which the strange machine had already received, the Hush-hush!

Then we heard that Tanks had really arrived on the Somme and we started out, another correspondent and myself, on a Tank-hunt. I do not think that either of us had much expectation of tracking down our quarry, nor had we any idea what it would look like, if we did. But we were given hints as to the general direction in which the beasts might be found and, after an hour or so of motoring, we left the cars and took up the trail across country on foot. We could not ask the way, for the subject was too secret to be mentioned, and we went on hopefully into the rolling wilderness beyond the railheads and scattered camps and trains of moving transport. More than once we thought that some distant lorry with a queer-looking tarpaulin or some curiously camouflaged gun was the thing for which we were seeking. Successive disappointments were now making our quest seem almost hopeless, and the dull day was drawing to its close when suddenly, on topping a gentle rise in the ground, we found immediately before us not one tank but a herd of forty!

It was an entirely incredible scene. No writer of fiction

who has set his hero to the hunting of the giant saurians of another age in some impossibly discovered glade of a lost continent ever imagined a spectacle more unbelievable than was that herd of the huge monsters, unlike anything that ever lived on earth, as they shifted and seemed to browse about the meadow before us. A portion of the herd was drawn up in even ranks, like the elephant-lines of some Asiatic army which may have confronted a distant forerunner of Alexander in times long before the commonplace modern elephant of to-day had been evolved. Others moved nosingly about, weaving in and out just as some great brutes might do before settling down for the night. Toad-chimeras; terrestrial whales in crocodile's armour; hybrids, crossed in a nightmare, between behemoth and a she-mastodon: shades of Sinbad, Gulliver and Munchausen!

The brutes were all painted in blotched reptilian colours, hues of rattlesnake and iguana, yellow and dull grey and black and mottled brown; and in the failing light, against the brown-green earth, they were strangely invisible. We went on and mingled with the herd, touched the brutes and talked with their keepers; and then the head-keeper—the O.C. behemoths—took me inside where I could inspect the creature's vitals and admire the extraordinary ingenuity of its internal economy. It was immensely interesting in every detail, the construction of the new and as yet untried engine of war. But far transcending any interest in the thing as a weapon or as a machine was the grotesque and enormous ludicrousness of the herd as a spectacle.

One beast was made to perform for us, put through all its tricks—except firing its guns—and everything that it did only increased its improbability. Was it really a serious contribution to the science of warfare, or was it only some prodigious joke by an inspired artificer of pantomime dragons? In a very few days we were to know, and the Germans were to know, that they were very real implements of war, and, before we left, we had a view of them which showed them in all their horror.





A TANK IN ACTION.



The time came for them to move forward towards the place whence they would go into the battle-line, and in single file they moved away and we watched them one by one go shouldering dimly up the slope before us, then stand for a while silhouetted against the sky before, with ponderous deliberation, disappearing down the other side. Seen so, in the rolling, uncouth majesty of their movement, they were singularly terrifying.

How vastly more terrifying they must have been to the first Germans who saw them thirty hours later, one can imagine. It is believed that vague rumours of the new "armoured motor-cars" had reached the enemy; but it is certain that the German rank and file had been unwarned. Prisoners whom we took told of their terror as the things first came at them. When they fired upon them, they averred, with rifles and machine guns, the bullets only struck sparks from the leviathan's armour and glanced aside, and the great shapes came on inexorably in the half light of dawn, spitting fire and death as they came.

Officially, the new craft called themselves his Majesty's land-ships, and every one carried its own name—H.M.L.S. "Delphine," "Daphne," "Delsie," "Cordon Rouge," or "Crème de Menthe"—as proudly as any ship of the sea. But, whatever they called themselves, the Army generally called them "Tanks," that name, it is understood, being chosen as having the merit of being totally undescriptive. No person, overhearing an unguarded conversation about "Tanks," could possibly imagine that it had reference to such portentously incredible things as these land-ships. And, besides "Tanks," the Army called them by many names, as "Rhino" and "Willie" and "Crocodile" and "Humming Bird" and other names less printable. We were soon to learn both their value as engines of war and their shortcomings, for it may be confessed now that the Tanks of the first design had shortcomings which could not possibly have been foreseen because the conditions, of *terrain* and so forth, were conditions which had never existed in war before and could not have

been imagined and provided against. They rendered invaluable services and, when they met the adverse conditions at their worst, they failed; and, when they failed, they were an undoubted hindrance to the accompanying infantry. As a certain Corps Commander said to me: "We took Flers by means of the Tanks and High Wood in spite of them." Again and again, however, by their help we captured redoubts and formidable trench positions which, without them, might have delayed us for a long time and at the best must have cost us hundreds of lives. On the whole, the balance was largely to their credit, and their handling gave opportunities for the display of individual heroism which made his Majesty's land navy not unworthy of any of the sister Services.

It was, I have said, on the afternoon of September 13 that I saw the herd of Tanks, and it was in the early morning of September 15 that, for the first time, they went into action, contributing their share to what was beyond doubt one of the great days of the battle.

Our attack was delivered at six o'clock in the morning on a front of about six miles, the thrust being delivered generally northwards on a line pivoting on the left at the Bapaume road. At one narrow point on that front we were held up by a strong redoubt known as the Quadrilateral throughout the day. At one other point, in High Wood, we were delayed and had hard fighting for some hours. Everywhere else in the whole front we swept all before us, shattering the German third main line of defence and making an advance of from one to two miles. By the end of the day we had taken 4,000 prisoners and the three new villages of Flers, Martinpuich, and Courclette were in our hands. It was victory on a thrilling scale.

I have spoken of the difficulty with which correspondents were now confronted in attempting to see the fighting at close range. The best that one could do, in case of an attack like this, which involved the whole wide semi-circular front, was to push up to whatever point combined reasonable height



of ground with a position approximately central to the whole field. Before daybreak, therefore, with two others, I made my way to Montauban. The dawn was beautiful, but a white mist lay thick upon the ground, so that everywhere the faces of the slopes around us remained shrouded in clinging white, and it was impossible to see the infantry moving to the attack, even where they should have been within view, or to gather anything of the progress of events except from the sounds of the conflict or such signals as one might be able to understand.

The attack was preceded by a terrific bombardment, lasting for some twenty minutes, all along the line. One had already seen many great artillery actions in this battle, but never before had the power of our guns seemed more shattering and overwhelming: never had it inspired one with a greater, fiercer joy and exultation. Along the six miles on which we were attacking raged one inconceivable storm, a fury of flame and whirling smoke and deafening noise. We knew that the enemy had over 1,100 guns massed against this little bit of the British front. For the last twenty-four hours he had shelled us with great violence, especially on the left of our line. But when, in that early dawn, all our batteries broke out together, it seemed as if he had no guns at all.

We stood in Montauban by the site of the ruined church and graveyard, the church no more than a few ragged stumps of masonry and the graveyard a thing obscene and terrible. In one spot there still stood an angle of two church walls, a few feet high, and in the angle, still on her pedestal, was a carved stone figure of the Blessed Virgin, her robes still blue and pink and gold-embroidered in spite of two months of exposure to the weather, and in spite of all the smoke and gas fumes which had swept over her; and her face was still serenely beautiful.

Around, on all sides of her, lay the ruins of war. Where the church began or ended you could not tell, for there was nothing but bits of shattered stone, pieces of shells and litter of equipment strewn the ground on which there was left no yard of level space but only shell holes heaped with all the wreckage

of battle. At some indeterminate point you might pass from what was church to what was graveyard, where every vault was gaping, every grave had been ploughed up. Splintered grave-stones leaned at all angles from dark holes and ragged, twisted bits of iron monuments, and crosses covered the ground or stood half upright; and everywhere, protruding from those gaping vaults and holes and sticking out of the edges of the shell holes were the bones of those who had once occupied the graves.

Nature had tried to cover the dreadful things with clumps of nettles and black knapweed, but they would not be covered, for new shells fell daily and ploughed them up again, and as you went you clambered and stumbled among shell pits and broken monuments and pieces of shells or whole shells, unexploded, and shreds of uniforms and equipment and remnants of mortality.

It was very horrible, very wonderful, to stand there in the grey of the dawn, amid a clamour and fury as if the world was truly coming to an end and all around you the graves had already given up their dead—and then to turn to the sweet Virgin in her blue and pink and gold with the infinite patience and eternal pity on her face.

As the sun rose we saw a beautiful sight above us, for in the sky appeared suddenly a cluster of points of fire. Not far from them our aeroplanes were circling, and we wondered for a while whether these fire sparks were some new form of anti-aircraft shell which the enemy had devised, or whether they were something which one of the aeroplanes had thrown out. Then suddenly a little mist obscured the sun, or perhaps they all changed their angle all at once, and lo! we saw that they, too, were aeroplanes. The rising sun's rays, striking upwards, had illuminated them so that each glittered as a mirror glitters and, too dazzling to have any definite shape, had stood only as a point of fire against the blue of the sky.

And our aeroplanes did well that day. That they destroyed thirteen enemy machines and drove down nine others in a damaged condition to the ground, was only a detail of their

achievement. They came down low enough to use their machine guns against the enemy's guns and on his infantry in their trenches, and all the time, from their eeries in the clouds, they watched and understood and reported each change in the progress of the fight. To us down below they were a beautiful sight. If only one could have shouted and hailed them, to tell them how one admired them and gloried in them up there, in their superb dominion of the air above the battle! Often the enemy's shrapnel burst thick about them, sometimes chasing one machine across the blue, sometimes bursting in bouquets among a fleet, as if the gunners were shooting blindly "into the brown" of them. But nothing stopped them in their appointed work; but always they swung and circled, passed and re-passed, rose and dipped and banked and turned, proudly careless of themselves, caring only that the mastery of the air was theirs—and ours—and that we should hold it.

For half an hour, from shortly before six o'clock, it seemed that our guns raged with ever increasing intensity. Then came a few seconds' lull, not complete, but perceptible, and we knew that they must be lifting from the enemy's front line to allow our infantry to go over. Then the clamour broke out redoubled, for the enemy's guns also were getting to work, and the incessant *cr-r-r-rump, cr-r-r-rump* of the bursting shells mingled with the sharper detonation of our guns. Now and again the German shells came far over, with the long drawn whine to which one always listens strainedly above all the uproar, wondering whether it is passing far enough away or whether one had better drop at once *sans cérémonie* among the bones and litter in the old shell hole at one's feet.

A thing which takes some time to lose its novelty is the great noise made by our own shells in the air in such a bombardment as this. The individual shell in the air makes little noise compared with the individual burst or gunfire. But the latter are instantaneous while the missiles take a definite number of seconds to travel. So that, in a great bombardment, there are always some hundreds of shells in the air for one that



is bursting at any given moment, and the cumulative noise of them is a perceptible factor in the universal din, a strange, high-pitched, rushing sound of wind and water which comes near to dominating the other sounds and welds all together.

It was tantalising beyond words that the mist still clung to the slopes so that one could see nothing of particular incidents. Rising and falling, with intervals and fluctuations on which one tried to put intelligent interpretations, the noise went on, the flash of guns and shell bursts, the swirl of smoke and fumes and mist combined, out of which rose signal rockets, now and again—ours and the enemy's—and all the air was pungent with the smell of powder and shell fumes.

It was full morning when we left our post on the side of the ridge and the rest of the day was one blurred impression of all the wonderful scenes of victorious warfare—the immense spectacle of the movement behind the lines of the British Army in time of battle—the clamour of guns, the prisoners, in twos and threes or in large batches of hundreds; our own wounded coming painfully down on foot, on stretchers and in ambulances, and all was suffused with the hue of victory.

Before the afternoon I had talked with some scores of our wounded and not with one whose voice did not ring true and whose eyes, even in his pain, were not alight with the fire of triumph. There were thick-set men getting on to middle age, hard and weather-beaten and tanned by exposure and battle; and there were slim youths with downy cheeks and wistful eyes and soft hair fit for a mother's stroking; men from the Northern Counties and the South, from London and the Midlands, from Ireland and Scotland, and Wales and Overseas, and they were fighting men all. Not one of them but laughed as he told the incoherent story of his own little gallant bit in the great fight; not one who did not show in his bearing the consciousness that he had borne himself well before his comrades. It was a wonder that never palled but was always new; the spirit which these men of ours possessed, from no matter what corner of the Empire they might have come. One wondered where the grumblers, the cowards, the



mean people whom one thought one had met in ordinary life had gone. They were not here. Or if they were they were uplifted and transmogrified. They doubtless, many of them, could not have explained or expressed it; but some wind had blown upon them; the inspiration of a great Cause had come into them; some sense of comradeship and brotherhood influenced them—something had made true men and gallant soldiers of them all.

## XV

### THE GERMAN THIRD LINE

WHEN our attack was delivered in the dawn of September 15, there is reason to believe that the enemy was only partially prepared for a great blow at that particular moment. That they were not entirely surprised, we know ; but from prisoners I gathered that there had been other bombardments so heavy during the last few days that even the furious intensity of this had aroused in them no immediate apprehensions of an attack. Certainly the Germans never believed that, now or at any other time, we should strike as hard as we did.

Nowhere was success more sweeping and rapid than on the extreme left of the attack, along both sides of the Bapaume road, where Canadians and English troops co-operated. It had taken us so long and had cost such fierce fighting to make our way for 1,000 yards along the Bapaume road from Pozières ! And now, in a day, we swept over two miles of enemy country and both Martinpuich and Courcellette were in our hands.

The capture of Courcellette was entirely the work of the Canadians, and in it French Canadians bore a large part. There was surely inspiration in the idea of these Frenchmen, citizens of the British Empire, coming home to France from far-off Canada to fight with their English comrades and helping to wrest back for France one of her lost villages. One hoped that in the land where brave men go when they are dead, the spirit of Montcalm looked on and knew.

At the moment of attack the Canadians had one of those experiences which have already been referred to as having

occurred several times upon the Somme. The Germans at this point apparently apprehended an advance on our part, and endeavoured to forestall it; and less than two hours before our advance was to be made, the Germans delivered one of the heaviest attacks which they had yet made, on the front just north of the Bapaume road. They succeeded in breaking into our front line trench and hard fighting and bombing were going on when the hour set for our advance arrived. At the appointed moment the Canadians went forward, from the support lines and other positions in rear of the trench which the Germans had entered. Never was a counter-attack delivered with such promptitude or in such strength. The Germans themselves must have marvelled, if they had time to think of anything, as our men, wave after wave, swept on to and over them, and out beyond on the attack itself, as it had been originally planned. The only real difference that the German attack made was that our men had already killed a large number of them and taken others prisoners before they started from our own front line.

The attacking force then had to go over open and exposed ground and carry, with many other minor obstacles, a long trench, formidably manned and fortified, which ran, not directly across the line of their advance, but at an angle to it, so that as each party reached it they came under a flanking fire from further along. All behaved with great spirit and took their whole objective without a sign of wavering, up to the edge of Courcelelette.

The village of Courcelelette had been included in the plan of the operations as a possible ultimate objective, but it was not really expected to be taken that day. Having eaten up everything that was set before them, however, the Canadians were hungry for more. The attack on the village was decided on and arranged hastily, and the French, with other Canadians on their left, went at it. Courcelelette, less ruined than most of the other villages in the battle area, still had houses standing more or less complete and traceable streets. It was very strongly held, as events proved, and there was

stiff fighting in it in which the bayonet was freely used. The Germans, however, individually were as usual no match for our men at that game and, the attack on the place having been made at six o'clock in the evening, by nightfall it was all in our hands.

Meanwhile, as the leading troops fought their way through the ruins, another party came behind to clean out the dug-outs and "mop up." The place was full of dug outs, and one of the spectacles of the day was a single and very young French Canadian herding up and bringing off a lot of between thirty and forty Germans. Engaged in the "mopping up" were in all some 700 men. The total garrison of Courcellette was certainly not less than from 1,500 to 2,000 men, or twice the strength of those who cleaned them out. Among the prisoners taken here were two Battalion Commanders, and one of them, who surrendered from a dug-out, was furious when he realised the situation and saw how many of his countrymen had given themselves up to so small a force. In their whole operation the Canadians' prisoners were about 1,300, and their total advance was over two miles.

After the village was taken, the Canadians dug in on a line well to northward of the place which ran through and included what had been two strong German positions at the quarry and the cemetery. Here the enemy delivered no less than seven separate counter-attacks. The Canadian forces in the new position were almost pitifully small, but they stood off all the attacks and even pushed forward beyond their original line. A story is told of one French Canadian who shot a German who was working a machine gun in a shell hole out in front. He went over the parapet—such as it was—got the gun and, single-handed, dragged it in. "Come on, boys!" he said as he dragged it in. "There are lots of these things lying about: let's go and get them"—and was shot dead as he said it.

The scenes in the village seem to have been tumultuous, and the men to have fought with frenzy. The men told of a Colonel who sent successive runners back with messages,





AUSTRALIANS ON ROAD.



but, one after another, they were killed. So he acted as his own runner, and got through. Beyond the village, two Germans had been buried by a shell. One was dead, but the other could just wave a hand which protruded from the *débris*. A Canadian dug him out until one arm and a shoulder were free, then gave him the spade and told him to finish the job himself, as he had to go on fighting. While the *mêlée* raged around him the half-buried German scooped and scooped with his one hand till he had extricated himself, then, bringing his spade with him, fell in with the front line of the Canadians and, without invitation, helped to dig their new front trench.

The next village to the right was Martinpuich, which was known to be strongly fortified and held. In a sense it was regarded as the hinge of and key to the line of the whole German front. Here and to the east of these troops the 15th and 50th Divisions were engaged, and never in this battle did soldiers show sterner qualities through a long all-day fight. Here, as at some other point along the front, our men, when the moment came, went forward magnificently and swept the German positions opposed to them almost without a check. Beyond the first enemy trench was a series or rather a maze of other trenches and fortified positions in shell holes and the like, but up to the outskirts of Martinpuich, while there was very stiff fighting, the attacking troops had no great difficulty. Then, in the ruins of the village, were the usual deep dug-outs and fortified positions. The place bristled with machine guns, and was held by the enemy in great strength. For some hours the fight went on among the ruins of the village, our men pushing forward almost yard by yard, forcing one strong point after another, until by evening the whole place was in their hands and they had dug themselves in on a line on the northern and eastern sides of the village. Seven hundred prisoners were taken in Martinpuich alone.

To the east of Martinpuich, barring our advance between there and Flers, lay High Wood, strategically, as has been explained, more important than any village and in its defences certainly no less formidable. It was just over two months

since, in the great push of July 14, we had first penetrated into High Wood. Since then the wood and the ground immediately before and around it had been the scene of as sustained and concentrated fighting as was seen by any of the bloodiest positions in the defences of Verdun. On the morning of September 15 our line ran through the wood rather below the middle. Above us, at the northern end, the Germans still held the highest ground. Even more formidable than the German positions in the top of the wood was a stronghold at the extreme eastern angle where a large mine crater had been converted into a veritable fortress of unusual strength. From here and from the high ground just below the extreme northern point of the wood, the enemy had been able to sweep the whole wood with machine guns which were so placed that our guns could not reach them. The wood itself was strung with barbed-wire entanglements; but worse than them were the barricades made by the fallen trees over which it was humanly impossible for men in whatever strength to succeed in making their way in face of the machine-gun fire from front and flank.

It was one of the London Divisions which took High Wood. Our men first worked up both sides of the wood, fighting their way almost by yards over the series of small trenches and shell-hole positions with which the ground was covered. They encircled the wood which was still full of machine guns and of enemy troops sheltered in every cunning way. Then, beginning from our line at the lower side of the wood, they went steadily through it. It was a ghastly job, for the wood with the dead which it contained, with its defences and the enemy machine guns, was horrible in every foot of it. But by nightfall it was ours, and our line due north of it ran about 1,000 yards beyond its furthest extremity. There was no finer achievement in the day's advance.

To the right from here, on the west of Flers village, the New Zealanders had their first opportunity on the Somme to show their quality. They did extremely well, not only in the advance itself, but subsequently, when they held their ground, under difficult conditions, against violent counter-attacks. The



operations of the day, indeed, were for the New Zealanders only the introduction to a long period of very stiff fighting, in the course of which they established their reputation as being among the best fighting men in the Army. While they suffered severely, as was inevitable, the individual initiation and self-reliance of the men enabled them generally to win their objectives, no matter what obstacles were opposed to them, at comparatively small cost.

On the morning of September 15, the task of the New Zealanders was to operate just to the left of the village of Flers and clear the successive trench lines in their front to a depth of some 1,800 yards. They performed that task admirably. The formidable German Switch Trench ran across their front at a distance of about 500 yards. Starting at 6.20 they had rushed, cleared and occupied it along the whole of their front by 7.15. Then came the German main third line, generally known as "the Flers line," another 500 yards ahead, running just before and to the left of the village. It was captured and secured by eleven o'clock. Pushing on again to their final objective well beyond the further line of the village, leaving the village itself on their right, they were in the most advanced position assigned to them to reach, with an extra jump of 800 yards, by a few minutes after noon.

The first, and a very formidable, counter-attack was delivered at four o'clock that afternoon, when four German battalions were thrown against them from the line of a sunken road and a trench running approximately parallel to their left front. The attack was beaten off with very heavy loss to the enemy. Not only was no ground lost, but the next day the Wellingtons pushed forward and flung the enemy out of the trench from which he had attacked on the preceding evening and held it against successive counter-attacks. For five days, from the evening of the 15th to the evening of the 21st, the most desperate fighting raged almost continuously, attack and counter-attack being delivered in rapid succession with the most stubborn bomb and bayonet fighting.

In this fighting, troops from all the districts—Otago, Canter-

bury, Wellington, and Auckland alike—vied with each other in gallantry, and heroic stories were told of one captain of the Canterbury. Again and again he led his men to the attack under conditions of the greatest imaginable peril and again and again came through unhurt. Throughout these days the New Zealanders held an advanced position with an exposed left flank. The enemy threw all the strength he could muster against them, only to find the line immovable and to recoil from every attack with very heavy losses.

The staunchness of the New Zealanders and their co-operation with the troops on their left, whom they assisted in the carrying of certain very difficult positions, was of the greatest value to our whole plan of operation. It is unpleasant to have to record that the Germans here unquestionably made use of the unhappily familiar trick of showing a white flag and then firing on the men who came to accept their surrender.

