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THE FIFTH ARMY



*Photo of painting by Robinson, Canterbury*

*General Sir Hubert Gough*  
*From a painting by Frank O. Salisbury*

# THE FIFTH ARMY

BY

GENERAL SIR HUBERT GOUGH

G.C.M.G., K.C.B., K.C.V.O., ETC.

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## PREFACE

THIS book which I venture to present to the public purposes to throw some light on the great and decisive part the British people and army played in the War with a spirit of unselfish devotion. If it achieves that end I shall be satisfied. I have not relied entirely upon my own knowledge and recollection of the events with which I deal, and the access to official diaries which was kindly accorded to me by Sir James Edmonds and the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence has been very helpful. The maps are the work of Brigadier General Harvey Kearsley, and I am safe in saying that their clearness will be appreciated by the reader. Maps 3, 8, 9 and 10 have been copied from those published in the *Official History of the War*, and I would like to take this opportunity of tendering to the Controller of His Majesty's Stationery Office my sincere thanks for his courtesy and consideration in allowing Brigadier General Kearsley to make use of them. My very grateful thanks are further due to Brigadier General Kearsley for his continuous and most careful criticisms and helpful suggestions from the time I first took up the pen until the work was completed. I also desire to acknowledge my great debt to Major General Sir Neill Malcolm and Mr. Evelyn Jones for their most valuable advice and assistance. I have been fortunate, too, in the interest and the advice which I have received from others who have kindly read the MS. and who, from their knowledge of events, have checked many facts and supplied others and given me much encouragement. I proffer my very grateful thanks to Major General T. T. Pitman,

Mr. W. B. Maxwell, the late General Sir Alexander Cobbe, Major General Sir Percy Hambro, Brigadier General F. S. Piggott, my cousin, Arnold de la Poer, and Mr. C. S. Wheeler ; and finally to my literary agent, Mr. Leonard Moore, who has placed his valuable experience at my service.

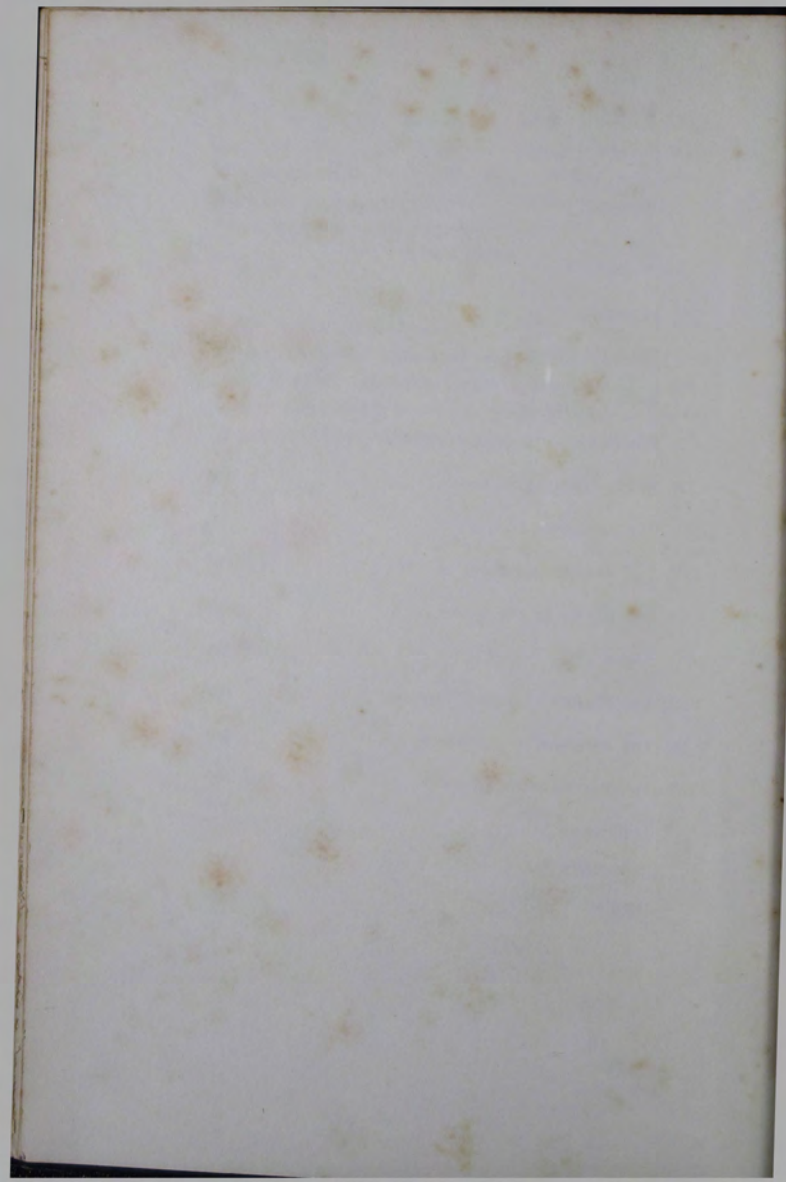
HUBERT GOUGH.

The 'Notes' which appear at intervals in the first two chapters are merely explanatory and are inserted in order to enable the reader to obtain a view of the general situation ; the facts given therein were not known to us, the more humble actors in the drama, at the time.

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## INTRODUCTION

'**L**OOK at those people! Even now they don't realise what a volcano they are sitting on!'

It was the gruff voice of Sir William Robertson speaking. Together we surveyed the brilliant scene at the Court Ball at Buckingham Palace: the splendour of the diplomatic and service uniforms, the gorgeous dresses of the ladies, and the beauty of the surroundings all combined to please and perhaps dazzle the eye. A casual observer would have said that war was the very last thing on earth that could have any relation to this display of magnificence. Yet the Sarajevo murders were several weeks old—the State Ball had already been postponed a fortnight as an act of mourning for the Austrian Archduke. For years people had talked about war—talked about it in that half-believing manner which so irritates serious men. Now the war clouds lowered overhead, but did not seem to attract serious notice.

First impressions of war vary with every individual personality. Some men trace their war memoirs back to the very date of the Sarajevo murders, claiming that even then they had sensed the actual beginnings of the conflict. Others admit