The troops which cleared the greater part of the village of Flers, operating immediately on the New Zealander's right, were again, as to three-fourths of their numbers, London men. They had the same successive lines of trenches to carry and they went straight through them, breaking over the third main line into and through the village, where there was comparatively little resistance. Beyond Flers were two very strong positions—a sort of twin redoubt—known as Box and Cox, which by the time the Londoners had cleared them out were full of German dead. Here six machine guns were captured.

In their advanced position, our men had to repel very heavy counter-attacks. The first attack drove the Londoners, severely shaken by the shelling, back for some 400 yards. Then they rallied and with the bayonet came on again, cleaned the enemy out of the position which he had won, and by sheer hard fighting, body to body, thrust and stabbed and hurled him back over the whole 400 yards and—as a make-weight—for fifty yards to boot. The second counter-attack on another part of the line was also met and thrown back, and everywhere the Londoners held a front more advanced than when the counter-attacks began.

So keen were the men that one party pushed on out "into the blue," and only came straggling back later after extraordinary experiences of individual fighting. Heroic tales of single performances were told after the fight, as of one officer who with a rifle had a duel with an enemy machine gun and knocked it out, and of another officer who had a single combat, such as might have come out of the pages of Sir Walter Scott, with the bayonet with a gigantic German. The Englishman had a bullet in his shoulder when the fight began, but he got home with his bayonet five times before his opponent was killed. In the course of the duel he himself had his jaw broken, but he carried on and kept in the fighting line, in spite of his two wounds, throughout the day.

On the Londoners' left, sharing in the honour of the capture of Flers, was a Light Infantry Division which had recently come into the line on the Somme after spending nine months in the Ypres salient. They had in all to make an advance from positions at the eastern end of Delville Wood of some 2,500 yards, carrying four successive German lines—the Switch Line, Brown, Tea Support and Gap Trenches—with a multitude of minor trenches and detached positions; and they did their work most creditably. Certain companies of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry had a particularly ticklish job assigned to them as a preliminary to the general advance, in the clearing of a certain entanglement of entrenched positions at the angle of Delville Wood known as "Mystery Corner." They did it with great dash; and afterwards, though entitled to remain and hold the positions won, they went forward with the general advance and acquitted themselves gallantly. It was a performance of which the Regiment has a right to be proud.

Certain troops of the King's Royal Rifles did much the same thing, declining to stay behind at the trench to which their appointed advance had carried them, but going on with their comrades of the Rifle Brigade and Somersets to the uttermost line of advance beyond the Flers—Lesbœufs road.

The actual capture of Flers was, as has been said, com-



paratively easy, the interior of the village containing few positions of any strength, and our casualties there were few. But how far this lack of resistance was due to the Terror that walked there by noonday, in the shape of Tanks, it is difficult to say. Certain it is that Tanks walked majestically ahead of our advancing line of men, and there were those who said that one of the finest sights of a thrilling day was the spectacle of one huge pachyderm sauntering down the main street of Flers all alone, while from among the ruins rifles and machine guns played on it like pea-shooters.

There was very gallant work done on the following day, after Flers and the Lesbœufs road were won and a futile counter-attack had been beaten off. The country ahead of here was swept by machine-gun fire from the right so that, as an officer described it to me, the air was "stiff with bullets." None the less, on the evening of the 16th the men who had already done so much went on again. The line which they held and had lived in for a day was little more than shell holes with a wavering link of shallow trench. Out of it they climbed and pushed ahead and took a section of another and more satisfactory trench ahead, where they finally consolidated and sat down. In these operations some companies of the Durhams particularly distinguished themselves. While they did this one gallant Tank walked on almost to Gueudecourt before mishap overtook it, when its skipper made it useless to the enemy and left it where it lay for many days afterwards, a landmark to the men on either side. The crew came back and set to work to help in Red Cross work.

In the booty which fell to the troops in this advance were ten field guns, with many machine guns and about 1,000 prisoners.

On the right of here were the Guards; and they behaved—as the Guards behave. I believe that I am voicing the unanimous sentiment of the Army when I say that, whatever rivalries there may be and however proud any man may justly feel of his own battalion, his own brigade, his regiment or division, no troops, taking all points of soldierly conduct



into consideration, have presumed to put themselves before the Guards in the present war. It is well, I think, for the traditions and the future of the British Army that it is so. In rest or in the fighting line, in attack or on the march, or on parade, the Guards have striven with extraordinary success to live up to their reputation as the model of what soldiers should be.

Rarely have any troops had a sterner task set them than confronted the Guards that morning, for it was on their immediate right that our line was, as has already been told, held up by the Quadrilateral. Almost from the moment of leaving their trenches, therefore, the Guards had to go forward with their right exposed to a murderous machine-gun and rifle fire. They had enemy troops in the first trenches who fought stoutly; but over everything and through everything, always swept by the withering fire from their right, the Guards went straight forward, out "into the blue" for some 1,800 yards. It was as fine an exhibition of stalwartness and fighting pluck as was ever given on a battlefield. Two months afterwards, when driving with a French Divisional General and his staff, I heard the French officers discuss it as if it were already one of the classic incidents of war.

The "jumping off place" from which the Guards started was just on this side of the crest of the ridge. They could see nothing beyond and knew little of what was there. It was supposed that they had a certain space of open ground before arriving at the first main trench which they had to take. But they had no sooner topped the crest than the right of their line found itself against unsuspected trenches with uncut wire, which were held by seven companies of one of the best of the German Regiments; and the Germans fought well.

Our men had no idea that the trenches were there. The first thing they knew was that they were upon them and then it was hand-to-hand fighting with bayonet and clubbed rifles. Of those seven German companies it is believed that there was not one man left who was not either killed or a prisoner.

While these things were happening on the right of the

Guards' line, their left had gone through the first trench confronting them and then had had to swing on a right incline against another trench which ran diagonally to their front. That trench was cleared as the first had been; but in this manœuvre, in the hopeless ground which had no sort of landmark, the right hand and left hand troops failed to keep in touch, and though they went abreast against the next obstacle, the Switch Trench, it was with a gap between them. Both wings stormed into and over the Switch Trench as they had taken everything else, but the gap between them caused some trouble, for they were raked from the flanks and rear, until it was discovered and attended to. Beyond yet another trench lay, not parallel to the advance, but almost at right angles to it. This they began to bomb along from the nearer end; but that was slow work for their taste. So they deployed over the open and took it frontally with the bayonet as they had taken all the others.

One talks thus of successive trenches as if each was a definite and visible objective, with nothing in between, because tactically and in theory that is what they were. But here, as in most parts of the battle front, the ground crossed was so shell-ploughed as to be almost like a rough sea grown solid, so that no man could see for more than a few seconds at a time anything but the immediate hole or bank in front of him. And, apart from the continually exposed right flank, on which the advance was swept without ceasing by machine-gun fire, the enemy was everywhere, in scattered, broken trench lines and outlying shell holes alike. Somewhere out there in the wilderness a conference of Battalion Commanders—a conference which will become one of the classical traditions of the Guards—was held in a shell-hole to try to decide where they were. Out there it was, also, that Col. John Campbell, of the Coldstream Guards, rallying his men with a silver hunting horn, which had been presented to him by officers of his battalion, won his Victoria Cross and earned fame as "the Tally-ho V.C."

For five hours—from six o'clock till eleven—the Guards

went on like a tidal wave, nothing standing before them, leaving trench and shell hole behind them full of dead; and at the end the Germans before them were frankly running—running, as I heard a Guards' officer saying, "so that you could not see their tails for dust"—and I heard both officers and men declare that if it had been humanly possible for them to go further—if they had been fresh—they "could have chased the beggars to Berlin."

It was in no sense to the discredit of the troops on the right of the Guards that they were checked by the Quadrilateral. The position included defences which were unsuspected, and it was humanly impregnable to frontal assault by infantry. On the following day a Tank was brought to the infantry's assistance and then, by simultaneous attacks on the flanks and in front, the position was carried and our troops swept on over the trenches beyond. It was one of the accidents of war that the delay should have occurred at that precise spot where on the whole of the front it was most fortunate for Germany.

It happened that it was at this particular point that our cavalry was ready to go through in case our advance penetrated far enough. We have already seen that the advance elsewhere had penetrated to and beyond the farthest limits of expectation, and that in this immediate neighbourhood, before the Guards, the Germans were in a condition of complete demoralisation and rout. How much the cavalry might have achieved here it is impossible now to say; but it was a queer caprice in the luck of battle which made the one spot where the cavalry was to be used the one spot where their use was impossible.

The Quadrilateral was situated some 750 yards due east of the centre of Ginchy on the Ginchy—Morval road. It was in itself an extremely strong position, made at a point where a bend in the road was sheltered by a clump of trees. It was protected in front not only by the ordinary trenches, running east and west as defence against our direct attack from the south, but also by lines of trenches on the west side running north and south. Just beyond the bend the road runs through



a deep ravine with wooded sides, and this had been strongly fortified and deep dug-outs were made all along it.

The whole position, then, consisted of the redoubt itself forming the southern angle of a "V," the two limbs of which ran northward, in the shape of the north-and-south trenches spoken of, and north-eastward, in the fortified ravine through which passed the continuation of the road. In addition to all this, the open ground over which we had to advance to attack was swept by machine-gun fire on the right flank from the strong point, of which I have spoken before, in the extreme northern end of Bouleaux Wood and from places beyond. It was almost a desperate place to attack.

In the advance of the morning of the 15th our men broke from their trenches to be met immediately by a withering fire from rifles and machine guns. In spite of it they went over the first line of enemy trenches. The left of the attack, partially protected from the machine guns in Bouleaux Wood and thereabouts, went straight on past the redoubt, which was left on their right and into and across the next line of trenches, to a point some 700 yards north of the redoubt itself.

The frontal attack on the redoubt failed to get on. The storm of bullets from front and right which swept across the open made it impossible for anything to live there; and throughout the day our men lay in their lines and in shell holes before the Quadrilateral, while the storm of bullets swept the ground above of anything which appeared. Meanwhile, however, the troops which had pushed up on the left, finding what the situation was, and that their right flank was in the air, turned eastward and attacked the position from that side, capturing one of the auxiliary trenches and then bombing down it, and fighting along on both sides, south-eastward towards the redoubt. This attack was delivered at six o'clock in the evening, and as night fell the troops attacking thought that they had won the redoubt. As a matter of fact, they had only won a final trench immediately protecting its southern and western face, the existence of which had not been suspected, and between them and the redoubt itself the ground



was filled with uncut wire entanglements. There was nothing to do but to fall back again and give our guns a chance to demolish the wire.

All through September 16 and 17, therefore, our guns played on the position, cutting much of the wire and damaging the redoubt itself severely. In the evening the final and victorious attack was made. Those who, on the preceding evening, had attacked from the north and west and had so nearly won the position, were determined that it should ultimately fall to them, and they started to attack with tremendous impetuosity a few minutes before the appointed time. The defenders fought stubbornly and a ferocious fight, chiefly with bombs but often hand to hand with bayonets, followed on this side. Apparently it helped to distract the attention of the garrison from the real main attack from the south. Charging from that side over the open, regardless of the machine-gun fire which still swept the ground, the men on that side rushed the position, broke into it with the bayonet, and swarming in from all sides soon overcame all opposition. Out of the redoubt itself there came 170 unwounded prisoners, besides a very large number of wounded sent to hospital, and nine machine guns.

The troops attacking from the north-west or left had accounted for the trenches which formed that leg of the "V," but there still remained the sunken road or ravine with its multitudinous dug-outs. Hard fighting went on here for a long time. Many of the Germans refused to surrender and had to be bombed in the dug-outs. Many came out and fought and were bayoneted in the open. Their total losses were very heavy. Our men pushed on for some 500 yards along the ravine to the point where the road dips down to the low ground before Morval. There, on the morning of September 18, they consolidated a line running north and south, with the Quadrilateral 500 yards behind it. Incidentally, a patrol pushed forward into the hollow before Morval, captured a field gun and made seven gunners prisoners.

It was altogether a very fine achievement and an excellent

example of the stoutness of our infantry fighting. The experience of the first attack showed how formidable the position was, and every man who went to the attack the second time knew well what the fire was which swept the ground that he had to go over. It was a triumph of sheer determination and fighting quality. The temporary check at the Quadrilateral had, as has been explained, its serious consequences, but it was not an incident of which the Army has any cause to be ashamed. The German troops who fought here, and fought stoutly, were Bavarians of the 7th and 21st Regiments of the Fifth Bavarian Division.

Viewed as a whole, September 15 was beyond doubt one of the most sensational days of all the Battle of the Somme, both by reason of the sweeping character of our success and also because it was the first day on which the Tanks were used. They contributed very largely to our triumph. If in some places they failed, in others they proved themselves invaluable.

Mention has already been made of the Tank which, far in advance of our troops, walked alone down the main street of Flers. Another led our men through Martinpuich, bearing on it a placard with the legend "Great German Victory! Special Extra." With the Canadians the Tanks were of the greatest service, our machines practically accomplishing single-handed the capture of the sugar factory at Courcelette. The troops attacking High Wood, as did those at some other parts of the line, found them rather an encumbrance, though one assisted materially in the reduction of the very obstinate position at the eastern angle of the wood.

In conversation with Corps, Division and Brigade Commanders in the course of the next few days one discovered a wide variety of views as to the value of the new machines. Among the rank and file as a whole, however, they were enormously popular. Their moral value, in the hilarity which they caused among our men and the dread with which they inspired the enemy, was immense. We learned much in that first day both of their potentialities and their weaknesses;

but what was indubitable was that in the very first hour of their employment they had rendered more tangible military service, had destroyed more enemy works of military importance, and had put out of action more enemy troops, and that without damage to any civilian or non-combatant, than the Zeppelins had rendered in all the two years of war. Few things have better illustrated the German obliquity of mental vision than the general outcry that went up, both from the prisoners whom we took upon the field and from German newspapers, that the Tanks were not a legitimate engine of civilised warfare !

Besides at the Quadrilateral and where the enemy was flinging his useless and costly counter-attacks against the New Zealanders and the London troops, local fighting continued at many points on the line throughout September 16. The result of the two days' fighting was that, with the high ground gained and the three villages captured, we had also taken over 4,000 prisoners, including 116 officers, with six field guns and more than fifty machine guns. The official *communiqué* was doubtless right in speaking of it as "the most effective blow which has yet been dealt to the enemy by British troops."

## XVI

### THE ENEMY ON THE RUN

OUR brilliant success of September 15 and the following days was succeeded by an interval of confined local fighting, in which we straightened out the irregularities in our front and made good our gains. On September 22 and 23 especially we made successful minor advances between Flers and Martinpuich (where the New Zealanders did excellent work in clearing out a very formidable network of trenches) and to the east of Courcellette. The weather was changeable, with heavy rains on several days, but not of so serious a character as materially to impede operations; and fighting, more or less severe, never ceased.

Our next great push was to be made on September 25, and on September 24 I went up from Montauban past Delville Wood, over the ground recently fought over, to where one could look down upon Flers and, through the mist and smoke, see a wide panorama of the positions so soon to be attacked beyond. In Montauban pious hands—the hands of soldiers of our own Army—were at work restoring some order to the graveyard where the statue of the Blessed Virgin stood. They had straightened some of the fallen monuments which were yet unbroken, filled in the shell holes, where the human bones protruded, removed the larger shell fragments, bits of equipment, and other dreadful memorials of the fighting, and, having pulled down the two ragged stumps of wall behind the Virgin, had raised her





NEW ZEALANDERS ON THE ROAD TO THE TRENCHES.



on a higher temporary pedestal, where all could see her with her pleading hands and gentle face, and where, clear of the wreckage around her, she served as a landmark, visible through the stumps of trees which stand around, for long distances.

Beyond, after threading one's way through our own gun positions, lay the terrible region which was all a network of old battered German trenches winding their way through a wilderness of shell holes and the *débris* of battle, where shells sang overhead all day. I doubt if any part of all the battle area was more utterly wrecked and swept clear of every trace of what such a country ought to be. Hardly any green thing grew, except where between shell holes there were patches of sickly grass studded now and again with stunted plants of dock and ragged patches of dwarfed thistles, not one half their normal size. Presumably it was the fumes of shells which had killed almost everything. Over all the region, of course, hung that awful smell—sometimes only a taint in the air, sometimes sickeningly strong—which belongs to battlefields. But in patches also there were other smells, chemical and sickly-sweet or very pungent, the smell of gas shells and such abominations which had burst about here, at one time and another, in hundreds.

There were places where the shell holes, over an acre or more, were so thinly scattered that they appeared as individual holes with open spaces of a few yards between. They were so clearly separate that you might have stood and counted those within sight. There were also acres and acres where they were so thick that they coalesced and ran into one another, and no man could say with confidence whether it was two shells or three or five which ploughed up one spot of earth. Along the main German second line especially there was abundant testimony to the work of our guns. There were stretches of a hundred yards and more together where it afforded no shelter, and was no longer a trench; but the bottom of what used to be the trench and the parapets and the surrounding earth were all of a

level, all churned up into one jumble of dirt and sandbag and bits of equipment and fragments of shell.

Bernafay Wood, captured at the outset of the battle and where there was comparatively little resistance, was less utterly stripped of all semblance of a wood than any of the others in this area. Of course there were no leaves on the trees, no sign of autumn foliage anywhere; but the wood still stood reasonably compact, with a regular outline and enough bare poles of trees standing to make it still a wood of moderate density. Trônes Wood was very much thinner, for it had seen desperate and prolonged fighting; but Delville Wood, for all its size, was infinitely worse, a mere ghost of a wood, with trunks, branchless and shattered, here and there, so that you could see clear through it from one side to the other.

Longueval, also, was one of the most utterly desolated of villages. At one point at its northern end two spikes of stone, perhaps the height of a man, stand up white in the sunlight. The village had once been all embowered in trees, for Delville Wood ran over a great part of it. Now there were only a few blackened stumps, protruding from the whitish-grey area of battered masonry, flat on the ground, which marked where the village stood. That and the two splinters of white stone were all that remained.

From the high ground beyond it we looked down on Flers, but had no desire to enter it, for between the village and ourselves the German shells were falling thick. Overhead shrapnel was bursting and the ruins of the village were wreathed and half hidden in a cloud of white and grey and blackish smoke. Unhappily it was an afternoon of intense heat and hazy; and through the smoke and haze one could see the further landscape only vaguely, with the dim outlines of Lesbœufs, to our right, Gueudecourt in front of us, and on our left Eaucourt l'Abbaye, and all the maze of trenches between them and us.

As we turned homeward the enemy began throwing shells about in the objectionally random fashion that he favoured



at times, into Longueval on our left, over our heads to drop before us as we went, and into a hollow or little valley on our right. But worse than any shelling was the stricken country itself in the afternoon heat, with the broken trenches and shell holes, the smells and the buzzing of flies. All the time also we walked towards our own guns, most of which were at work, crashing at us unexpectedly from their well hidden positions as we approached; but beyond them, amongst the shattered tree trunks, we could see the Virgin on her new pedestal standing against the sky.

The attack of September 25 was, in its results, hardly less brilliant than the splendid success of ten days before, for it gave us Morval, Lesbœufs and Gueudecourt, and sealed the fate of Combles. On our right the French also attacked simultaneously, with success equal to our own. The spectacle of the bombardment was stupendous. I have no accurate idea how many guns were at work, but perhaps, including the German guns, the French guns and our own, there were 3,000. But it does not matter; for when you begin to count guns by thousands, all firing at their greatest speed, all massed within a narrow area, I doubt if 3,000 can sound or look any different from 30,000. There are no degrees in chaos. It is merely overwhelming, and if you make it more overwhelming there are no new adjectives with which to describe it.

The point from which I watched was within the zone of the French Army, where ruins of Hardecourt lay on our left and of Maurepas on our right—both dreadful witnesses to the gallantry of our French Allies. Between them, ahead, lay Leuze Wood, with the high and bitterly contested ground to the east of Ginchy just beyond it on the left, and Combles hidden in the hollow in which it lies on the other side of Maurepas. Morval was just out of sight over Leuze Wood. But when one speaks of villages and woods, it must be realised that there were no such things. The woods were mere thin screens of blackened and twisted masts of ships, and the villages mere grey areas of flattened stone. From

where we stood, beyond the thin lines of black tree trunks here and there, much the most conspicuous object in all the view was the wreckage of a British aeroplane lying out in the middle of the waste: an aeroplane which, though desperately crippled, the pilot had brought safely down to earth within the friendly lines five days before. So bare was all the shell-torn ground, with the ragged snaky, whitish lines of trenches running about it, that the wreckage of the planes of an air-machine stand up like a gigantic landmark. You yourself seemed as conspicuous a mark for the enemy's shells as a ship in mid-ocean in a thunderstorm seems to be exposed to the lightning.

It was half an hour after noon when the storm broke. Before that, all the guns together had been firing, perhaps no more than twenty shots to the minute. Then, suddenly, in one minute a thousand spoke at once. On our left and behind us and for as far as the eye could see ahead, our own guns spat and roared. To the right the wonderful French "75's" flickered along the whole face of the slope till their flashes made a continuous glitter, as if someone shook a gigantic diamond with a thousand facets in the sunlight. Along the whole German lines, from far to the right by Rancourt and Fregicourt and beyond, to the furthest distance past Morval and Lesbœufs, the shells burst as if a sudden dust storm swept over the earth.

For ten minutes the din was indescribable. Then for a brief interval it slackened slightly ahead of us and we knew that the infantry attack was being made. But the German guns were at work by now and, as the *barrage* of our guns pushed a little further away, the clamour grew greater than ever. Amidst all the general uproar certain things always impress themselves upon one: now it was the occasional *cr-r-r-rump* of a German shell bursting not too far away, the crash of certain heavy British howitzers on our left and the punctual deep-toned roar of a huge French 400 mm. on our right. On such occasions there are extraordinary acoustic phenomena. A number of British guns quite near, but

with a little dip in the ground between, were quite inaudible. Others, no nearer, at another angle, shook us each time they fired.

At two points in the circuit the fire was particularly terrible—on the extreme right, towards Clery, where the hurricane of the French shells was fiercest, and about Morval, where our attack was furious and the intensity of the German reply, which swept all the ground behind our front lines, showed how much importance the enemy attached to the retention of that place. Though all the line before us was one continuous bank of smoke and bursting shells, at these two points it was evident that the struggle was especially desperate, the inferno worse and more concentrated.

For the spectator, it was impossible to tell how the battle went. One knew only that our fire had pushed on and had not drawn nearer again, and that the enemy still spent his fury close up by our front line. Not that he did so entirely, however, for when we returned to the "safe" place a mile or so in our rear, where we had left our motor-car, we found that some of the German shells which had passed shrieking over our heads had very nearly found the car, and the chauffeur had had a much narrower escape than any of our own party.

As we came away, the wounded and prisoners were already beginning to come in; and from the first of the former—a private in a Yorkshire Regiment whom we found walking painfully with a shrapnel bullet through one arm and a bruised leg, and whom we picked up and took to the Red Cross dressing station—we heard our first definite news of victory. He had been wounded before Morval and before he left had seen his comrades enter the village.

Nor was it only Morval that was ours. Lesbœufs also was in our hands before the end of the afternoon. By evening we were at the edge of Gueudecourt, and Gueudecourt fell to us the next day. On the extreme right we had at last cleared all the difficult ground about the end of Bouleaux Wood, where the enemy's positions were very strong, and



the Combles valley. Combles itself was entered by the French and ourselves simultaneously on the following morning. It was a great and sweeping victory, notable not only for the extent of the gains but for the comparative cheapness at which they were attained on most of the front. At many points the Germans showed every evidence of demoralisation, and our men treated them with little more respect than if they had been rabbits. The lines before Morval and Lesbœufs (as well as Gueudecourt) were so strong, being part of the German third main line of defence, that they might well have cost us more dearly than they did. Tanks were not used, except, as will be seen, at a later stage of the operation, and our success was due to the perfected synchronisation of our artillery and infantry and to the immense superiority to the enemy of the *moral* of our men. Nor was the enemy using tired troops, for at least the whole of one new Army Corps had just been put into the line against us, having been hurried down from the north after our victory of September 15.

The attack was made on a front of about 7,000 yards, and of the fighting on most of the line little description is possible: it was one victorious charge immediately on the heels of a terrific bombardment. The German third main line, known also as "the Flers line," had run from before Flers, wanderingly south-eastward to in front of Morval. A little to the north of Morval, however, it was joined by the double trench system of the fourth main line before Gueudecourt and Lesbœufs. Morval itself was on high ground and had to be approached across the upper end of the valley which ran northward from Combles. In this commanding position, with the elaborate connecting lines of old and well fortified trenches before it, Morval should have been extremely difficult to take. Before Lesbœufs, besides the trench lines, there was a complication of sunken roads and timbered ravines, all carefully fortified for defence, which made that place equally formidable. The twin trench lines, which were known as Gird Trench and Gird Support before Gueudecourt, had been given other names lower



down. They were Cow and Ox Trenches (with their supports) before Lesbœufs, and Bovril, Meat and Mutton Trenches (with their supports) in front of Morval: appetising names, and our men devoured them greedily.

On the extreme right, following on the heels of a whirlwind bombardment, our men carried in splendid succession the various obstacles in their way; first, the formidable lines of trenches; then a well fortified sunken road; then other positions before the village of Morval. The southern side of Morval was exposed to enfilading fire from above Combles and beyond, but our men went on into the village and through the upper part of it and by noon had cleared all but one stronghold at the south-eastern corner, which offered some resistance but was reduced by evening.

This action on the right was a pivotal operation for the whole line. Swinging round in a wider circle, the troops on the immediate left went on with equal determination, meeting a very severe machine-gun fire as soon as they left their trenches, but breaking through the successive enemy defences up to the lower edge of Lesbœufs and then, after an interval while the *barrage* lifted, on through the southern part of the village.

Abreast of them on their left other troops kept pace. These also had to face a very heavy machine-gun fire and German *barrage*, but they carried their first objective, the main line of enemy trench, so easily that they went on victoriously, so close up to our own shell fire as to be practically mixed up with it. But their fighting blood was up. They saw Germans running; and, regardless of our own shells, regardless of the enemy's machine guns and everything, they simply stormed through the northern part of the village and out well beyond and to the north of it.

Beyond, on the extreme left, it was that the troops had the most difficult time. They, again, were met with heavy fire at starting and when they had romped over the first line of trenches, machine guns were everywhere along a certain sunken road and in isolated positions on all sides.

The German artillery *barraged* the support trenches heavily and the village of Gueudecourt itself was strongly defended. Before the village, on the west and southern sides, ran the double line of strongly fortified trenches, protected with barbed wire, known as Gird Trench and Gird Support. The road from Ginchy, running due north, crossed these trenches just below the town in a deep ravine, the ravine itself, forking at this point, ran in two legs up the eastern and western sides of Gueudecourt. Across these, a little higher up, the road from Le Transloy to Eaucourt l'Abbaye also cut through a deep gully on both sides of the village. In the village itself were machine-gun posts and in between these trenches and ravines lurked all manner of minor defended holes and hidden strongholds. The place was a veritable porcupine, with prickles in all directions.

On the first day our troops had fought their way up from the line which they held to the east of Flers, across about 1,000 yards of ground and trench and shell holes, close up to the village. They had to face extremely heavy artillery fire, through which supports had difficulty in getting up, while a post on the right of the line at the junction of Gird Trench with another trench, known as Gas Alley, swept their front with machine-gun fire; and that evening they were unable to get at the village itself. The post on the right was eventually cleared by a most gallant direct attack, with bomb and bayonet, by men of the Leicestershire Regiment; and the adjoining troops on the right, who watched, declared that it was a magnificent performance.

In the early hours of the next morning the advance on the village was made, a Tank having been brought up to help. The Tank was of undoubted value, both at the formidable position where the two trenches—Gird and Gird Support—crossed the sunken road in the ravine before the village, and again at a still stronger post in the south-east side. With the help of the Tank in dealing with these obstacles, and assisted by an aviator who flew along the trenches and used his machine-gun on them, our men romped through

the village, taking as they went great numbers of prisoners, 350 of whom seemed to have come from the post at the junction of Gird Trench and Gas Alley and another 300 from the village itself.

When the village was cleared the Tank seems to have had a most extraordinary experience. Its skipper and its crew apparently grew bored with sitting still while other men were fighting, so Leviathan went on alone into the wilds beyond, to see what it could find. It found occupation enough. Some distance beyond the village, when it was surrounded by the enemy, something went wrong with its insides and it could not move. The Germans, discovering this, grew bold and, creeping up to it under cover of trenches, and shell holes, they fairly swarmed all over the poor thing like the Lilliputs on Gulliver. They peppered it with bombs, shot through the crevices in its hide and, so it is said, actually climbed on top of it.

Meanwhile our infantry had cleared the village and they also wanted more to do. Then they discovered the plight that the Tank was in, fighting like a buffalo ringed round with wolves. So they went to its rescue and there seems to have been fighting of the best, till, when the enemy had been driven off, he left between 250 and 300 dead on the ground around the Tank. Behemoth himself was not seriously hurt, but was scarred like a bear that has been worried by terriers. The derangement of his interior was soon repaired and he was full of fight again.

When the Tank went off on this excursion on its own account the Germans from one of the nearer trenches, after Goliath had passed, came running back to the British lines to surrender in sheer terror; and an aviator who was flying overhead gave an absurd description of the Tank marching majestically across country, its progress marked by an efflorescence of white handkerchiefs and similar emblems of surrender waved from the trenches. Unfortunately a Tank's capacity for carrying prisoners is limited, and when the monster was seen to be in difficulties the enemy who had



demoralisation and collapse the German armies were at that time, perhaps, only the German Higher Command knows. It is certain that we had shaken the German military power and established a moral superiority to the enemy's troops to a degree which a few months before would have seemed incredible.

It was not merely that individual battalions here and there were demoralised, but the working of the whole German machine was visibly deranged. Prisoners told how they had been kept in the front line one day or two days beyond their time; how they ought to have been relieved and the relieving troops never came; how new troops ought to have come on Tuesday and did not come till Thursday and then it was a different regiment from that which had been expected. One extraordinary case there was of troops which did not wait but, beyond any doubt, retired from their positions before the reliefs arrived. We found the positions empty, took prisoners from the retiring troops and saw the reliefs come up; and we treated them most unpleasantly when they came. The incident was so inexplicable that it gave rise to a story that the whole German Army had fallen back four kilometres, though why precisely that distance nobody knew.

There were places, indeed, as always, where the enemy fought very stubbornly and where our men needed all their gallantry to go forward as they did. In relation to the whole circuit of the front, however, these places were few. The Guards, on their front in the attack, had practically no opposition after they had cleared the first trench line, and it was the universal opinion of both officers and men that, had a further advance been desirable or could the rest of the line have kept pace with them, so completely broken was the enemy's defence, that there was nothing to prevent them from going on indefinitely. At one place our men took over 1,000 yards of trench, which was completely evacuated at their approach. At another place a wounded private told me contemptuously that: "We could have taken the



trench with picks and shovels." The west side of Morval was full of deep dug-outs, from which the men poured as our troops came on, with their hands in the air.

A captured German officer of one regiment said frankly and with bitterness: "My men would not fight." At least one regiment—the 13th—seems to have been in a complete state of rot. Prisoners taken from it said that most of the officers had been killed and those who were not killed had feigned illness—stomach-ache, the prisoners said—to get away. When our men took the trenches, there were only non-commissioned officers and privates there, who surrendered in a spirit of almost mutinous disgust.

In a casualty clearing station I spoke with a German who had been wounded with the bayonet—a clean thrust through the shoulder. He had been wounded, he said, near Martinpuich in the trench. "In your own trench?" I asked. "Naturally," he replied, "it is there that they always come with the bayonets." He spoke as if recalling some horrid nightmare, a nightmare which must then have been haunting many German regiments—the terror of our "them" crashing into the trenches with the bayonet which they so hated to face.

From two different prisoners came stories to the same effect, namely, in the one case that eight German battalions had been practically wiped out in the fighting on the 25th; and, in the other case, that the 236th, 237th, 238th and 240th Regiments had been annihilated. Prisoners are always inclined to be over despondent. But there could be no question that the German losses had been terribly heavy.

Extraordinary evidence of the extent to which demoralisation was spreading in the German troops was furnished by the captured documents which fell into our hands. Thus, a truly amazing exhortation from a Regimental Commander to his men said:

To the hesitating and faint-hearted, I would say the following:—

What the Englishman can do the German can do also, or if, on the other hand, the Englishman really is a better and superior being, then

he would be quite justified in his aim as regards this war, namely, the extermination of the German.

There was more to the same effect, all showing a very curious state of affairs in that particular regiment.

Another Regimental Order said "with the greatest regret" that it was necessary to report that "the Regiment has had to take notice of the sad fact that men of four of the companies, inspired by shameful cowardice, in a recent change of positions, left their companies on their own initiative and did not move into line."

Illuminating, again, was an Order of the Day issued by the Commander of the Artillery of the Guards' Reserve Division, which set forth that: "All officers and sergeants are to be expressly warned of the consequences if they leave their posts. They run the risk of being court-martialled." Staff officers were detailed to inspect the posts and see that all were present and carrying on their duties. From yet another similar document we learned that "Proofs are multiplying of men leaving their positions without permission or reporting and living at the rear"; and from another that all the officers of a battalion have gone "sick"—and this in a Bavarian Regiment—and left the command to a Cadet Officer who had never been under fire before. The information in this was independently confirmed by the entries in a captured officer's diary.

All these things supported what prisoners told us and what we saw in the field, that the *moral* of a large section of the German Army was very bad indeed.

Of tales of individual gallantry on our side one heard a great number. Perhaps the most remarkable was that of a man, who was the end man in a trench of which we held a part and the enemy another part, when a party of Germans consisting of 2 officers and 22 men came along to attack with bombs. He killed them all but one; and that man he took prisoner. He used his revolver first, and then picked up one German rifle and then another. Half way through the fight the rear section of the Germans

started to run and he hunted them along the trench, clambering over those whom he had already killed as he went; and he had actually disposed of all but one—23 men in all—when the last flung himself down and begged for mercy. The story seems incredible, but was vouched for by more than one witness of part of the exploit as well as by the prisoner.

I heard from certain Canadians the tale of one of their officers, who was off in the far North-West when the war broke out and he came by canoe and on foot 500 miles to join the Expeditionary Force. He went through all the fighting that his Division had seen and rose gradually through the successive non-commissioned ranks till he got his commission. A German machine-gun in a certain post was holding up his men and he crawled up until quite close to it and then went for it single-handed. When his men came on they found his body lying across the gun and the gun's crew dead around him.

Another incident reflects equal credit on the gallantry of two different Overseas Contingents. The Canadians were fighting over ground which had formerly been on the Australian front. The Canadians had been there nine days when they found in a shell hole, far ahead of where the front line had been, three Australians, two wounded and one unhurt. The three had pushed out by themselves into enemy country, when they were caught by shell fire and two were wounded. The third dragged them into the shell hole and sat there with them. To come out in daylight was impossible, so all day he sat there and looked after the other two and at night he sallied forth and got water-bottles and rations from the German dead which lay around, and thus he had kept his two patients and himself alive for nine long days.

An incident was told of an officer who, before the attack of the 25th, was bringing some rum up for the use of his men in the front line. As others had done, he lost his way and came to a trench which was not his own. There were



Germans in it, but only German wounded—the others, apparently, having fled. So the British officer gave each of the German wounded a drink of rum and made them as comfortable as he could before climbing out again and making his way to his own trench, where he arrived safe but with a rum ration which was a little short.

One of the Canadians' prisoners was a dog; a little dog patched with black and yellow and white. With a general inclination to be a terrier, it was too many kinds of dog to be of much value from a fancier's point of view. But it was a loyal little dog with a great heart, though German. When our men broke into an enemy stronghold, it was the only thing there alive; and it crouched between the dead knees of the German officer who had been its master and barked valorously at the intruders. But if there is anything besides fighting which our men understand, it is dogs. So they comforted the little thing and brought it away, and it soon came to the conclusion that the British were good people to live with.

It used to spend most of its leisure in trying to provoke an Airedale five times its own size to fight. But the Airedale was an officer's dog and a gentleman, and said that it could not possibly fight so small an enemy, especially when the other was down on his luck and a prisoner; so, whenever the little dog was rude to it the Airedale merely looked at the horizon and blinked its hairy eyelids. So Fritz, as the little dog was called, lived and may live to a good old age somewhere in England or in Canada, always friendly to the human beings who brought it away from that dreadful place and were kind to it, but always fiercely inimical to British dogs.

How far we might not have pushed our victory, had but the fine weather held, it is impossible to say; but on September 28 rain began to fall. It was, though we did not know it at the time, the beginning of a long season of almost continuous wet which was to last on into the winter. The summer had ended just in time to save the



Germans from discomfiture, the extent of which no one can guess.

Meanwhile, while these great events had been going on on the main battle front, success even more dramatic and involving no less serious a blow to Germany's military prestige was won on the extreme left, in the capture of Thiepval.

## XVII

### THIEPVAL

THIEPVAL fell on the same day as Combles. It will be remembered that on July 1 we had won a lodgment in the very nose of the Thiepval salient, at what was known as the Leipzig Redoubt. That advantage we had held. Then, as has already been told, from Ovillers-la-Boisselle we had broken our way northward along the old German front line by a series of admirably organised and extremely successful sudden blows, until by the end of August we had pushed up to well within 1,000 yards of Thiepval. Between us and the village, however, there was still a maze of German trenches with, especially, in the middle of this maze, an elaborate stronghold of trench and dug-out and machine-gun positions known as the Wonderwork or *Wunderwerk*. This position crowned the end of a small spur which ran southward from Thiepval, and from it the enemy was able to sweep the ground eastward towards Mouquet Farm.

The Wonderwork, with the trenches around it, was very gallantly attacked and rushed on September 14. The actual position had already been so battered by our guns that little of it remained. There was very hard fighting, however, in the positions around it, in which the bayonet was freely used; and I heard a fine upstanding sergeant of the attacking troops say that it was "just lovely." The enemy, who, we knew, attached great importance to the Wonderwork, delivered heavy counter-attacks in a desperate effort to

recover it, but without any success. We held all the ground won and its possession materially facilitated our subsequent movements in the Mouquet Farm area.

Along the main circuit of the ridge, our advances of September 15 and 25 carried us well over the crest and down the further slope. Only on the extreme left was the enemy now in occupation of the high ground on the summit of the spur beyond Thiepval, and thence eastward to Mouquet Farm towards Courcellette. As befitted positions of so much importance, all the ground here was extremely strongly fortified. The strength of Thiepval itself was notorious. On the highest ground of all, about 1,000 yards to the north of the village, was an elaborately fortified position known as the Schwaben Redoubt. To the east, north of Mouquet Farm, two other equally strong positions, situated on the German main second line, were known as the Stuff and Zollern Redoubts. The whole area, with a southern frontage of about 2,500 yards, was practically one fortress, a veritable Gibraltar with great cellars and subterranean galleries, and the defences inside as nearly perfect as two years of labour could make them. But the time had now arrived when, in conformity with the advance along the rest of the front, it was desirable to get possession of this final piece of the high ground.

The Germans never believed that Thiepval could be taken. Captured officers freely confessed that they had regarded it as impregnable. The place, moreover, had been garrisoned by one regiment—the 180th Württembergers—since September, 1914. It had been a matter of pride with them to hold it, and they had gloried in its impregnability. They were stout troops, not new men, but veterans who had had in their keeping one of Germany's strongholds for twenty-four months, types of the best soldiers with whom Germany started the war. The prisoners whom we took told how they had lain snug in their dug-outs while our worst bombardments had torn the ground above them and laughed at the idea of our ever winning Thiepval. The

credit of its capture belongs chiefly to men of the Suffolks, Essex and Middlesex.

The attack was made on September 26 at 12.30 from the south—that is, from the line which we held across the salient by the Wonderwork and thence towards Mouquet Farm. In the line of the attack lay a maze of trenches studded with machine-gun posts, connecting with subterranean passages and dug-outs. Beyond the row of shattered remnants of apple trees which, standing ragged against the sky, had been for two months past the landmark by which the site of Thiepval was known, lay the village, just over the brow of the rise, with, right at the southern point, the remains of the Château, a house of some importance which was owned by a German and, rumour says, had been prepared for war by him in the years before war came. However that might be, the Château had vast cellars which, connecting with other cellars in the place, seem to have been the ganglion of Thiepval's system of underground fortifications. This Château (of course there was no building there, but only a heap of broken brick, conspicuous as a red patch on the face of the grey-brown slope, masking the entrances to the subterranean lairs) was one of the most formidable obstacles in our way.

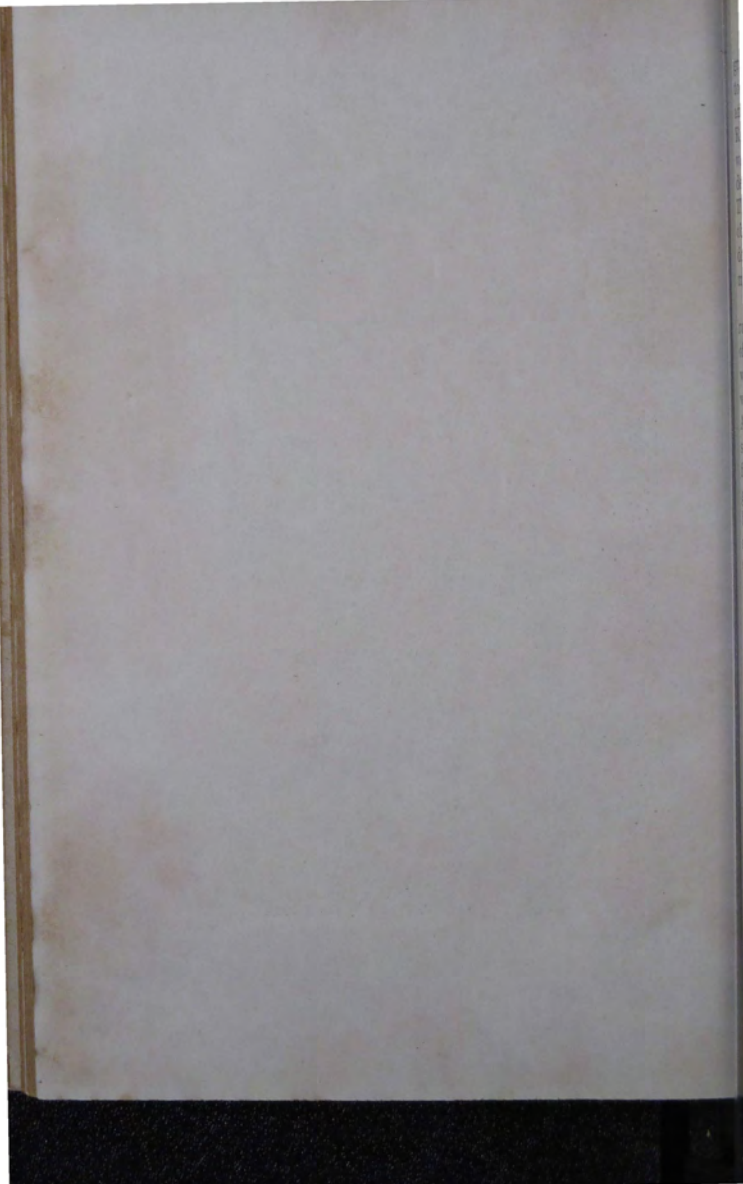
A second formidable obstacle was a sunken road, with burrows to dug-outs along its course, and machine-gun positions everywhere, running northward from the middle of the village towards the Cemetery. The Château was in our hands by the middle of the afternoon. Positions on the road held out until the following morning. The Germans fought well, but they met better men than themselves.

Two Tanks were used in the attack and both did valuable service, especially one which contributed largely to the capture of the Château, which so bristled with machine-gun positions that it may well have been considered invincible by infantry attack. In advancing against it, the Tank got into difficulties in soft earth, and a furious fight raged while our men attacked the Château. It was still in pro-





AN ADVANCED DRESSING STATION.



gress when the Tank overcame its troubles and came on to help them. Against a Tank machine guns are powerless, and with and around and behind it, men of the Middlesex Regiment stormed into the positions with bombs. There was a short period of hand-to-hand fighting before all the defenders of the place who were not killed surrendered. The second Tank also did noble work until it came to an obstacle which even it could not climb over. Then it sat down and converted itself into a stationary fort and did most useful work.

As the fight raged through the ruins our men began to run short of ammunition; but they found abundant stores of German bombs and, as on several occasions before, fought with them. There was hand-to-hand fighting and bayonet work, and duels with clubbed rifles and even with fists. Again and again the enemy's machine guns rose from unsuspected holes after our men had passed and fired on them from the rear, until later comers took care of them. Underground, in the dug-outs and connecting passages, a second battle raged under the feet of those above, even more terrible, for our men went down into the pits and met the Germans there with bomb and knife and bayonet. Untold tragedies went on in the dark labyrinths, and unseen deeds of heroism were wrought which never will be known.

Among the men engaged in the attack on Thiepval were a large number of new drafts very recently arrived from England, and they behaved extremely well. One heard many tales of individual gallantry in the course of the action, as of the Commanding Officer, already the possessor of the Victoria Cross, who sat calmly in the open amid the red dust of what had been the Château directing the operations of his men. One man rounded up 60 prisoners single-handed from the dug-outs. A lance-corporal bayoneted the two men with a machine-gun and dragged the gun away to a position where it could be used against the enemy. A machine gunner of the Middlesex, with one private whom he taught to load the gun, sat out in a shell crater and kept

the gun at work all night. A battalion of the Bedfords who were in the fighting fought with the greatest gallantry.

Before evening the whole of the village of Thiepval was in our hands, and that night we held a line just north of it but to the south of the Cemetery, which was known to be strongly fortified. Beyond the Cemetery again was the position known as the Crucifix (to which, it is believed, some of our men had penetrated on July 1), where once a crucifix had stood, backed against and just below the very highest ground, which was crowned by the Schwaben Redoubt.

The attack on Thiepval seems to have taken the Germans largely by surprise. Under the intensity of our artillery fire, moreover, they had great difficulty in sending back information of the progress of events, and it was not until fairly late in the evening that the German artillery appeared to understand that we had indeed captured the place and that it was safe for them to shell it. By that time we had made good our footing and were already using the underground workings to accommodate reserves which we had brought up. So spacious were these caverns that three whole companies were billeted in one series of connecting dug-outs. When the enemy came to a realisation of the situation, he shelled our newly-won positions heavily and continued throughout the night and following days. So little did he hurt or check us, however, that at 1 o'clock in the afternoon of the following day we advanced again.

I had not seen the attack on Thiepval, being engrossed in events on the southern part of the front; but the second attack, on the Cemetery and the positions beyond, I watched from a post whence I had seen other of the advances in this neighbourhood. It is useless to describe again the wonderful scene in detail—the hot, drowsy, midday sunshine—the spiteful pounding of the enemy's shells on Thiepval—the lazy, desultory answer of our own guns, just a few to the minute, seemingly aimless and irregular—then, with-



out warning, instantaneously as the hand of one's watch reached the appointed moment, with one crash came the whole splendid diapason of our artillery. It is always indescribable and incredible, when, over the doomed area, the sunshine, the lines of trench, whatever ragged trees or other landmarks there may be, are blotted out; when the earth seems to heave up to meet the sky, the air shakes and the sky is full of the roar and shriek of shells, till all blend together in one whirling, writhing chaos of smoke and dust-cloud.

Beyond the little company of ragged trees and mottled patch of ground, which were all that there was of Thiepval, we saw the region of the Cemetery—marked by another small company of tattered tree-stumps—and all the rise beyond where the Crucifix was and the Redoubt lay, disappear in a moment behind the dreadful veil. The *barrage* lifted for a moment and we knew that the infantry were going into that hell of smoke and fire and death. We saw the cloud spread northward as our guns increased their range to positions beyond, and, as the wind drifted the smoke away, the region on which our storm had first broken came out peacefully into the sunlight again. Our men had gone beyond it.

Presently, on that same region the enemy's shells began falling—sure sign that it was our ground now and not his—and still the tide of battle moved on. Ever northward the curtain of our bursting shells passed steadily, until it engulfed only the further side of the Redoubt and the slope to the German first line on the Ancre; and there it hung. Between it and us the enemy's shells dropped in increasing numbers, on Thiepval, on the ground which our men had just swept over, and at large over the middle distance and the foreground of the picture. But always the centre of the fight hung at the further side, where the last slope from the high ground of the ridge went down to the valley.

We had, indeed, by sheer hard fighting carried yard by

yard all the ground along the fortified road to the Cemetery, through and beyond it, past the Crucifix to the Schwaben Redoubt itself. We broke into the redoubt and seized and held all the southern side of it. To the northern side, where his positions were a few feet higher than ours, the enemy still clung, and there was yet to be fierce fighting before he was ejected. This, however, was immaterial. The Thiepval position as a whole was ours. What the enemy still held was no useful part of the position itself, but only a last temporary protection against being flung headlong down the slope to the Ancre beyond.

On the right the attack was equally successful. We had carried the Zollern Redoubt and swept on 750 yards beyond to Stuff Redoubt, of which, again, we held the southern face, and from here eastward we seized and occupied the long line known as Hessian Trench, which ran almost due eastward to a junction with the Miraumont road north of Courcellette. To the right of Stuff Redoubt our attack was made by the Canadians, who had very hard fighting in Hessian Trench, individual positions changing hands three and four times. English troops which distinguished themselves in the advance to the east of Thiepval itself were Sherwood Foresters, Norfolks, Manchesters, West Yorkshires, Northumberland Fusiliers and, in one especially gallant operation, some of the Border Regiment. But nothing could have exceeded the dash and determination of the attack (as officers assured me) at every point. The capture of Thiepval was undoubtedly one of the finest achievements of the whole battle; but the rest of the advance and the fighting of the succeeding days were hardly less glorious or less creditable to our arms. On the whole the Germans here fought stubbornly—almost with desperation—and showed little evidence of the demoralisation which was so shameful on much of the more southern front.

The dug-outs and underground galleries in Thiepval were very extensive, and, as usual, great quantities of luxuries

—tinned and bottled delicacies, liquids, aerated waters, cigars and cigarettes—were found in the officers' quarters.

One of these subterranean barracks was evidently fitted up as a hospital and dressing station; and the stock of drugs and instruments found in it was very valuable, including supplies of drugs which we have difficulty in getting. Among those who surrendered here was a German Army doctor with a staff of twenty men, and they turned to and did good work for our wounded in this underground hospital. This, like the other dug-outs in the place, had every evidence of being intended—as it had been—as a permanent habitation. All were wired for electric light, and were in every way fitted up like substantial houses. In some of them meals were, as often happens, found half eaten and many things went to show the unexpectedness of our attack.

In addition to the assistance rendered by the Tanks in the capture of Thiepval, one of the machines served also a useful purpose afterwards; for where it straddled a trench it gave sufficient shelter to house an emergency dressing station underneath its belly, where our wounded received first treatment before they could be taken to the hospital underground.

Mention was made in a previous chapter of the difficulty of our situation about Mouquet Farm, where the enemy had complicated mazes of trenches and fortified positions with underground connections and exits in unexpected places. All this region was finally cleared out in this advance and put well behind our lines. In the action here a detachment of Pioneers distinguished themselves. They were coming up as a working party in the rear of the first waves of our attacking infantry and saw Germans emerging from their dug-outs. Dropping their tools, they went for the enemy and, when the Germans above ground had been disposed of, the Pioneers dived underground where blind, confused fighting went on for several hours. When the remnant of the Pioneers reappeared triumphant they brought with them prisoners to four times their own numbers.



Again and again in the course of the battle the Pioneers did conspicuously gallant service. Admiration for our infantry, artillery and airmen, whose achievements necessarily engrossed one's attention, had a tendency to blind one to, or at least to make it difficult to speak of, the deeds of others, as of the Engineers and—except when, as in this case, they took a conspicuous part in an infantry attack—of the Pioneers.

As for the Engineers, they—well, they were the Royal Engineers. It is a tradition of the Sappers that they always do their job and never make a fuss about it. Long before the beginning of the Somme battle, the losses in the Field Companies of the Engineers were so heavy that a special order had to be issued mandatorily limiting their opportunities to sacrifice themselves. In the course of the battle, a Commanding Officer of troops which had borne a heavy share in certain recent operations complained to me that, in making up his list of Recommendations for Honours, he could not get the Engineer officers to give him any names. "Oh, they have all done well," they said. "That's all right." "And," said the Commanding Officer to me, "it *was* all right. They *had* all done well,—d——d well; but somebody must have done particularly well and I wanted names! Extraordinary chaps!" he added meditatively. "Marvellous chaps!"

The work of the Engineers and the Pioneers was often carried on, of course, under circumstances of the greatest possible danger. Consolidating newly-won positions and entrenching had more frequently than not to be done under heavy fire, from which the men who were working could not take shelter as the infantry in the same place might be able to do. On the steadfastness and rapidity of their work depended the safety of all the troops who had to hold the positions, and probably the retention of the positions themselves. Often their casualties were heavy; but whatever they might be the work went on. Again and again I heard officers speak with the utmost gratitude and admira-



tion of the work of the Pioneers ; again and again I heard it insisted that it was to them that the chief credit for the final success of a " push " ought to be given. The Pioneers, perhaps, caught the trick of modesty from the Royal Engineers. Certainly there were in all this Army, which was so extraordinarily inarticulate in its own praise, no troops who talked less and worked more gallantly.

## XVIII

### EAUCOURT L'ABBAYE AND LE SARS

It has already been said that on September 28 the rainy season definitely set in. Though for the first few days the rain was comparatively light, it was continuous and the air remained so thick that aeroplane observation was impossible, and operations of any kind were difficult. None the less, fighting of a loose character, but often very stubborn, continued through the last days of September and in the beginning of October, both in the region from Thiepval to Courcellette and to the east of these, in the country above Martinpuich and Flers towards Eaucourt l'Abbaye. Mention has already been made of the performances in this region of the New Zealanders and the English troops on their left, who were forcing their way up the German third main line and driving the enemy back on to his defences before Eaucourt l'Abbaye and Le Sars, in front of both of which villages the third line ran. The whole area, from Courcellette and north of Flers, the land gently sloping downwards to the valley at the bottom of which lay Warlencourt, was a region almost devoid of landmarks, but cut up everywhere by trench lines and with a number of sunken roads which lent themselves easily to defence. It was by sheer doggedness and determination that we broke our way across it.

There were very formidable positions just east of Courcellette on the Bapaume road. Some 1,500 yards further along the road towards Le Sars was D'Estremont Farm, which had been converted into a fortress, as had also an old quarry

just south of Eaucourt l'Abbaye. A series of extremely strong positions delayed us for some days, further to the east, where a shallow sunken road running north from High Wood crossed the German third line close to a tangle of fortified positions where that line was intersected by two trenches known as Drop Trench and Goose Alley, and formed a quadrilateral hardly less formidable than the more famous position of that name further east. Further to the north-east again was another formidable series of positions about what was known as Factory Corner. It is impossible here to describe in detail the operations by which these places, with all the intervening network of trenches and machine-gun posts, were successively carried. But by September 30 we had hammered our way to a position to attack the main lines in front of Eaucourt l'Abbaye and Le Sars. The attack was delivered at 3.30 in the afternoon of October 1, on a front of about 3,000 yards.

The main line trenches here were very formidable. The foremost trench was of old construction, dating from the same period as the main first and second lines, made nearly two years before when the whole system of defence of this region was planned. The second trench, fifty yards or so behind the first, was newer, having been dug immediately after the commencement of our offensive at the beginning of July. Together, with the usual German ingenuity in adapting angles of roads, shell craters and similar points into strong outlying machine-gun positions, they threatened to be very difficult to take. But we carried them with comparative ease at the first assault, over the whole front of the attack, except for a narrow stretch immediately before Eaucourt.

At this point, where there was a complication of defended roads, in addition to the defences of Eaucourt l'Abbaye itself, the centre of our attack was hung up. On the left, however, we carried the trenches across the front of and well beyond Le Sars, while on the right, the troops there, having taken the two trenches which were their objective, went on, of their own initiative, past the east side of Eaucourt l'Abbaye itself and established themselves on a line from the northernmost

corner of that place due east and west, connecting with our positions to the north-west of Factory Corner. They even captured and held positions further to the north, on the road to Le Barque and west of it.

On this extreme right of the attack the gain was from 1,250 to 1,500 yards. On the left, from D'Estremont Farm, it was about 500 yards. What was best was that the capture of the trenches was accomplished at comparatively small cost, very much less than the formidable character of the positions themselves justified us in expecting.

A very curious situation now arose, and continued for a day or two, at the point before Eaucourt l'Abbaye, where we were held up. Tanks were brought up to help and, with their assistance, our men broke through the trenches into Eaucourt itself. Apparently, however, they had only broken through on the right of the detaining section of trench, and the Germans still remained in possession of a narrow piece of the main trenches in front of the lower left hand side of Eaucourt l'Abbaye, as well as of various outlying positions of more or less strength beyond, especially one which was known as the Tangle. Though we had pushed round to the top of the place and outside and some of our men had gone through it, we had no consecutive line round it, but this gap on the left centre was always open. The situation was very confused and the enemy evidently misunderstood it.

A small party of Germans—some twenty or thirty men—came towards Eaucourt l'Abbaye across the open from the north. Some were killed and the rest taken prisoners. They said that they were coming to relieve other troops who ought to have been in the positions which we occupied. It appears that those troops must either have retired casually before their reliefs arrived (as has happened before) or they had bolted when our attack came. Anyhow, they had disappeared.

A second and larger party of the enemy came from the same direction, but seemed to lose its bearings and passed to the right, or east, side of Eaucourt where our troops on



that side were ready and willing to receive them. Both these detachments of Germans had come from the direction of the Butte de Warlencourt—an isolated hill or mound some fifty feet high about a mile to the north—and our guns proceeded to shell that region heavily.

By this time, however, the Germans seem to have arrived at an understanding of the situation and they counter-attacked in force through the gap in our line, of which I have already spoken, and again occupied the trenches before the place, while we continued to hold the positions on the further side, some of which were as much as 1,000 yards in the enemy's rear. This was the situation on the evening of October 2.

The next day we spent in strengthening our positions on the further side of Eaucourt and, as we drew the cordon round it tighter, subjecting it to a heavy bombardment. On October 4 we attacked again, drove the enemy out of the trenches to which he clung, filled up the gap and entered Eaucourt l'Abbaye in earnest.

Eaucourt l'Abbaye consisted of a small settlement clustered about an old religious establishment, which had evidently been of considerable size. The walled enclosure—though, of course, no walls were standing now—was a rough parallelogram, each of the sides being from 300 to 400 yards in length. Inside, besides the remnants of the main buildings, were the ruins of a number of smaller structures, constituting almost a hamlet. It possessed the usual vast cellars and had been elaborately fortified, both within the walls as well as with strong positions around it, especially on the northern side. That it fell as it did was a remarkable testimony to the ascendancy which our troops had now established over the enemy.

A great quantity of rain fell in the first five days of October. It was not until the 6th of the month that the weather cleared, and on the 7th we again struck and captured Le Sars. It was impossible for a spectator now to see the fighting along our advanced positions at close quarters, and I watched

only the bombardment, preceding the attack at two o'clock in the afternoon, from some distance away. Even so it was an impressive sight, for with the attack on Le Sars we pushed forward also at various points along the front, and the French upon our right attacked simultaneously.

The capture of Le Sars—our twenty-second village taken on the Somme—was another triumph for the hard fighting qualities of our infantry. The enemy was prepared for the attack and had massed troops to resist it. Le Sars itself was held by the 4th Ersatz Division, and the ground behind Eaucourt l'Abbaye by the 6th (Bavarian) Division, the two Divisions, both of four regiments, occupying a front of less than 3,000 yards. Three more Divisions, namely, the 15th, 18th Reserve and 5th Ersatz, were held in reserve based on Bapaume.

With the troops of the 4th Division in Le Sars our men had little difficulty. They said that the Germans fought better than some of their recent troops; but, on the other hand, I heard German prisoners say that our men fought "like devils," and they spoke of it, even reminiscently, with terror. We went straight through the village in an almost incredibly short time. At the first rush we reached and rested on a sunken road which ran across the village at about its middle. Then, as the *barrage* lifted, a second rush took us straight through the rest of the place and 500 yards or so beyond, on both sides of the Bapaume road.

With the Bavarians between Le Sars and Eaucourt our men had harder work. On the right, indeed, to the north-east of Eaucourt the Bavarian resistance crumbled, and we pushed out handsomely along the road to Le Barque. We pierced their line also at various points in the centre and on the left to positions nearly midway between Eaucourt and the Butte de Warlencourt. The ground immediately between Le Sars and Eaucourt, however, was extremely difficult, by reason of a complication of trenches, fortified positions and sunken roads, and because here it dipped into a hollow or gully which ran northward almost to the Butte,

from the neighbourhood of which it was scoured by machine-gun fire. The ground was already sodden and very heavy, and to attempt to establish a line across the gully under the fire from above must inevitably have been costly. Holding the higher ground on both sides, we had to be content temporarily to leave this dip as a gap in our front line, having it well commanded by posts at the lower end near the mill to the north of Eaucourt l'Abbaye.

On the left of Le Sars beyond the Bapaume road the Germans had thrown their Naval Division into the line, and they were severely punished in the attack on that section of the front. About 500 yards, on the average, in front of our positions in Hessian Trench the Germans had made and were holding in strength another long trench, practically parallel to Hessian, which the Canadians had named Regina Trench. We had already raided Regina Trench and broken into it at various points, but in the attack of October 4 we stormed and occupied it on its entire length.

On the right of our front we also pushed forward, in co-operation with the French, in the direction of Le Transloy. After having taken Morval we had turned that village over to the French, as it was desirable that they should hold it in connection with their operations against Sailly-Saillisel. The point of junction between the Allies was now therefore only a little to the east of Lesbœufs. In the region between here and Le Transloy the enemy had made a series of trenches, including as many as six more or less definite lines in advance of the main defences before Le Transloy itself, besides a number of isolated posts and fortified positions. The conformation of the ground, with certain undulations trending across the line of our advance, gave the enemy here and to the north-east of Gueudecourt a local advantage in positions. Owing to the increasing wetness of the ground, advance became very laborious, and much obstinate fighting was to continue here throughout the winter, in which individual trenches—sometimes hardly distinguishable among the shell holes in the mud—changed hands more than once. Of the ground which



we won in the attack of October 7, the Germans regained a portion by counter-attack. It was, however, a small thing compared with the general success of our advance, including the capture of Le Sars.

In the Thiepval neighbourhood, the Germans also delivered successive and heavy counter-attacks, which, however, made no impression on our lines and cost them heavily. The work of our artillery, both in the major bombardment preliminary to the general attack and in repelling and breaking up the counter-attacks, was at this period especially good. There had, indeed, been a continuous improvement in the performance of our gunners from the first day of the battle. They were called upon to work almost incessantly with very little respite, and no praise could be too high for them.

The Germans at this time had against the Allies on the Somme, on the north of the river alone, about 2,000 guns, equally divided between the region of the Ancre and the southern battle area. The field was divided into four sectors, of which the northernmost, or Serre—Miraumont sector, contained 432 guns, the Bapaume sector 574, the Le Transloy sector 404, and Péronne 660. The number of our guns is immaterial, but there was never a day when our artillery was not manifestly superior to theirs. Apart from the number or weight of pieces, our advantage in the air enabled us constantly to harry all movements behind the German lines and to worry their batteries to an extent which they never approached. An example of what the German artillery suffered from was the experience of a battery of the 13th Regiment of Artillery which, as we learned from a captured document, in the course of eight weeks fired 34,000 rounds and lost twenty-eight guns, eleven from overheating of the bore and seventeen knocked out by direct hits from English shells. Such an experience was quite beyond anything suffered by any battery on our side, though the audacity with which we pushed our guns up behind our infantry advance was entirely insolent.

It was nothing short of amazing that in so short a time we were able to produce Artillery on the scale that we did



and of the quality which our gunners showed themselves to possess. They surpassed anything which we could have dared to hope. What was comforting also was that, with some irregularities, our ammunition was probably on the whole as good as that of the Germans, while our guns generally lasted much better than we had any right to expect. There was, perhaps, no gun on the Somme of any calibre which was not called upon to fire more rounds than constituted in theory its normal life. Many fired, and with perfect accuracy, twice and even three times that number.

## XIX

### RAIN AND MUD

THE records of a hundred years are said to show that, in the valley of the Somme, October is the wettest month of the year. In October, 1916, five out of the first eight days of the month—that is, previous to the capture of Le Sars—had been wet. The earth, however, had been thirsty and capable of absorbing much moisture. Of the remaining twenty-three days of the month there were only seven in which no rain fell, while eleven were wholly wet; and this was followed by more or less rain on every one of the first nine days of November. Long before the end of this period was reached the earth had become saturated and could drink no more.

The volume of traffic behind the lines in a great battle such as this must in any case be enormous, and the keeping of roads in repair constitutes, under the most favourable conditions, a stupendous task. We, it must be remembered, had been steadily advancing for four months, and behind our battle line lay some five miles of ground over which the two armies had fought continuously. The whole area was trampled by marching and counter-marching feet and torn and pitted with shell holes. Photographs and descriptions have made the world familiar with the general aspect of the blasted region, where villages were battered into nothingness, and all that remained of patches of woodland were a few sparse tree trunks, riven and twisted, standing up from a wilderness of tumbled furrow and shell-crater and ruined trench. Photographs and descriptions, however, can give only a partial

idea of the reality. Under the continued rain the loose earth tossed up by the exploding shells melted to the consistency of gruel; the shell holes themselves, the hard subsoil packed by the impact of the projectiles, held water almost as if they had been lined with cement; wherever marching men or trains of horse-transport or of lorries passed, the surface of the earth was plashed to an inconceivable slush in which all the *débris* of battle was embedded. The difficulty of getting up the necessary ammunition and supplies, of moving men and guns, became prodigious. Immense energy was put into the making of new roads and the repair of old ones. A new organisation was charged with the pushing up of railways, both of normal gauge and light; and all this work had to be done more or less under shell fire. Any machine less than gigantic in its scope and admirable in its detail must have broken down.

For the enemy, falling back as he was, with abundant billets in villages yet undestroyed, on familiar ground so far unfought over, and with long-prepared and ever shortening lines of communication, the natural conditions were much less unfavourable than they were for us. Yet never for a day did we lose the mastery of him. Whatever natural advantages the Germans had, or ought to have had, they were outweighed by the superiority of our artillery, the pressure of which, aided by our aircraft, never slackened, and by the spirit of our men.

Any considerable advance or any operation on a grand scale along the greater part of the front, however, became impossible. Several cases were reported of horses, two or three miles behind the actual front line, being drowned in shell holes. The front line itself in many places was at first composed of connected shell holes hastily prepared for purposes of defence or of trenches newly and quickly dug in the soft mud, undrained, innocent of duck-board flooring and unprovided with shelter. In many of these the men had to stand always in water above their knees and not seldom up to their waists; and, as winter approached, the hardship

became very great. It required physical fitness merely to live in the trenches. To stay and hold them under shell fire was heroism. To attack from them almost impossible. In such operations as did take place, the men helped each other out of the waist-high water, over the parapets of mud, and attacked across a "ground" which at its solidest was quagmire, and for half of its surface standing water. Several times I talked with men, coated with mud from trench-helmet to boot-soles, who had only escaped drowning in some shell hole in No Man's Land because their comrades had pulled them out. Some men, otherwise unhurt, are known to have been drowned and undoubtedly many wounded must have died so.

The subsoil in much of the battle area was chalk and the mud had a dreadful glutinous quality, making it cling so tenaciously that it was common for men going about their daily affairs to pull their feet out of their boots. A well authenticated instance is known of an officer leaving behind him in the mud, not only his boots and stockings, but his breeches. Scotsmen found their kilts particularly easy to part with. In a certain minor attack a whole party of our men, some seven or eight in number, arrived at the enemy's trench barefoot, without a boot or sock among them.

People at home, when they read that the weather had brought operations to a standstill, had no conception of what the words meant; nor was it possible immediately to remedy the difficulties, for it would have been useless to endeavour to improve the front line trenches until those in the "back area" had been drained and duck-boarded and given proper shelters, so that, in relief, the men could at least come back to comparatively decent conditions. It was necessary to work from the rear forwards, through the communication, reserve, support and assembly trenches to the front line, and this took time.

As the weeks passed the likelihood of another grand advance along the whole line, which would have carried us up the opposing slope before Bapaume, became less and less. By



local operations here and there we continued to manœuvre ourselves into a more favourable situation for such a blow as soon as the conditions might make it possible. We seldom had any difficulty in winning any piece of trench which we attacked ; but even in dry weather it has been said that advance consists "one-tenth in winning a trench and nine-tenths in holding it." The difficulty of holding now was increased a hundred-fold. Our men must, in any case, reach their objective thoroughly exhausted with the mere physical labour of getting through the mud. In the soft and melting earth no trench, after our bombardment and attack, however it might have been parapeted and sand-bagged against our advance, offered any protection against enemy fire or attack from the rear. More than once, after a successful advance, it was impossible to retain the position won, where, in the expanse of mud, there was no shelter from shell fire or even from machine-gun and rifle sniping.

On all the front, from the Butte of Warlencourt to our junction with the French by Morval, there was, then, during the month from the capture of Le Sars to the end of the first week of November, little change in position, though we slowly edged our way nearer to the German fourth line. Especially we pushed up on to the local high ground before Le Transloy. By a general thrust forward on October 12 on the front from Gueudecourt to the Bapaume road we advanced our line considerably and made 150 prisoners. In this affair the Newfoundlanders came into action for the second time on the Somme, and they revenged themselves for their losses of July 1. They suffered rather heavily by shell fire while waiting to attack. They then went magnificently over 400 yards of open to the enemy's trench, which they cleared out with the bayonet. Afterwards, the troops on their left being held up, they spread out, bombing their way along the trenches, over what should have been the front of two battalions and, in much inferior force, repelled successive counter-attacks with the greatest coolness and gallantry. Officers with whom I talked afterwards spoke of the magnificent behaviour of every

man of the battalion, and told how a sergeant had single-handedly bombed a machine-gun crew and captured the gun, and how a corporal, also alone, had secured the surrender of a similar unit by threatening to bomb any man who moved. On the whole front of the attack there was evidence in the number of German dead in the trenches of the effectiveness of our artillery fire; and apparently a relief was in progress in part of the line at the moment of our advance.

A similar thrust followed on October 18, when a Tank was usefully employed, and we took 100 prisoners; and another on October 23, when we captured what was officially estimated to be about 1,000 yards of trench with sixty prisoners, partly from the 64th Brandenburgers, who were the captors of Douaumont, and partly from the 2nd Bavarian Division, which had taken Vaux Fort. The region in which the fighting took place was a dreadful wilderness of mud. On the spur or fold in the ground which ran transversely across the line of our advance, the enemy had, as has been said, a local superiority in position. Everywhere he had seamed the earth with a maze of trenches, to which we had given meteorological names—Hazy Trench and Misty, Sleet, Frosty, Zenith, Orion, Dewdrop, Spectrum, and the like. It would be useless to describe the individual operations in detail. Around some of these trenches—as, notably, Hazy and Misty Trenches—prolonged and severe struggles took place; but in general, though more than once we were unable to keep immediate possession of what we had won, for the Germans fought here stubbornly, we slowly forced our way through the slimy labyrinth of trench and shell hole until the greater part of the high ground of the spur was in our possession.

An illustration of the extraordinary character of the fighting which went on here was the capture of Zenith Trench on November 2. An officer went out from our lines to reconnoitre, and surprised everybody by coming back hauling a German machine gun. He had crawled up to the trench, found it tenanted chiefly by men asleep, and had actually gone in and stolen a machine gun from under the noses—presumably,

snoring—of the enemy. His accounts were so encouraging that it was decided to take the trench at once. Arrangements were quickly made, and, without any preliminary bombardment to wake the slumbering, we rushed Zenith Trench. So satisfactorily was it done that our total casualties in making the attack were only twelve in number. The enemy, when he found what we had done, began counter-attacking at once. He delivered four distinct attacks in rapid succession, and the net result was that we held the trench, with over thirty prisoners and four machine guns, while more than 100 dead Germans were visible in the country over which the enemy attacked.

Four days later some Worcesters, attacking from Zenith rushed and captured two other trenches in a very dashing attack with bombs.

The conditions of the fighting now were very different from those which had prevailed in the earlier days of the battle. Then we had generally presented to us for attack a definite objective in a formal line of trenches or fortifications carefully prepared in the course of preceding months. Learning by experience, we had so perfected the formula of our attack, by increase in the volume of the bombardment and suddenness of assault, that no such objective had any longer great terrors for us. No machine gun could live above ground during the bombardment, or, if sheltered, could emerge and get into action, after the bombardment moved away, before our infantry was upon it.

In the country where we were now fighting the enemy had no such long-prepared defences, but a multitude of more or less hastily made trenches, which gave only imperfect shelter. To put into the foremost of these any very large number of men would have been only to give them as hostages to be massacred by our bombardment. The foremost German trenches, therefore, were now generally held in comparatively small strength, larger forces being in reserve in the nearest positions where they could reasonably expect to escape our preliminary shelling, in order to counter-attack as speedily as possible.



It was towards the end of September that I heard one of our Divisional Commanders say that, like Napoleon's fifth element in Poland—mud—the extra element in Picardy was shell holes. The extent to which the *terrain* was gouged out with shell holes, until it was all ridge and hollow, immensely modified all the circumstances of attack. Apart from the difficulties of advancing over the ground, especially in muddy weather, and of keeping touch and direction, every shell hole was a potential fortress, being easily adapted to the use of a machine-gun position. Evidently, also, in the case of a hurricane bombardment, guns in outlying shell holes at unexpected places were more likely to escape destruction than those in the formal trenches against which the bombardment was directed. It is needless to say that the enemy did not have a monopoly of the utilisation of shell holes. But they plainly lent themselves more readily to the purposes of defence than to attack; and they introduced an almost guerrilla quality into the local fighting which made progress necessarily more slow and the process of advance even more methodical than ever.

Both sides had also developed the use of machine guns for purposes of *barrage*. In the summer, the Germans ordinarily met our attacks with a triple *barrage*, on our front line and before it, on the support trenches and on the communication lines behind. This, later, they supplemented (and even superseded) with a machine-gun *barrage* which, from the beginning of our preliminary bombardment, sprayed the whole of No Man's Land and our front line, in the hope of checking our first attack. It was never very effective. Meanwhile we took to placing, as an auxiliary to the work of our artillery, a heavy machine-gun *barrage*, over the heads of our men as they attacked and occupied the enemy front line, on the positions beyond and the grounds over which a counter-attack would have to be delivered.

It was under such a complication of fire and counter-fire, in an expanse of mud where mere movement was difficult and speedy movement impossible, amid the blind wilderness



of shell holes where the enemy might be lurking anywhere and at any angle, that our men, during October and November, fought their way—sometimes snatching and winning a new section of trench and sometimes seizing but failing to hold it—to within striking distance of the German line before Le Transloy and Le Barque and Ligny-Thillois. To the west of here, above Le Sars and Eaucourt l'Abbaye, we were checked by the extremely strong position about the Butte de Warlencourt.

The Butte is a mound or tumulus, of the origin of which it is difficult to get any information. Doubtless its history must be well known, but books upon the antiquities of Picardy give no enlightenment, and inquiries, by other correspondents as well as myself, in various likely directions were fruitless. We could look at the Butte through our glasses and watch its process of gradual disintegration under the fire of our guns, till its sides, from being green turned to brown, and then became patched with white where the outer earth was beaten away and the chalk below showed through. Inside it, we were told, were great chambers; and somewhere in these it seemed that machine guns and gunners managed to survive our bombardments. Twice, at least, before the middle of November our men reached the Butte, but were unable to hold their positions.

There had been hard desultory fighting here at intervals in October, in which the South Africans and troops of the Royal Scots did very gallantly. On November 5 some men of the Durhams charged over the ground up to and past the Butte on the west side and, flowing round it, encircled it on the north. At least one machine gun, however, appears to have continued to be active from inside the tumulus itself, and the ground around it was enfiladed from both sides. We intercepted a German order to attack and retake the ground and hold it at all costs. Supports could not be got up over the intermediate space swept by artillery and machine-gun fire and, after pluckily repelling successive attacks, the Durhams were compelled to fall back to this side of the Butte. It was an

extremely gallant performance and, if troops on the right could have got up, the place could undoubtedly have been held.

At present the Butte still stands, sorely battered and in itself of little importance, but a useful outpost of and protection to the German lines behind it, from which the ground around it, as well as the hollow running south and westward into our positions, is commanded by rifles, machine guns and artillery of all sorts.

While we were thus hampered and held stationary by the mud over the greater part of the front, on the extreme left, about the Ancre, above Thiepval, our positions ran along the summit of the ridge, whence the slope dipped steeply down to the river valley. Here the ground was better drained and drier; and savage fighting raged about the Schwaben and Stuff Redoubts. Orders which we captured at this time told of the supreme importance which the German Higher Command attached to the retention of their positions on the edges of these redoubts where they still commanded the mouth of the valley. It was only by sustained and relentless pressure and by sheer hard fighting that we drove them back almost yard by yard, although the German troops fought—as always now—with curious inequality.

In a minor but very successful attack on October 8 and 9 we took a number of prisoners of the 110th and 111th Regiments which had formerly fought at La Boisselle. The new men were conspicuously inferior to those whom we had taken from the same regiments on the former occasion.

An even more successful operation took place on October 12 at these same places. The Schwaben Redoubt was about 1,000 yards to the north of Thiepval, and consists of a maze of trenches and strong points covering an area of nearly 700 yards in its longest diameter. We had for some time been in possession of the greater part of this labyrinth, but the enemy had clung to the northern fringe with certain formidably entrenched positions beyond. This northern fringe was, if only by a few feet, the highest point

of the Redoubt. From it the Germans could—so far as we would let them—still overlook us. Beyond, the ground began to dip almost immediately down to the Ancre, and the enemy had been able to bring up reinforcements and supplies from the valley below. Of late this had been extremely precarious work, for his main channel was by a trench, known as Strassburg Trench, which was under direct fire from our positions above Hamel across the valley on the left. Strassburg Trench had been almost obliterated, and even at night it had been costly work for the enemy to feed his posts at the top of the slope. None the less, the Germans were evidently succeeding in bringing supplies and reinforcements to their men above, but it was not until after the capture of St. Pierre Divion that we discovered that from that place, on the floor-level of the Ancre Valley below, long tunnels ran back into the hill, from which there was access to the communication trenches above.

How strongly the positions were held was shown by the fact that in this attack of October 12 two of our battalions, one of the Worcesters and one of the Black Watch, took, after short but severe fighting, over 250 prisoners. On the left of the Redoubt itself we pushed our front forward a distance of some 300 yards farther up along the old German first line, and enough additional prisoners came from here to bring the total up to rather over 300. They belonged, again, largely to the 110th Regiment.

Stuff Redoubt, which was of smaller extent, lay something over 1,000 yards to the right, or eastward; and here, again, while we had been in possession of the area known specifically as the Redoubt, there were certain other strongholds about what was known as The Mounds, a couple of hundred yards or so beyond. This point, again, was close to the edge of the dip to the river, and the Germans had had channels of communication through a double line of trench and a sunken road running down to Grandcourt.

A short but very fierce preliminary bombardment had cut the wire everywhere and our men cleared the country beyond



the Redoubt as far as The Mounds at a single rush with the bayonet; and so complete and economical was the success that one company of the North Lancashires captured 100 prisoners at the cost of a total casualty list of 35.

So loth was the enemy to permit our advance here that in the course of twenty days, before, during and after these two operations just mentioned, no less than eleven separate counter-attacks in strength were flung against our lines. They gained nothing. Where they were not broken by our artillery they were stopped by the infantry before reaching our positions. If, as in a few cases, they broke into a trench at any point, they were promptly thrown out again. In the aggregate the German losses in these useless attacks must have been very heavy. On October 21 we replied to them.

On several occasions, it has been said, in the course of the Battle of the Somme the Germans selected the moment when we had all preparations ready for a new advance to throw one of their heaviest counter-attacks against us. This was so on the night of October 20 and in the early morning of October 21.

Whether the enemy was aware of our intention and hoped to break up our attack before it was delivered, or whether it was but an accident, it is impossible to say. But now, as in each other case, the result was distinctly favourable for us. A few fine days had made the surface of the ground on the summit reasonably dry and we had decided to attack on the morning of October 21, to drive the enemy from his last foothold on the edge of the Schwaben Redoubt and also, if possible, to capture the long line of trench—known, first, as Stuff (or Stauffen) Trench and, on its right hand or easterly extension, as Regina Trench—reaching from the Redoubt eastward to a point north of Courcelette. The operation meant an advance on a front of nearly 5,000 yards to an average depth of about 500 yards.

In the course of the night of October 20 the enemy attacked the Schwaben Redoubt and our positions on both



sides of it in strength. The attack was stopped before reaching our trenches. Early in the morning he attacked again in greater strength and with more determination. At a few points he penetrated our line, but everywhere he was driven out again, or the parties which had entered our trenches were killed or taken prisoner. A few hours later, our own attack was launched in accordance with the original programme and was brilliantly successful everywhere.

The outstanding feature of the operation was the number of prisoners which we took, and the readiness with which they surrendered. In places the Germans came pouring from their trenches long before our infantry reached them, and the extraordinary spectacle was seen of the two waves of men advancing to meet one another in No Man's Land, our men going forward with fixed bayonets and the Germans trotting to meet them with their hands in the air. Our ranks opened to let them through (as in a figure in the Lancers), and while we went on to occupy the German trenches streams of Germans passed back over our trenches to the rear. In all 1,080 of the enemy with 16 officers surrendered, either to the English troops on the left of the attack or to the Canadians on the right.

There were places where the enemy did not surrender, but, while some fought and were killed or captured, others hid in their dug-outs and shell holes until our first wave had passed and then attacked our soldiers in the rear. We, however, had learned wisdom since the opening day of the Somme battle, and our attacks were now always delivered in a number of successive waves, one close behind the other; and any Germans emerging in the rear of the first wave were satisfactorily cared for by those who followed after.

The operation, as has been said, was brilliantly successful, and our casualties were so few in proportion to the number of prisoners taken and the length of trench won, that it ranked amongst the most economical of the whole battle.

The short spell of fine weather ended on October 23 and

in the next fortnight there were only two stretches of twenty-four hours continuously without rain. At times the rain was very heavy and accompanied by fierce gales. It was not until November 9 and 10 that a temporary improvement again permitted us to attack effectively, which we did in the darkness of the early hours of the morning of November 11, when the Canadians, on a front of about 1,000 yards, on the right of the ground covered by the last advance, pushed forward to a depth in places of 450 yards, carrying our front here to a level with the east end of Regina Trench.

At that point, between the end of Regina Trench and our positions above Le Sars, there had been a nest of German positions along an old farm track—known as Farmer's Road—and the larger road, here sunken, which ran from Courcellette to Warlencourt. A local rise or swelling in the ground, with certain ditches, and a chalk pit farther back, made the position difficult; while the fact that the ground did swell there made it desirable that we should hold it.

The attack of November 11 was preceded by a bombardment almost as fierce, though on a comparatively narrow front, as any in this battle. The Canadians reported that it was admirably effective, trenches and positions being almost swept out of existence, and the place littered with German dead. The ground was very heavy for an attack, but behind our *barrage* the Canadians got over with comparatively few losses. The line was held partly by troops of the Prussian Guard and partly by Saxons, and the 70 prisoners taken came from both in nearly equal numbers. Farmer's Road now became an easterly extension of Regina Trench, an unpleasant interruption to our line had been removed, and we were now at this point close upon the German fourth main line which ran immediately in front of Pys and Warlencourt. Unfortunately the weather, which had promised well for the two days, broke again that same evening. Any attempt to go over the low ground in which the village of Warlencourt lay would have been hopeless.

We seemed, therefore, to have reached a line from which, in the absence of a long spell of frost or dry weather, further progress was likely to be impossible for a long time. The dramatic events which followed so suddenly were, I believe, as unexpected by the Army in general as they were by the outside world.

## XX

### BEAUMONT HAMEL AND THE ANCRE

IN the first week of November German military critics were openly rejoicing that any further progress by the Allies on the Somme was impossible. "Let the French and English go on sacrificing the youth of their countries. They will not thereby achieve anything more." On November 13 and 14, by the most unexpected and, perhaps, most brilliant stroke of the battle, we captured Beaumont Hamel, St. Pierre Divion and Beaucourt, with some 7,000 prisoners. The fall of Thiepval cannot have been a more bitter disappointment to the German Higher Command or the German people.

The attack, which was delivered at 6 o'clock in the morning, when it was still almost entirely dark, was kept so secret that not even the war correspondents knew that it was coming; for it had been the custom of General Headquarters to inform us on the eve of any important movement, so that we might make our plans accordingly.

We had, indeed, been aware that everything was in readiness for a renewed attempt on the section of the German front where we had failed on July 1, from the Ancre northward as far as before Serre; but such an attempt, it was anticipated, would be made as part of a general attack along the whole line. In company with the German critics we had unwisely supposed that because two-thirds of the front was held stationary by the mud, the remainder must be stationary also.



From certain artillery observation posts and other points of vantage we had looked across at Beaumont Hamel many times. I had seen it when it was still a real village, half hidden in trees, straggling into view round the crest of the green hill in which it lay. I had seen it again immediately before the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, when it had already endured some thirty-six hours of concentrated bombardment and was a village no longer, but only a tumbled heap of ruins exposed in all their nakedness through the bare stems of the trees which two days before had been covered with leaves. So it had remained, growing less and less of a village, but with the barbed wire entanglements before it, repaired and increased since the attack of July 1, so dense and wide that, coated with rust, they looked like a broad belt of red ploughed land between us and the enemy. The superstructure of the village, moreover, was of no importance. Its strength lay in its situation, in a fold of the slope just behind the summit where it rose from the Ancre, and in its old caves which were in effect subterranean barracks impervious to shell fire. We knew the extent of these caves, for our Army had plans of them; but we could only guess how they had been improved and how far the hill had been honeycombed with more recent dug-outs.

The French, with all their gallantry, had failed to take Beaumont Hamel in the old days; and it was its strength, with its command of the Ancre valley and opposing slopes, which had made useless the splendid valour of the Ulster troops on the first day of the battle. There was no likelihood that we should underestimate the formidable character of the fortress, and the enemy evidently was free from apprehension. In spite of the lesson of Thiepval, the Germans still believed Beaumont Hamel impregnable. Each of the two opposing slopes of the Ancre valley, moreover, so commanded the other that, if Beaumont Hamel was held by the enemy, it rendered almost equally impregnable the southern side of the valley where St. Pierre Divion lay.

The valley here is only some 500 yards across; and when

the Ulster troops in July attacked up the south side of the Ancre, it was the fire of machine guns from the opposing slope that made all their gallantry unavailing. To non-expert onlookers, like myself, it had seemed evident that advance from our positions above Schwaben Redoubt, down one slope of the Ancre valley, was humanly impossible while the other face was held by the enemy and full of his machine guns, like wasps' nests in a bank. But to smoke the wasps' nests out, one had first to take Beaumont Hamel, and that, from our own experience, as from that of the French before us, seemed equally impossible.

But we played for a great *coup*, and won. Attacking simultaneously northward, down the nearer slope, and eastward, directly against the face of the main German line before Beaumont Hamel, we stormed and seized the whole position at once. It was an extraordinary triumph, and so difficult and confused was the fighting that, though the attack was delivered at 6 o'clock in the morning, the official *communiqué* of 9.50 that night did not venture to claim more than that "the strongly fortified position of St. Pierre Divion is in our hands." No mention was made of Beaumont Hamel.

We correspondents had a distracting time. At the first tidings of the fight we hurried to the various headquarters of the troops engaged and went to meet the wounded coming down and to see and speak to prisoners. The latter, who came in astonishing numbers, talked all in a tone of deep dejection. First there had been the terrific shell fire, from which they had sheltered crouching in trench or tunnel or dug-out. Then, before the shells had ceased, the English were upon them and amongst them with bomb and bayonet; and no alternative offered but surrender.

The wounded, on the other hand, all had tales of triumph, and spoke, whatever their individual suffering and disappointment might be, with that elation which, one had learned, was the surest of all evidence of victory. Wounded Highlanders and men of the Naval Division, Riflemen, Somersets,

Royal Fusiliers and Warwicks, whatever their regiment, tired and inconceivably muddy, with bandaged head or arm, limping in or carried on a stretcher, all alike were sure that we had won. Often with only the vaguest notion of where they had fought, hopelessly astray in their topography, all alike were confident that where our men had meant to go, there they had gone—gone leaving trench and shell hole full of dead Germans and sending back prisoners innumerable.

All alike, also, had tales of the enemy pouring from his dug-outs after we had passed; of enfilade fire from trenches in their rear; of blind fighting with Germans on every hand. Many strong positions of the enemy we knew had held out long after our first attacking waves had swept beyond them and, though we certainly had overrun not only Beaumont Hamel itself, but all the country—hillside and valley alike—as far as Beaucourt, all indications pointed to there being many more Germans still unsundered on the battlefield than there were British soldiers in that gallant front line out beyond them. So the official *communiqué* spoke warily and, while all the correspondents wrote the tale of triumph as we had pieced it together from one source or another, each of us also accompanied his message with a private warning against its publication until confirmed or modified by later telegrams.

Happily, misgivings proved superfluous. By the next evening we knew for certain that all the ground was ours and the last enemy stronghold had been reduced. Not only both sides of the Ancre valley were in our hands, with Beaumont Hamel and St. Pierre Divion, but Beaucourt as well. The prisoners, who had numbered 3,300 on the first day, had increased to 6,000, and were destined to exceed even that figure by another 1,000. The Germans from Berlin officially confessed defeat, and announced that they had "fallen back to other positions in the rear which had been prepared in advance." This was untrue. They did not fall back; because no men on the ground, except those



wounded early in the attack, were left to do so. The 7,000 prisoners represented a total German casualty list of nearly 30,000. We had killed, wounded and taken prisoner the entire strength of the garrison of every trench and stronghold and dug-out in the captured territory. Victory could not have been more complete.

Yes, victory could not have been more complete—except in one particular. The attack had extended over a front of about 8,000 yards, of which some 5,000 yards were in the north of the Ancre, extending as far as to just beyond Serre. On the northern 2,000 yards the ground was extremely muddy, and here we did not succeed. The extreme left of our attack, indeed—that is the northernmost troops of all—broke through the successive enemy lines and swept all before them; and here some men of the Shropshires did magnificently. The troops immediately below them, however, on their right, hampered by the soft ground, had found it impossible to get on, so the northernmost Division, having held throughout the day the advanced line which it had won, fell back at night to its original position.

This, however, was a small matter compared with the larger triumph. We had dealt German military prestige the most humiliating individual blow, perhaps, which it had ever suffered, capturing a fortress boasted to be impregnable and taking 7,000 prisoners—a number then almost incredible in trench warfare on so narrow a front, though even this extraordinary figure was eclipsed later by the French. We had grasped the whole of the Ancre valley, and had done it all at an exceedingly cheap cost, as the cost of such things is reckoned. Even the Division which, labouring in the mud, had failed to break the German first line and might have been expected to suffer terribly, had barely 900 casualties.

On the north of the Ancre the victorious troops were chiefly Highlanders and the Royal Naval Division, the former taking Beaumont Hamel itself and the latter Beaucourt and the slope of the Ancre valley.



The Scots, who had done most gallant fighting in the High Wood and Switch Line area at the end of July, had confronting them here as they attacked, slightly to the right of their centre, a formidable obstacle in the so-called "Y" Ravine, a great gash in the earth some 700 or 800 yards in total length. It was shaped like a great "Y" lying on its side, the prongs or top of the letter projecting down to the German front line and the stem running back into the hinterland connecting with the road through the dip which goes from Beaumont Hamel, on the north, to the Ancre. At its western end—the forked end projecting down to the front—the chasm was thirty feet and more in depth, with sides so precipitous that in spots they actually overhung. Down below, from this thirty feet level, the Germans had burrowed into the sides of the earth and dug their lairs to a lower level still. Not only were these retreats impervious to any kind of shell fire, but the steepness of the sides of the nullah protected even the entrances, which were traversed so as to be unreachable. Some of the great caves here hollowed out were big enough to shelter a battalion and a half of men in absolute security.

Besides all this, the careful German had dug a tunnel back from the forward end of the ravine to his own fourth line in the rear. We did not know that until later; but there seems to be no doubt that, until even that fourth line was in our hands, reinforcements were coming into the ravine while we were besieging it. Altogether it was almost as formidable a position for defence as can be imagined.

Our attack, as has been said, was delivered at 6 o'clock in the morning, while it was yet dark; and the darkness, while it rendered it very difficult for our men to keep touch and direction, doubtless on the other hand contributed to make the attack a surprise. As usual, our artillery bombardment was admirable. There was only one spot on all the front which the Highlanders attacked at which the elaborate wire defences were not swept out of being, not only before the front trench, but before each successive line beyond.

While the abysmal shelters of the ravine were little damaged, all the ordinary trenches and positions were battered to pieces, so that one of our chief inconveniences for many days afterwards was that we could not find the mouths of dug-outs. But if it was an inconvenience to us, it must have been something considerably more to any of the enemy who remained inside.

Behind this devastating fire the Scottish troops broke over the German defences without a check on all their front, except only immediately before the ends of the "Y" Ravine. Below this narrow point, on the south, they went forward, with the Naval Division keeping step on their right, across the first and second lines to the third line. This was very strongly held, and here there was stern fighting, but the Scotsmen had no intention of being stopped, and when they went on it was to leave behind them a trench full of German dead.

On the other, or north, side of the ravine, our men broke over the first and second lines almost as easily; but from here on there was savage fighting, in all sorts of scattered positions and among shell holes, before the third line was reached. It was reached, however, and from both sides we attacked the ravine with bombs. The first breach in it was made at a point just behind the fork of the "Y," and down the precipitous sides our men tumbled, bayonet in hand. On both sides of them the chasm was full of Germans, and there was for a while as stubborn a struggle down there, with bombing and bayoneting and grappling hand-to-hand, as the battle has seen.

While it was still in progress, our men down in the ravine not only holding their own, but slowly forcing the enemy back on either hand, a new frontal attack was delivered from No Man's Land against the narrow bit of the front line still unbroken at the forward end of the "Y." The Germans at that end, who had so far been pinching the Scots against the other Germans beyond, now found themselves in turn attacked on two sides. As they turned to repel the frontal

attack, the men in the ravine behind them surged forward. Meanwhile, farther up the "Y," other parties of our men had broken into the ravine, and there followed a spell of indescribable confusion. It was short, however. It was the kind of gruelling which the Germans have never yet been able to stand, and, first singly, and then in blocks, they threw down their arms and surrendered.

Even after the mass had surrendered, there still remained the dug-outs and the tunnel to be dealt with; and it was then that an enterprising Scots private who had lived in Germany found his opportunity. A German officer surrendered to him; but the private was too canny to take him back quietly and turn him over. Instead, he led him along the ravine to a suspected dug-out, and bade the officer put his head into the entrance and order the men inside—if any there were—to come out. The officer thundered his order—and out came fifty tame Germans.

While this struggle for the ravine was going on, the other Highlanders higher up had swarmed over the German lines and into the dip of the hill where Beaumont Hamel lay; and before midday we were in possession of the site of the village—and the mouths, at least, of all the subterranean hiding places with which it was underlaid. In such a place all units of troops inevitably get broken up, and it became a true soldier's fight, where every man was almost "on his own" and the most extraordinary incidents took place.

At one spot a Scots lieutenant had penetrated far back through the German lines, stopping burrows as he went and dropping men to hold the bits of trenches. When he reached his last trench line he had only two men left; and these he posted in the trench while he investigated dug-outs. In one dug-out he found a Battalion Commander—a Uhlan—and his staff, and called on them to surrender, which they did. On some pretext they went into an inner chamber of the dug-out and he went with them. By this time it had dawned on the Germans that their captor was alone, so they turned to him and said that instead of being his prisoners,



it looked to them that he must call himself theirs. He was forced to agree. Happily, there was a man below with a periscope, and, while the German officers were still enjoying the way in which they had turned the tables on their captor, he announced that the Scots were all round them up above and that it was useless to resist. "So," said the lieutenant, "I think I'll be the gaoler again and you can be the prisoners." And once more they surrendered, and he marched them out in triumph.

At another place a man of the Signals Corps was running telephone lines up (as they do while fighting is going on), and he had just reached his goal in a captured German trench when he was hit and collapsed at the mouth of a dug-out. As he did so a German officer came up from the depths below, and "Signals" could see that there were more behind. He pulled himself together and called on the first man to surrender. The German promptly did so. With what strength he had left the Scotsman then telephoned back over the line which he had just laid and explained the situation. Then he stood guard over the German in the doorway, keeping the others blocked behind, until help came up.

Altogether the Highlanders' performance was a fine piece of fighting, done with magnificent determination and in perfect temper. The Division took 1,400 prisoners and 54 machine guns, with an incalculable amount of miscellaneous booty, in the caverns and dug-outs of Beaumont Hamel and the ravine.

The front on which the naval troops attacked was the stretch from just below the "Y" Ravine, on the south of Beaumont Hamel, to the north side of the Ancre. The preliminary bombardment had here again swept wide swathes in the dense barbed-wire entanglements which protected the enemy front line, and, immediately behind the storm of our bursting shells, the men went through that first line everywhere as if it had been a barrier of paper.

Their extreme right rested on the Ancre, and it went with a rush across the level of the valley bottom. As the ground



rose northward, the centre of the line had to attack diagonally along the slope of the hill, the extreme left being on the highest ground. About a third of the way along, just at the top of the slope, some 500 yards from the Ancre, there was a German redoubt, or strong point, so hidden by the curve of the slope as to be invisible from in front, composed of a triangle of three deep pits with concrete emplacements for machine guns, which could fire almost flush with the surface of the ground and sweep the slope in all directions.

The German main first line consisted essentially of three chief parallel trenches, at intervals of fifty or seventy-five yards, with numerous intermediate and interlacing trenches and strong points. The redoubt was situated immediately behind the front trench, reaching back to and resting on the second. Our men everywhere stormed over the front trench. On the right they went straight on, along the valley bottom and the lower part of the slope, pushing as our *barrage* lifted, and carrying line after line of trench, rushing many minor positions, on to the dip along which runs across their front the sunken road, going up from the Ancre to Beaumont Hamel.

On this road they rested while other troops—still of the Naval Division—came up and went through them, up the opposing slope of the dip, till they had won a line beyond. Then, the first line catching up with these again, they all swept on together up to the very edge of Beaucourt. It was a magnificent charge, covering a good 1,500 yards straight ahead. The charge, according to the statement of the men themselves, was led throughout and received its inspiration from the Commanding Officer of the Hood Battalion, Lieut.-Col. C. B. Freyberg, who had been wounded at the very outset, in crossing No Man's Land in the early morning.

While the extreme right of the line was doing thus gloriously, the right centre was held up by the redoubt, and if the machine guns in the redoubt checked the troops immediately in front of them, even more did they sweep the ground along the face of the slope to the left. Here were other

troops of the Royal Naval Division and some Royal Marines. They suffered badly from the machine guns, which poured a stream of lead across the rising ground, but nothing stopped them. They won the first and second trenches, and then, as on the right, supports came up, and, breasting the machine-gun fire, here, as on the farther right, they pushed straight on across the dip and sunken road and up the slope towards Beaucourt.

Arrived there, all troops made junction, and a line was formed on the Beaucourt—Beaumont Hamel road. But behind this line, made by union of the extreme left-hand and right-hand troops, the centre was hung up by the redoubt, and in the intermediate space behind our advanced positions the Germans, in strength, still held the central parts of trenches over the two ends of which we had swept. The redoubt remained intact, and various other positions were still in the enemy's hands. We had our one thin line far out in front, but behind it, between it and the place from which it had started, were, as has been said above, undoubtedly many more Germans than there were British soldiers.

That evening, going along our advanced positions and gathering what men he could, Col. Freyberg found that he had about 600 men whom he could use for an advance. This did not include those in the machine-gun positions established in the most advanced line reached, nor those who had been detached at various points on the advance to clean out and hold the trenches and dug-outs which had been passed and left behind. It was in getting these men together during the night that he received his second wound.

At the first sign of dawn, at 6 o'clock, with the men whom he had got together, he went on again against the village of Beaucourt. There was something less than a quarter of an hour of hand-to-hand fighting; and then the village was ours, or what remained of it, which was only the usual area of battered masonry with a few rugged stubs of walls striking out from the face of the slope against which the

village had been built. When daylight came our men were safely digging in on the farther side of Beaucourt, and then it was that, with four wounds in him now, the gallant officer had to be taken back. There is seldom a case in war where success seems to have been so clearly due to one man's personality, as by common consent among the men of the Division it was pronounced to have been here, and the Victoria Cross which rewarded his gallantry was undoubtedly well earned.

Just at the time when the capture of Beaucourt was accomplished we also completed the reduction of the redoubt in the rear. In the darkness of 3 o'clock in the morning a Tank advanced as far as the enemy's front-line trench. Unable to reach advantageously the redoubt, in the position in which it lay, the crew of the Tank climbed out of the fortress with their machine guns and proceeded to train them upon the redoubt at a range of fifty yards or so. The spectacle was more than the garrison of the redoubt could stand; and before the machine guns had opened fire from their new position a white flag was hoisted out of the depths of the earth and the redoubt surrendered. It contained 360 unwounded men.

This was at 6 o'clock, and with the capitulation of the redoubt the centre was able to push on, and the men went forward gaily, cleaning out the trenches and minor positions which still remained full of Germans. In all, in the two days' fighting the Division took 1,725 prisoners. They had advanced nearly 2,000 yards on their entire front of about 1,200 yards, and on the whole of that front they had broken through and captured the vaunted defences of the German first line and, with the ground, they had taken the village of Beaucourt.

In such an operation as this many men do deeds which deserve to be sung almost as much as those of the intrepid Commanding Officer of the Hoods. An officer of a trench-mortar battery led the Tank into action against the redoubt. It was not strictly his business, but he "knew

the road" (having been putting mortars into the beastly place for half a day), and did most gallantly a service of great danger. There was also a chaplain of the Dublin Fusiliers, in support on the farther left, who, most insubordinately, went over the parapets with his men—unarmed save for a huge enthusiasm and his fear of God—and then made a hobby of gathering prisoners, as if he were forming a collection of them. He went fearlessly and unscathed about the open and wheedled the cowering Germans out of shell holes and hiding places, talking gently to them in his Irish way, and leading them back to where they would be safer. The Highlanders complained that many of the prisoners whom he thus shepherded home belonged to them.

Wonderful tales one heard—as wonderful as were told after every big fight—of the pluck of the stretcher-bearers and runners, especially of those of the latter who tried to take messages back from the neighbourhood of the "Y" Ravine while that stronghold was still in German occupation and its garrison could snipe anyone who moved on No Man's Land. Equally wonderful were the stories of the *sangfroid* of the men of all ranks. In the ravine was found a huge ration store, with immense quantities of tinned meat and other things, and in the dug-outs of officers were cigars and such alluring trifles. There were reliable accounts of soldiers who went about their later work, even bayonet fighting, with big German cigars in their mouths. Most of them picked up a meal of German rations in between whiles, and some, who had found an ordnance store, were actually discovered in process of putting on clean shirts. But he is incorrigible and incomparable, the British soldier. When the Scotsmen came back after the fight was over and they were relieved, there was scarcely a man who did not bring his quota of German helmets and goodness knows what else; and they were in the gayest spirits, as if the work that they had been on had been a holiday.

While the capture of Beaumont Hamel was, of course,



the great achievement of the day, the triumphant sweep which took us to the Ancre on the south was almost as big a thing, giving us all that southern face of the valley, a square mile or so of intricately defended territory, and the point of St. Pierre Divion.

Of the total front of 8,000 yards on which we attacked, roughly 3,000 were south of the Ancre and 5,000 yards to the north of it. In the south, on the right, or east, the advance began from the western end of Regina Trench, from our positions about 700 yards to the north of Stuff Redoubt. From this point a formidable line of enemy trench, known as the Hansa Line, ran unevenly north-westward down to the Ancre just opposite the village of Beaucourt. On the extreme right, north of Stuff Redoubt, to reach that trench was only an advance of a score or so of yards. Half a mile to the westward, above Schwaben Redoubt, the advance was nearly 1,000 yards. Along the valley of the Ancre itself, by St. Pierre Divion, it was over 1,500. The advance was equally successful everywhere, and we carried the whole of the Hansa Line.

The new ground won, therefore, south of the river was a wedge-shaped piece, 3,000 yards in extreme length, 1,500 yards across its base along the river, and tapering to an acute angle where it reaches Regina Trench. The whole steep slope attacked was a network of trenches and fortified positions, especially at the eastern end, where they had been less exposed to fire from our artillery on the left. The troops which made the advance were some which had already done excellent work in this section of the battlefield, and nothing that they had done was better than their achievement here.

In this region there seems no doubt that we caught the enemy, not only by surprise, but at a moment when a relief was going on, so that there were double the usual number of men in the trenches, and there was grim irony in the fact that the relieving division was the 223rd, which was one of Hindenburg's—or Ludendorff's—new “combed-out”

formations. It was rather hard that it should have just been created and be going into action for the first time as a division only to be caught within a few minutes of getting to the trenches and "biffed" as badly as we "biffed" the 223rd. The total number of prisoners taken south of the Ancre was about 1,300, with 29 officers.

At one point in this southern attack a Tank proved useful. It went forward and got ahead of our infantry into a position which was very strongly held by Germans, who swarmed around it and tried to blow it up with bombs. It stood them off until our infantry came up, and then helped to clear the position.

There was the same confused fighting here as on the other side of the river, and the situation was still uncertain until late at night. The wounded were full of strange experiences. One man lay in a shell hole through the day, and then tried to make his way to our line, and only a lucky flare sent up by the Germans told him that he was walking straight into an enemy trench. Others to whom I spoke had only a bewildered memory of going forward in the dark among shells—ours or theirs, they did not know—into empty trenches or trenches containing only mud and wire, over dim ridges from which Germans fired through the murk beyond, past shell holes and dug-outs, till they met bodies of the enemy with their hands held high in the air. But at some points the fighting was very stubborn indeed.

St. Pierre Divion, where was once a church and a cluster of houses, lay on the valley level at the foot of the slope on the southern side of the stream. Insignificant as a village, even before it had been obliterated by our guns, it had always had some interest and importance, because it was known that here there were elaborate dug-outs, and that it was the ganglion of the German communications at the mouth of the valley, through which we knew that they evacuated many of their wounded and got up supports and supplies to the troops of the front line on the high ground above.

When the place was taken we found that, starting from recessed and sheltered entrances on the valley level, a great gallery ran back some 300 yards into the hill. Then it branched and the cross-arms of the "T" were nearly as long as the stem tunnel. Here were underground dressing stations for the wounded, and great quantities of stores of all kinds, and quarters for whole companies of men, and officers' rooms with timbered and panelled walls and paper on them. From the further end passages and steps led up to the communication trenches on the hill. Among the booty found there was a great number of machine guns and stores of machine-gun ammunition. And the whole place smelled very foully, as a result, it was decided, of quantities of German war-bread which had gone rancid and mouldy.

Of the cheapness of the victory, I have already spoken. One Division, which took much ground, had less than 600 casualties and captured over 1,400 prisoners. A battalion of the Sherwood Foresters took prisoners to just about its own fighting strength.

The weather during the attack had been fairly kind to us, though it had generally been too thick for aeroplane observation. It continued kind for five days, being dry and cold and keen, and on November 18 we took advantage of it to follow up our victory with another thrust on a front of about two and a half miles which carried us forward for an average distance of 500 yards or so on the south side of the Ancre. On the north of the river, keeping pace, we also pushed on till our line was three-quarters of a mile to the north-east of Beaucourt and 500 yards beyond the Bois d'Hollande, which had been regarded as possibly a formidable obstacle in our way.

The stroke was dramatic, because it was delivered in a snowstorm before break of day. For some three days it had been freezing, so that by the evening of November 17 puddles of water two and three inches deep were frozen solid, and the surface of the roads was ringing hard. Snow

began to fall during the night and at 6 o'clock in the morning the whole earth was blanketed in white and flakes were still falling. For the first half of the day the battle area was transfigured and all the unseemliness of war was hidden under a gracious veil. Just as the snow was ceasing our attack was made, and that evening our line ran through the edges of the ruins of the village of Grandcourt.

Just before Grandcourt, on the west of the village, ran the original main German second line—the line which, lower down, passed such famous places as Stuff and Zollern Redoubts, the Windmill, and the top of High Wood. With its parallel lines of trenches and complications of minor defences and strong points it was almost as strong as the main first line, and constructed at the same time, or in the winter of 1914-15. We had already broken through, or eaten our way up, the line to a point some 600 yards north of Stuff Redoubt, where we held the Stuff (or Stauffen) Trench, which was the western continuation of Regina. In the attack we again broke along it for more than another 500 yards, though the enemy clung for a couple of days to certain positions in it to the south of Grandcourt, where the trenches run along the side of a small valley or ravine.

The advance was made by troops from the British Isles on the left, and by Canadians on the right. It was preceded by a short but fierce bombardment, from which, by the accounts of prisoners, the enemy took shelter in his dug-outs. From Stuff and Regina Trenches the attack was launched almost due north against a formidable trench line running almost due east and west, which had been christened Desire Trench. Before the enemy, crouching under our bombardment, could issue from his dug-outs, our men were on him.

At places savage hand-to-hand fighting seems to have gone on. At the one point of which I have spoken, on the sides of the ravine below Grandcourt, where the slopes were swept by machine-gun fire from above, we could not at the moment advance. But for some two miles to the right of



this we swept all resistance away; and on the extreme right, especially, the advance placed us in occupation of another stage of the descent along the minor spur which runs out from the main ridge towards the north. On the left side of the ravine we also won everything; so that the whole south side of the Ancre was ours up to the very outskirts of Grandcourt.

Across the Ancre, on the north side, our advance was smaller only because we had already advanced farther along that bank and nothing was to be gained by pushing ahead of the line across the stream. Of the Bois d'Hollande, once a dense quadrilateral plantation, nothing now remained but a few ragged tree stumps and a tumbled mass of splintered wood and shell holes. Seen from a little distance, it was just like any one of a dozen and more woods and copses from which we had hunted the Germans since the battle began. Up to a few days before it was known to shelter field guns. Those, however, had been withdrawn and only machine-gun posts and infantry remained. They offered little resistance and the wood was ours at a very cheap price.

The same was true of all the day's advance on the north of the stream. Immediately above the stream we had broken into the end of the main second line—the two trenches of which were known here as Puisieux and River Trenches—for some little distance up the slope towards the plateau beyond. Both here and on the south of the river our patrols pushed on beyond the line of our advance—here along the Serre and Puisieux roads, and on the south as far as the Grandcourt Trench, the remaining formal line of defence, running east and west, between us and Miraumont.

It was altogether a successful *coup*, gallantly carried through, the 800 prisoners taken bringing the total number for the six days of fighting on the Ancre to 7,060, and the total taken since July 1, to over 38,000.

The one sad thing was that the weather broke before the day was half over. At about 10 o'clock in the morning it began to thaw, with light rain falling at intervals. The

gracious veil of snow disappeared and the battlefield showed all its ugliness again. By evening two inches of melted snow and rain had done their worst with the ground, and the day closed on an earth all slime and slush and pools of standing water, with the air thick with a raw November fog.

## XXI

### CONCLUSION

THESE operations upon the Ancre, with the capture of Beaumont Hamel and Beaucourt, formed a brilliant conclusion to the greatest battle in which British arms have ever been engaged. In the closing week of November and through December short periods of clear weather, generally accompanied by frosts, alternated with days of rain and longer stretches of fog and humid air. The frosts were not of sufficient duration to harden the ground, the condition of which continued to make impracticable operations on any considerable scale. The artillery on both sides was active so far as the weather permitted, and on clear days there was constant aerial fighting. No infantry operations, however, were attempted by us, and while the enemy made one or two minor counter-attacks, hardly more than abortive raids, upon our positions on the Ancre and about Gueudecourt, they were entirely futile. On the edge of Grandcourt, without any enemy pressure, we retired our line by two hundred yards or so to positions topographically more favourable. Otherwise we held to the furthest line that we had won at every point, and there we rested into the New Year.

From July 1 to the end of the year was six full months. In all that period, though no infantry advance was made in the last six weeks, while there were seasons of comparative quiet following great advances, there was never a day of rest nor hardly a minute when the guns were silent. We had fought with an untried army. It proved itself on the

first day of the battle at least equal to the enemy's seasoned troops. It hardened and waxed stronger with every day that the battle continued, and in the middle of the fifth month it won what was perhaps the most brilliant and dashing of all its victories.

In July we had the splendid success of that first day, when we shattered the first German line and captured Mametz and Montauban, with Fricourt on the following day. Then came Contalmaison and La Boisselle, and all the triumph of July 14—with Bazentin-le-Grand, Bazentin-le-Petit and Longueval, and the fall of Ovillers-la-Boisselle and Pozières to follow before the month was up. It was a month of victory.

In August we captured no new villages, but it seemed to me at the time, and seems now, that it was in that period—mostly a season of grilling heat—when we fought our way steadily, yard by yard, up to the summit of the ridge that the new British Armies finally demonstrated their superiority to the German soldiery in fighting power. By the successive and stunning shocks with which we forced our way towards Thiepval; by the remorseless hammering of enemy position after position in the area from Mouquet Farm to the Windmill beyond Pozières; almost more by the determination with which we clung to Delville Wood, and finally, inch by inch, fought the enemy out of it and thrust him back to the highest ground by Ginchy and into the edge of Guillemont—not once in a single action, but day after day on all the front—the British soldier drove into the enemy with bomb and bayonet and gun the conviction that he was the better man.

That was a month of sowing. In September we reaped. Guillemont and Ginchy fell to us; and then, triumphantly along almost the whole front, we swept over the crest of the ridge and into Flers and Martinpuich, Courcellette, Gueudecourt, Lesbœufs and Morval. Combles gave itself up to the French and ourselves together, and, as a crowning triumph to the month, came the capture of Thiepval.



October saw few fine days, but on the opening day of the month we took Eaucourt l'Abbaye and, a few days later, Le Sars; while even more notable was the magnificent way in which we cleared the nests of well-nigh impregnable positions along the spur of the Thiepval ridge, with all their entanglements of trench and redoubt and fortified points.

At the beginning of November—as grey and sodden a month as November can be—the Germans openly boasted that our offensive had finally spent itself and become embedded in the mud. Our answer was the amazing triumph of the Ancre, with the taking of 7,000 prisoners and, to sweeten the cup, of Beaumont Hamel, Beaucourt and St. Pierre Divion. Five months of continuous success had been crowned by what future critics will pronounce one of the most brilliant victories of all the battle.

The “battle!” One must call it so because the whole of the four and a half months’ fighting on the Somme, including the successes of the French upon our right, were all one military operation. Yet measured by the standards of past wars, it was not one battle but fifty battles and fifty victories. I have mentioned above the names of twenty-five villages, and the capture of each one represented victory in what would have been accounted a great battle in former days. Besides these villages were as many other places, each fortified to the last degree and held with all the strength that Germany could put forth and each falling to us only after a separate conflict, as clearly a “battle” as ever a stout-fought action was. Such places were, in the first stages of the operations, the positions at the Horseshoe, the Quadrangle and the Villa Contalmaison; such later were the Windmill, Mouquet Farm, Waterlot Farm, Falfemont and D’Estremont; such were the chief redoubts like the Zollern, Stuff and Schwaben Redoubts on the Thiepval spur, the Quadrilateral beyond High Wood; and that other Quadrilateral to the north-west of Flers. Such finally were the woods: Fricourt Wood and Mametz, Trônes Wood, High Wood and Delville, and lesser coppices like Shelter Wood,

Angle Wood, Wedge Wood, Acid Drop Copse and Arrow Head, and both the woods of the Bazentins. Count these up and, with the villages, you will find that here are the names of fifty victories; and there were fifty more which are nameless only because they were fought and won around a stretch of trench, a fortified valley, a mile or two of sunken road tunnelled and furnished with concrete emplacements until it was a veritable fortress in everything save name.

If all these places had been scattered over a large area on the map, the Army which had reduced them in succession in one uninterrupted series of victories lasting for five months would be recognised as having performed the greatest military feat in history. Yet, the fact that these places were not widely scattered but were all congested into this narrow battlefield, made the difficulty, and should make the glory, all the greater; for here each village, each wood and redoubt and farm gave protection to the next. All interlocked, and none could be taken without consideration of the others. Yet the strength in which each was held made every one the scene of a great battle in itself.

And what had the Germans done to set against this triumphant progress of our Armies? Several times they succeeded in throwing us out again from trenches which we had taken and had been unable to fortify or consolidate. On July 1, with their machine guns, they made our victory cost us dearly, and held the northern section of our attack. They fought often with stubborn desperation and delayed our occupation of a particular strong point, redoubt or fortress in a village for days and even weeks, as in the Quadrangle Support Trench, at Ovillers-la-Boisselle, in the lines before Guillemont and at Schwaben Redoubt. In certain systems of trenches, as about Munster Alley and beyond Lesbœufs, the battle fluctuated for long periods, and our progress was very slow; while in Delville Wood, in Trônes Wood and High Wood by counter-attacks or with artillery fire, they did again and again succeed in forcing us back through

tracts of woodland from which we had already driven them out and regaining the ground which they had lost.

And to what did all this amount? The answer is on the map. In every case where they temporarily forced us back, we came again. They paid a bitter cost for their brief success and we held the ground. No single village which we had once won did we lose again. In no single redoubt where we had once gained foothold, did we fail to make that foothold good and fight on until the whole redoubt was won. The Germans sought in their official *communiqués* to minimise the glory of our successes by inventing imaginary attacks which we never made and which, in their fictions, they had heroically repulsed. They admitted casually as "of slight importance" the loss of places which in Orders that we captured they had, in almost frenzied language, adjured their men to hold, as of "pre-eminent importance," and as "vital to the success of the whole battle." When we captured positions, sweeping whole Divisions out of existence and taking thousands of prisoners, they announced that they had "fallen back" to positions prepared beforehand, when they, and we, knew that not a company of men in all the area attacked had lived, free and unwounded, who could have fallen back.

It can never again be said that Great Britain wins her wars without ever winning victories. We won victories enough on the Somme for a score of wars. No other area in the world is sprinkled so thick with names which are the symbols of victory as this region over which both we and the French fought here. Rarely in history has any Great Power suffered so continuous a series of reverses as the Germans have suffered here or been so manifestly exhibited to the world as the inferior to its opponent in the fighting power of its men.

The Germans have striven to give at least one favourable aspect—even though inferentially a shameful one—to the result of the fighting by claiming that they have inflicted on us losses far outweighing their own. The subject of respective losses is one on which the data are not yet avail-



able for speaking with any certainty. Half way through the battle, however, the Germans put out an official estimate of the British and French losses to that date which was nearly half a million in excess of the truth. All indications—the published German casualty lists, the documents which fell into our hands with the prisoners, the statements of prisoners themselves, and evidence from other sources—go to show that the total German casualties were not less than 750,000, and that they equalled, if they did not exceed, the combined losses of French and British together.

In the course of the five and a half months the Germans put into the Somme fighting the equivalent of nearly 140 infantry Divisions. The actual number of individual Divisions to the end of November was, I believe, 97. Many of these had been put in twice; some three times. The total was about 140. The German Army organisation contains 200 Divisions. The equivalent of rather over two-thirds of all the German Armies on all the fronts, therefore, were used upon the Somme. No Division was put in which was not very badly broken. A large proportion lost over 50 per cent. of their fighting strength, and the average loss for all was, I believe, between 44 and 45 per cent. What must be the moral effect on a military Power which loses in one prolonged battle, in which it suffers continuous defeat, nearly one-half of the strength of two-thirds of the units of all its armies?

We and the French between us took over 80,000 prisoners. How should any army surrender 80,000 prisoners, whether wholesale or by piecemeal, in a single operation except under circumstances of defeat? The dreadful effect of the persistent pounding which they received manifested itself clearly enough in the shaken *moral* of the German Armies in the later stages of the battle; and we know, better, perhaps, than from any other source, from the letters from their friends at home which were found on prisoners taken, the strain to which Germany was put to make good the losses in her fighting line. Not once but in hundreds of letters



we read of old men being called up, of cripples, of men previously several times exempted as unfit for military service ("But no one is exempted now," wrote one despairing soul) until, as another writer declared, "everything with legs" was being dragged into the ranks.

The progressive deterioration in the quality of the German troops throughout the battle was most striking and significant. It was not unnatural that troops after being subjected for days to such pounding as all the troops in their front line received should have been temporarily shaken and unnerved. It was explicable that a Division, after having been badly shattered in the line and then filled up with new drafts should on returning to the fighting line be less stiff than it had shown itself at the first trial. But these things were not enough to explain the rot—there is no other word—which was more than local, which showed itself towards the end of September. It was the German Army as a whole which had begun to show signs of demoralisation.

It was not merely that the Germans suffered local defeat, but twice at least, we know—once in mid July and again towards the end of September—their whole military machine was perilously near to breaking down. We never expected here to break it down. It was not with that end or hope that the battle was fought. But we learned beyond a peradventure in the course of it that broken it could be.

Looking backward over the course of the battle, it is impossible to say which of the greater victories will in the retrospect of time stand out as the most glorious: the first shattering of the lines of July 1; the extraordinary brilliance of the whole attack—in conception and execution—of July 14; the two great pushes in September, that of the 15th, which gave us Flers, Courcellette and Martinpuich, or the later one, when we took Gueudecourt, Lesbœufs and Morval and made the fall of Combles inevitable; the independent action at the same time which capped the long period of stern fighting with the capture of Thiepval, or the last triumph which set us astride of the Valley of the Ancre

and yielded Beaumont Hamel, with its almost legendary strength, into our hands. The Army generally until November talked of July 14 as having been the most brilliant of all the brilliant days. It may be that historians of the war will give precedence to the capture of Thiepval or Beaumont Hamel. What is at least certain and most comforting is that, so far from our offensive having weakened or spent itself, we were able, in spite of mud and frost, to win in the last month of fighting one of the greatest successes.

In contemplating this result, the aspect of it which one finds overwhelming and obscuring all others in its importance is the quality of our new Armies. Germany also had been putting new soldiers in the field; and 6,000 of them surrendered to our own new men in a single day. Not 6,000 nor half 6,000 of all our Armies have been taken prisoner in all the five months of fighting. Germany put her Naval Division into the line. It fought for a while and was broken in its trenches and withdrawn. We brought our Naval Division in and it swept the north bank of the Ancre and captured Beaucourt. Neither our Guards nor the German Guards, on the other hand, are "new," whatever recent drafts they may have received. Both were in the fighting line, though—luckily for the Germans—they never met. The German Guards in places fought very well; in others they behaved shamefully and surrendered in blocks. Our Guards never failed to do whatever was asked of them. They did not lose a foot of trench or surrender a man. They made at least one charge as fine as anything ever done in war. New men or old, Guards or Naval Division or line regiments, man for man, we had the better stuff.

One hesitates again to drive the subject home; yet always a correspondent on the spot doubted whether those at a distance understand how really fine our troops proved themselves—troops of every grade and in every class of work. Nothing could be better than the record of our Oversea troops—the splendid devotion of the Newfoundlanders on July 1 and their later revenge; the epic of the South Africans in Del-

ville Wood; the dash and determination of the Australians at and beyond Pozières; the brilliance of the Canadian attack on Courcellette; the extraordinarily successful fighting of the New Zealanders around Flers; each of these is among the finest chapters in the story of the war.

The world knows what the Scotsmen did, at Longueval, at Beaumont Hamel, and at many other critical places in the line. It was a Scots sergeant whom, after a hard fight, I heard say that he was glad that the enemy had waited to take the bayonet because "it made it so much cheerier." No fighting has been more brilliant than that of the Irish troops at Guillemont, no heroism more fine than that of the Ulster men upon the Ancre on the first day of the battle. The Welshmen showed their quality in as stubborn and determined a piece of work as has been seen in all the Somme fighting when they cleaned out a great part of Mametz Wood.

Each of these things makes, as it were, a gallant patch of colour in the splendid tapestry of the great battle; and, as a background to them all, between and around them, vying with them in brilliance and weaving all into one glorious whole, was the behaviour of the staunch English regiments. It is not yet possible to mention each regiment in detail; and in an earlier chapter, in trying to celebrate them adequately, I have almost called the roll of the English counties. From north to south and west to east—Northumberland and Devon, Gloucester and Norfolk and Suffolk—they all did alike magnificently. He who belongs to one of the London Divisions can say so with pride, and all the Army knows—and the Germans probably know too—how the Midlanders, both north and south, bore themselves. As one looks back certain names, associated with particular incidents, flash out upon the memory: the names of Manchesters and Middlesex and Liverpools and Worcestershires, Staffords and Wiltshires and men of Surrey, Kent and Sussex, Hampshires, Berkshires, Notts and Derbyshires, Bedford and Dorsets, men from the Yorkshire moors and dales (how the York-



shiremen did fight!), men of the Cornish coast, men of the fens and farms of Lincoln and Cambridge, millhands and miners and clerks, townsfolk or country dwellers, men of the hills or the plains, Riflemen or Fusiliers, Engineers, Artillery and Infantry, Pioneers and Airmen, Transport and Signals, Stretcher-bearers, Doctors and Chaplains—it is an amazing Army that we have created!

How proudly I have heard officers speak of their men, and how proudly men of their officers! I heard one young officer say that he never knew that a man could be so proud of anything in his life as he was of leading such men as his. Another told me that he did not know how he would ever bring himself to speak harshly to one of his men again after the way he had seen them behave. More than one told me that it humbled him to think that he was in command of, and expected to set an example to, such men as he had under him. One said that he did not know how his men did it. "For an officer," he said, "it's comparatively easy, because he knows that if he fails, everything will break: but how the individual men, who haven't the same responsibility to sustain them, do it, is what I shall never understand."

Almost every Battalion—every Brigade—every Division—was the best in the Army. I know it, because the officers have told me. But I am not sure that the best testimony after all was not that of an officer high up in the department of the Chaplain-General, and who has seen trench life, and said: "It is God-inspired. I can find no other explanation of it. The behaviour of the men is directly God-inspired."

I believe that I heard no man brag of his own deeds, but twenty laugh them away as "all tommy rot" when comrades told of them; such tommy rot it was as afterwards formed the substance of the brief official record for a Victoria Cross or the awarding of a Military Cross, a D.S.O. or D.C.M. I heard a neutral visitor complain—but complain in a spirit of the utmost admiration—that he had been with the British Armies for three weeks and had never yet heard a word



of command. And it was true. It was the incomprehensible thing about this new-born Army of ours that it seemed to do its business automatically, each man in his place and competent to fill it, sure of himself and going about his job as if he had done it all his life, whether that job was some fatigue work in the rear or going in cheerful silence to probable death. There never was an Army so completely free from fuss or pose which took whatever came its way—uttermost hardship or a cup of tea—in the same spirit of equable indifference, and behaved, individually and in the mass, like heroes, without a consciousness that heroism was not just a bit of the daily task.

The Army is under no illusions yet as to Germany's power being broken. But it knows quite well now that it is a better Army than Germany can put into the field.

Besides the prisoners taken, the British booty on the Somme included 29 heavy guns, 96 field guns and field howitzers, 136 trench mortars and 514 machine guns. There were also great quantities of stores of all descriptions.

That nothing but the weather saved the Germans from much greater catastrophe than they suffered is certain. How much farther, in a merely territorial way, we might have penetrated there is no use in endeavouring to guess. There were still successive lines of great strength in front of us; but in the mood in which our men were fighting no defences would have stayed them, and in the demoralised condition of the German troops, it is not to be doubted that we should have continued to take at each attack a larger and larger number of prisoners. General Mud was much the most successful commander on the German side in the whole battle.

While the advent of winter brought immense relief to the enemy, on our side there was nothing but regret that we could not go on fighting. It was as common in the winter to hear regrets that the offensive had not been begun in April instead of in July, as it had been in July to hear misgivings lest we had begun to attack before we were ready.

Those who in the summer had questioned our ability to keep up the attack till winter now mourned that winter had come so soon to put an end to our advance. Such had been the growth of confidence in our Army, so complete the reversal of our position in relation to the Germans, that it was difficult in December to put one's mind back into the attitude of June, difficult to believe that only six months before we had felt so differently. The weakling lad had indeed grown to a strength greater than he had dreamed.

If our strategy needed any vindicating, these facts alone should be enough to vindicate it. But it needs none. We struck at the first moment when we were fit to deliver the blow. It was delivered with certain definite objects in view: the relief of the pressure on Verdun, distraction of the enemy's forces so that he would be unable to throw great weight against Russia, the inflicting on him of as considerable loss as possible. All those results were triumphantly achieved. In addition to them all, however, and outweighing them all was the fact that we—our new Armies—had definitely proved ourselves superior to the trained troops of Germany and that, at the first serious essay, we, with the French, had strained German military power almost to the breaking point. The quality of our organisation behind the lines and the wonderful mechanical perfection which, in the later stages of the battle, our attacks attained were almost as admirable as the quality of our men.

It is to the Battle of the Somme that historians in future ages will point as the turning point in the war. The heroism of the French at Verdun will probably always stand out as the most splendid achievement of any of the combatants in the whole course of the war. But it was in the combined victory of the French and British on the Somme that the Allies, after two years of conscious inferiority in equipment and organisation—but never in *moral*—first showed themselves definitely stronger than Germany in land fighting.

## POSTSCRIPT

### A NOTE ON THE ORDER OF BATTLE

THE full story of the Battle of the Somme will not be written in all its details for many long years to come. Perhaps it will never be possible to write it as one narrative, though volumes will be devoted to discussion of its strategy or will treat of individual phases and separate engagements in the great struggle.

The raw material for the true and final account of the battle lies in the wonderful messages which came back to Division and Corps Headquarters during the progress of an action from officers of the units engaged, from aeroplanes which watched from overhead and from officers in advanced artillery posts: messages scrawled, fragmentary and cabalistic, written and transmitted in every possible circumstance of extreme peril; and in the formal Reports, based largely on these messages, compiled by the Staffs of the successive units according to their degree. Even more fruitful than these, perhaps, should be the different Regimental Histories and the Histories of the various Battalions, Brigades and Divisions engaged. Most, and, one hopes, all, of those units have preserved the necessary data and provided for the compilation of such Histories. And what amazing documents they will be! In them the real gallantry of our troops will be made plain, as it can never be when all the great panorama is crowded in a single cover.

One speaks habitually of *esprit de Corps*. As a matter of fact, under the organisation developed in modern war, the Corps, in its technical sense, is not the body which com-

mands allegiance or excites enthusiasm. That allegiance is just now rather divided and in a state of flux. Regimental pride, of course, remains and will remain, however much the individual Regiment be split into multiplied Battalions and engaged in widely sundered fields. Even more dearly than to his Regiment, however, a man's devotion is given to his Company, his Battalion, his Brigade and even to his Division. The last, however, is too big a unit to command much personal sentiment of loyalty, and the composing elements are not necessarily permanent, and this is still more true of the Army Corps. It may be that the instinct of Divisional pride will grow stronger, but at present, by no means every infantryman, however proud he may be of his Regiment, his Company, Battalion or Brigade, could tell you offhand to what Division he belonged, and only a minority would know to what Corps the Division was attached. With the Field Artillery the bond which binds the Battery or Brigade to its Division is even less permanent and essential than with Infantry.

That the sentiment of Divisional loyalty exists is shown by the fact there is Divisional jealousy, not among the members of the Divisional Staffs alone. I have heard the officers of Battalion become ribald with delight when they heard that the Division which in a certain "push" had failed to get on and had held up a portion of the line, was a certain Division with which they had exchanged bitter compliments in the course of the preceding spring somewhere up by Ypres. Make, however, no mistake! Every one of those officers would have cheerfully given his life to help any fragment of the other Division out of a hole; but, if some Division had to fail in that particular "push," they were glad to unseemliness that it should be that one. Precisely so would Harrow, having suffered defeat at the hands of Winchester, yelp with delight when Winchester grovelled before Eton.

Also there was jealousy over the possession of blocks of prisoners and captured guns and such little tiny kickshaws.



It is easy for prisoners, in being passed back, to stray across the boundaries between one Division and another, and conspicuous instances of what were considered by one Division gross thefts on the part of another occurred early in the battle in the fighting about Railway Alley and at the very end of it at Beaumont Hamel. So with guns, especially in woods where they could not easily be taken away. There were certain notorious guns in Mametz Wood which fell into the hands of one Battalion which duly labelled them as "captured" by it, and then passed on. Other Battalions came up and captured the same guns; which were afterwards claimed in turn by every relieving force which came into the wood. One such gun had as many placards on it as an eligible residence has house agents' signs in a favourite London suburb.

There may be said to be three facts which, so far as I can make out, every British non-commissioned officer and private had always clearly in mind. First, all the other men of his own Company, Battalion, Brigade and Division are "blighters"—blighters of the worst kind. Second, he would joyously fight and die for any one of those said "blighters," just as every one of them would, he knows, fight and die for him. Third, miserable and contemptible though every man is individually, they constitute in the aggregate the best and finest Company, Battalion, Brigade and Division in the British Army, and vastly beyond comparison with any unit in any other Army in the world. All of which he is quite willing to maintain and prove at any moment by whatever violent means may be suggested to him.

It is already understood why, in the foregoing chapters, it has been impossible to speak of individual units engaged in the Battle of the Somme, except in the vaguest and most incidental way. The time has not yet passed when such information might be of value to the enemy. It is not permissible yet to indicate the number of a Battalion or the composition of a Brigade. Certain individual performances of particular Divisions are already well known to the public

—as of the Ulstermen on the Ancre on July 1; of the Welsh Division in Mametz Wood; of the Irish Division (which was always referred to by its number as the Sixteenth in the recruiting campaign) at Guillemont and Ginchy; of the Royal Naval Division on the north side of the Ancre and at Beaumont Hamel. Besides these, the names of other Divisions will leap to the mind of any one who knows anything about the fighting on the Somme, as of the 29th, which added to the laurels so gloriously won in Gallipoli; the 3rd, which had done such splendid fighting before it went to the Somme, did so finely there and then had a stroke of cruel bad luck later; of the 6th, which also had its bad fortune and then redeemed it brilliantly; of the several London Divisions and North and South Midland Divisions; of the four Divisions which, as each came into line, in the area of the IIInd Corps, fought so gallantly on the road to Thiepval, and of the Guards. And besides these, others which signalised themselves by some special exploit were the 5th, 7th, 15th, 17th, 21st, 23rd —, but what is the use of going on? Sometime the fame of each will be duly blazoned. At present, as I have said before, the glory is not the glory of any individual troops, whether from the British Isles or from Overseas, but of the Army as a whole.

The individuality of the Armies and Corps engaged, with the names of their commanders, have already been made public and may be set down here again.

The attack of July 1 was made by the Fourth Army, under Lieut.-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, K.C.B., K.C.V.O., though troops of the Third Army under General Sir E. H. Allenby, K.C.B., co-operated in the subsidiary operation by Gommecourt on the left. The composition of the Fourth Army then was as follows, reading from the north downwards:—

VIIIth Corps: Lieut.-General Sir A. Hunter-Weston, K.C.B.  
—on the front from above Serre to Beaumont Hamel.

Xth Corps : Lieut.-General Sir T. Morland, K.C.B.—at the mouth of the Ancre to below Thiepval.

IIIrd Corps : Lieut.-General Sir W. P. Pulteney, K.C.B.—on the front before Ovillers-la-Boisselle and La Boisselle.

XVth Corps : Lieut.-General Sir H. S. Horne, K.C.B.—on the front above and to the lower side of Fricourt.

XIIIth Corps : Lieut.-General Sir W. N. Congreve, V.C., C.B.—on the right of Fricourt, opposite Mametz and to the junction with the French.

After the attack of July 1, as has been explained in an earlier chapter, in order to enable General Rawlinson to concentrate his attention on the southern part of the advance, the command was divided, the three northernmost Corps—the VIIIth, Xth and IIIrd—being taken out of the Fourth Army and put into the Reserve or Fifth Army (then first organised), of which Lieut.-General Sir Hubert de la P. Gough was given command. Shortly afterwards the VIIIth and Xth Corps were moved to a northern part of the front and the IInd Corps—Lieut.-General C. W. Jacob, C.B.—came into the line on the southern side of the Ancre, and did the fighting from Ovillers-la-Boisselle to Thiepval, including the capture of that place. On their right, between the IInd and IIIrd Corps, the Ist Australian Corps—Lieut.-General Sir W. R. Birdwood, K.S.C.I., K.C.M.G.—came in; and it was they who cleared all the country on the left of the Bapaume road from above Ovillers-la-Boisselle through and beyond Pozières on the right and to Mouquet Farm. They occupied Mouquet Farm, but the final capture and consolidation of the ground there was accomplished by the Canadians, who relieved the Australians towards the end of August.

Owing, apparently, to occupying a situation where the water was bad, an epidemic broke out in the Headquarters Staff of the XIIIth Corps, one of those who fell ill being General Congreve himself. The Corps was put temporarily under other command and was moved out of the line, the XIVth Corps—General Lord Cavan—being put into its place on

the right of the XVth. The order of battle from the Ancre downwards, therefore, in the the great pushes in September was :

IInd : Canadians : IIIrd : XVth : XIVth.

North of the Ancre, on the left of the IInd Corps, was the Vth Corps—Lieut.-General Fanshawe—and it was this Corps which in November took Beaumont Hamel and Beaumontcourt. On the left of the Vth, one Division of the XIIIth Corps was engaged in the same action above Beaumont Hamel.

Sir Douglas Haig in his dispatches gave the very highest praise to his Army and Corps Commanders. The advancement of Sir Douglas Haig himself to the rank of Field-Marshal had the unanimous approval of the Army, which has come to have the most whole-hearted confidence in its Commander-in-Chief.



## INDEX

- ACID DROP COPSE, 34, 44, 272  
 Albert, 9, 16, 30  
 Allenby, General Sir E. H., K.C.B., 284  
 Ancre, River, 12-13, 62, 166-7, 244-5, 250, 258-9, 263, 265, 269, 271, 285  
 Angle Wood, 133, 166, 272  
 Angres, 4  
 Antwerp, 150  
 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 72  
 Army, British, *see also under names of regiments, etc.*, handicapped through lack of munitions, 2-3; demeanour going into action, 15; neutral tribute to its heroism, 29; morale strengthened by the Battle of the Somme, 92-4  
 Army, French, how the Germans under-estimated its generalship and heroism, 5; point on the Somme where it joined the British Army, 26  
 Army, German, prime cause of its failure in the war, 2; strength of its defensive works, 25, 29-31; its reliance on machine guns, 30-1; demeanour of prisoners, 50-2, 141-2; ill-feeling between officers and men, 51; its intense discipline often proves futile, 97-8; accused of practising "surrender drill," 141; inhumanity towards our wounded, 142-3; ordered to take no prisoners, 143; its sentries tied to posts, 164; treacherous use of white flag, 190; regimental orders, 213-4, 273; steady deterioration throughout the Battle of the Somme, 274-5  
 Army, Russian, lack of guns and ammunition, 5-6  
 Army Medical Corps, Royal, 91, 101-2, 144, 262  
 Arnim, General Sixt von, 127  
 Arras, 30  
 Arrowhead Copse, 133, 272  
 Artillery, British, 8-10, 13-18, 29, 39, 43, 67-8, 81, 89, 146-51  
 Artillery, German, 11, 20-1, 32, 89  
 Auchonvillers, 17  
 Auckland, New Zealand, 190  
 Australian Division, 4, 86-8, 128, 136-9, 167-8, 171, 215, 277  
 BAILIFF'S WOOD, 47-8  
 Ball, Captain, 114  
 Bapaume, 12, 117-9, 234, 238-9, 285  
 Barastre, 117  
 Barnes, Captain the Hon. R. Gorell, *A Hymn before Action*, 93-4  
 Bavaria, King Ludwig of, 11  
 Bavarian Division, 11, 52, 173, 198, 232, 240  
 Bazentin-le-Grand, 55, 57-9, 62-3, 65-8, 89-90, 270  
 Bazentin-le-Petit, 55, 57-9, 62-3, 69-71, 80, 137, 270  
 Beaucourt, 250, 253-4, 260-5, 271, 286  
 Beaumont Hamel, 9, 12-13, 20-1, 97, 120, 154, 166-7, 254-62, 271, 275-6, 283-4, 286  
 Becordel-Becourt, 62  
 Bedfordshire Regiment, 222  
 Berkshire Regiment (Royal), 28  
 Bernafay Wood, 34, 49-50, 72, 202  
 Bertincourt, 117  
 Béthune, 144

Birch Tree Wood, 40  
 Birdwood, Lieut.-General Sir W. R.,  
     K.C.M.G., 285  
 Black Watch, 72, 245  
 Bois d'Hollande, 265, 267  
 Border Regiment, 4, 22, 26, 97, 224  
 Bottom Wood, 34, 67  
 Bouleaux Wood, 169, 196, 205-6  
 Bovril Trench, 207  
 Brandenburg Regiment, 240  
 Bright Alley, 67  
 Brown Trench, 191

CAMBRAI, 119  
 Cameron Highlanders, 72  
 Campbell, Colonel John, V.C., 194  
 Canadian Division, 4, 171-2, 184-7,  
     198, 215-6, 224, 247-8, 266-7, 277  
 Canterbury, New Zealand, 189-90  
 Carnoy, 62  
 Caterpillar Valley, 49  
 Caterpillar Wood, 39  
 Cavan, General Lord, 285  
 Chalkpit Salient, 4  
 Chaplains, Army, 102-3, 262  
 Clery, 205  
 Coldstream Guards, 194  
 Combles, 12, 124, 171, 206-7, 210-11,  
     270  
 Congreve, Lieut.-General Sir W. N.,  
     V.C., 5, 285  
 Contalmaison, 10, 34, 40-54, 80, 97,  
     270-1  
 Courcellette, 62, 124, 134-5, 184-8,  
     198, 200, 211, 219, 246, 248, 270,  
     275  
 Courtrai, 117  
 Cow Trench, 207  
 Crucifix, The, 20

DANZIG ALLEY, 67  
 Deccan Horse, 64  
 Delville Wood, 72-7, 89-91, 130-1,  
     137-8, 161-4, 166, 191, 210, 270-2  
 Desire Trench, 266  
 D'Estremont Farm, 228-30, 271  
 Devonshire Regiment, 26  
 Dispatch Riders, 99, 101  
 Douai, 117  
 Douaumont, 154  
 Dragoon Guards, 64  
 Drop Trench, 229  
 Dublin Fusiliers (Royal), 4, 262  
 Duck's Bill, 4  
 Durham Light Infantry, 243-4

EAUCOURT L'ABBAYE, 208, 224-34,  
     243, 271  
 Engineers, Royal, 53, 85, 99, 226  
 Essex Regiment, 22, 96, 220  
 Evin-Malmaison, 116

FACTORY CORNER, 229-30  
 Falfemont Farm, 169-70, 271  
 Fanshawe, Lieut.-General, 286  
 Farmer's Road, 248  
 Favière Trench, 27  
 Flers, 33, 62, 80, 124, 164, 178, 188-  
     92, 202, 208, 211, 270, 275  
 Flying Corps, German, 32, 120-2  
 Flying Corps, Royal, 8-10, 17, 32-3,  
     104-24, 180-1, 204  
 Fregicourt, 204, 210  
 Freyberg, Lieut.-Colonel, C.B., 259-60  
 Fricourt, 9-10, 13, 17, 23-5, 30,  
     34-46, 62, 67, 97, 144, 170, 270,  
     285  
 Fritz Trench, 67

GALLWITZ, GENERAL VON, 125  
 Gap Trench, 191  
 George, King, 144  
 Ginchy, 12, 79, 124, 160, 164-6,  
     170-4, 195, 270, 284  
 Gird Trench, 206-9  
 Givenchy, 4  
 Glasgow Highlanders, 4  
 Gloucestershire Regiment, 81-2,  
     154-5  
 Gommecourt, 8, 13, 284  
 Goose Alley, 229  
 Gordon Highlanders, 26, 72, 74,  
     97  
 Gough, Sir Hubert de la P., 33,  
     285  
 Grandcourt, 12, 117, 266-7, 269  
 Guards' Brigade, 192-8, 276, 284  
 Gueudecourt, 63, 203, 205-6, 208-11  
     232, 239, 269-70, 275  
 Guillemont, 34, 49, 80, 124, 130-3,  
     138, 161, 164-6, 169-71, 270, 272,  
     284  
 Gunfire, pheno ena caused by, 14

m

HAIG, SIR DOUGLAS, Field-Marshal,  
     8, 33, 144, 286  
 Hansa Line, 263  
 Hardecourt, 203  
 Havrincourt, 117  
 Hazy Trench, 240  
 Hébuterne, 17  
 Hessian Trench, 224, 233

- High Wood, 59, 62-4, 68-9, 78-80,  
90-1, 131, 137-9, 171-3, 178,  
187-8, 210, 229, 255, 266, 271-2
- Highland Division, 164, 254-8, 284
- Highland Light Infantry, 4
- Horne, Lieut.-General Sir H. S.,  
K.C.B., 5, 285
- Horseshoe, The, 34, 40, 271
- Houthem, 117
- Howell, Brigadier-General Philip, 160
- Hulluch, 4
- Hunter-Weston, Lieut.-General Sir  
A., K.C.B., 5, 284
- IMMELMANN, CAPTAIN, 111-3
- Inniskilling Fusiliers (Royal), 4, 96
- Irish Division, 164-5, 171-3, 284
- Irish Fusiliers (Royal), 21-2, 41
- Irish Regiment (Royal), 68
- Irish Rifles (Royal), 21-2
- Irles, 117
- JACOB, LIEUT.-GENERAL C. W., C.B.,  
285
- Joffre, Marshal, 144, 159
- KENT (EAST) REGIMENT, 128
- Kent (West) Regiment (Royal), 50
- King George's Hill, 144
- King's (Liverpool) Regiment, 4, 27-8,  
132
- King's Own Scottish Borderers, 22,  
132
- King's Royal Rifle Corps, 163, 191
- Kitchener, Earl, 2
- LA BOISSELLE, 10, 13, 19, 26, 30, 34,  
39, 42, 49, 82-4, 87, 270, 285
- Labour Battalion, 85
- La Briqueterie, 27-8
- Lagnicourt, 117
- Lancashire Division, 96, 98
- Lancashire Fusiliers, 4
- Lancashire (East) Regiment, 20-1
- Lancashire Regiment (Loyal North),  
4, 246
- Lancers, 17th, 144
- Le Barque, 230, 243
- Leicestershire Regiment, 208
- Leipzig Redoubt, 19, 28-9, 218
- Lens, 115-7
- Le Sars, 80, 228-34, 243, 248, 271
- Lesbœufs, 124, 202-5, 211, 233, 270,  
272, 275
- Le Transloy, 208, 233-4, 239, 243
- Leuze Wood, 124, 169, 171-3, 203
- Lewis Guns, 163
- Libercourt, 114-6
- Ligny Thillo, 243
- Lille, 117
- Lincolnshire Regiment, 53
- Liverpool Irish Rifles, 132
- London Division, 188, 190-1, 277, 284
- Longueval, 12, 34, 58-9, 64-6, 72-80,  
89, 202-3, 270
- MACHINE GUNS, 21-2, 30-1, 98, 146-7,  
163, 166, 186, 196-7, 199, 242-4
- McKubbin, Lieutenant, 111-3
- Maetz Horn Farm, 133
- Mametz, 13-19, 23-6, 34-49, 62, 67,  
71, 97, 144, 170, 270-1, 283, 285
- Manchester Regiment, 27, 224
- Maricourt, 26
- Marlborough Wood, 40
- Marne, Battle of the, 92
- Martinpuich, 62, 81, 124, 134-5, 137,  
172, 187, 198-200, 211, 270, 275
- Maubeuge, 117
- Maurepas, 203
- Meat Trench, 207
- Meaulte, 62
- Middlesex Regiment, 4, 96, 98, 132-3,  
220-2
- Miraumont, 117, 135, 224, 234, 267
- Misty Trench, 240
- Montauban, 19, 26-8, 30, 39-40,  
179-80, 200-1, 270
- Montcalm, 184
- Morland, Lieut.-General Sir T.,  
K.C.B., 5, 285
- Morval, 124, 195, 197, 202-7, 211,  
213, 233, 239, 270, 275
- Mounds, The, 245-6
- Mouquet Farm, 85, 128, 133, 136-7,  
167-70, 218-20, 225, 270-1, 285
- Munro, General, 3
- Munster Alley, 88, 133, 137, 272
- Mutton Trench, 207
- Mystery Corner, 191
- NAVAL DIVISION, GERMAN, 276
- Naval Division, Royal, 252-4, 256,  
259-62, 276, 284
- Newfoundland Regiment, 54, 77, 96,  
98, 239-40, 276
- New Zealand Division, 188-90, 199-  
200, 228, 277
- No Man's Land, 20-2, 66, 69, 149-52
- Norfolk Regiment, 28, 224
- Northumberland Fusiliers, 4, 41-2,  
44, 52, 224

OSTRICOURT, 114-5

Otago, 189

Ovillers-la-Boisselle, 20, 34, 56, 72-8,  
82-3, 97-8, 145, 218, 270, 272, 285

Ox Trench, 207

Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire  
Light Infantry, 4, 162

PEAKE'S WOOD, 40

Pendant Copse, 20

Péronne, 234

Phalempin, 114-5

Pioneer Battalion, 49, 225-7

Poelcappelle, 117

Poincaré, M., 144

Poodles, The, 37-8

Pozières, 47, 78-89, 128, 166, 270, 285

Provin, 114-5

Prussian Guard, 43, 52, 158, 168-9,  
173, 248, 276

Puisieux, 32, 119, 267

Pulteney, Lieut.-General Sir W. P.,  
K.C.B., 5, 285

Pys, 248

QUADRANGLE, THE, 34, 40-1, 44-7,  
69, 271

Quadrilateral, The, 178, 193-8, 271

Quarry, The, 136-8

Queant, 117

Queen's, The (Royal West Surrey  
Regiment), 28, 50, 96

Quivrechain, 117

RAILWAY ALLEY, 34-8, 283

Railway Copse, 37

Rancourt, 204, 210

Rawlinson, Lieut.-General Sir Henry,  
K.C.B., 5, 33-5, 284-5

Recken, 117

Regina Trench, 233, 246, 248, 263,  
266

Rifle Brigade, 20, 93-5, 163, 191,  
252-3

River Trench, 267

Roisel, 117

Royal Fusiliers, 4, 86, 253

Royal Scots, 243

SAILLY-SAILLISEL, 233

St. Eloi, 4

St. Pierre Divion, 245, 250-3, 263-6,  
271

Savage, Lieutenant, 112-3

Saxon Division, 248

Schwaben Redoubt, 219, 222, 224,  
244-7, 252, 271-2

Scots Fusiliers (Royal), 28

Seaforth Highlanders, 22

Seclin, 117

Serre, 12, 18, 20, 30, 32, 97, 234, 267,  
284

Shelter Alley, 34, 37, 43

Shelter Wood, 34, 37, 271

Sherwood Foresters, 96, 224, 265

Shropshire Light Infantry, 4-5, 162,  
254

Signals Corps, 85, 258

Skyline Trench, 136

Somain, 117

Somerset Light Infantry, 20, 191,  
252-3

Somme, Battle of the, disposal of the  
French and British lines, 6, 12, 26;  
postponement through bad weather,  
8; preliminary operations, 8-11;  
opening stage, 13-33; progress  
from Fricourt to Mametz, 34-46;  
fight for Contalmaison, 47-54;  
breaking the German second line,  
55-77; Ovillers-la-Boisselle and  
Pozières, 78-91; effects of the  
battle on Allies, neutrals and  
enemies, 91-95; how future his-  
torians will regard it, 97; wearing  
the Germans down, 124-44; to-  
wards Thiepval, 145-60; tanks  
brought into action, 175-8; cap-  
ture of Flers, Martinpuich, and  
Courcelette, 178-99; seven villages  
captured in twelve days, 200-217;  
Thiepval, 218-27; Eaucourt  
l'Abbaye and Le Sars, 228-35;  
operations hampered by rain and  
mud, 236-44; Schwaben Redoubt  
stormed, 244-7; Beaumont Hamel,  
St Pierre Divion and Beaucourt,  
250-68; summary of operations,  
268-72; estimated total casualties,  
273-4; number of German Divi-  
sions engaged, 274

South African Division, 72-7, 164,  
243, 276-7

Staffordshire (South) Regiment, 28,  
41

Strassburg Trench, 245

Stuff Redoubt, 219, 224, 244-6, 263,  
266, 271

Stuff Trench, 246

Suffolk Regiment, 97, 138-40, 220

Sugar Factory, Courcelette, 198

Surrey (East) Regiment, 128



- Sussex Regiment (Royal), 128  
 Suzanne, 16  
 Switch Line, 80, 191, 194, 255  
  
 TANGLE, THE 230  
 Tanks, 175-83, 192, 195, 198-9,  
 208-10, 220-1, 225, 230, 240, 261-2,  
 264  
 Tea Support Trench, 191  
 Thiepval, 12-13, 16-20, 30, 85, 97,  
 120-1, 124, 145-8, 160, 210, 218-27,  
 234, 270-1, 275-6, 285  
 Thillo, 135  
 Times, The, v., 62, 95  
 Tourmignies, 114-5  
 Transport Companies, 100  
 Tunnelling Companies, 3  
 Trônes Wood, 34, 49-50, 72, 74, 78,  
 131-2, 202, 271-2  
  
 ULSTER DIVISION, 20-22, 98, 251-2,  
 277, 284  
  
 VAUX, 16  
 Velu, 117  
 Verdun, 4-5, 7, 11, 92, 134, 280  
 Vimy, 4, 146  
 Vyfuegen, 117  
  
 WALES (SOUTH) BORDERERS, 22  
 Waller, Sergeant, 111-3  
  
 Warlencourt, 117, 135, 228, 231-2,  
 239, 243-4, 248  
 Warwickshire Regiment (Royal),  
 81-2, 97, 135, 145, 154, 253  
 Warwickshire Territorials, 20  
 Waterlot Farm, 74, 130, 133, 271  
 Wedge Wood, 169, 272  
 Wellington, New Zealand, 190  
 Welsh Division, 44, 49, 277, 284  
 Welsh Fusiliers (Royal), 4, 41, 97  
 Westrooske, 117  
 William II., German Emperor, 8, 11  
 Wiltshire Regiment, 155-9  
 Windmill, The, 87-9, 124, 134, 137,  
 266, 270-1  
 Wonderwork, The, 218-20  
 Worcestershire Regiment, 81-2,  
 155-9, 241, 245  
 Wounded, treatment of, 59-61, 91  
 Württemberg Division, 52, 219-20  
  
 Y RAVINE, 255-8, 262  
 York and Lancaster Regiment, 20-1  
 Yorkshire Light Infantry, 191  
 Yorkshire (West) Regiment, 224  
 Ypres, 4, 8, 146  
  
 ZENITH TRENCH, 240-1  
 Zeppelins, 199  
 Zollern Redoubt, 219, 224, 266, 271  
 Zonnebeke Château, 117

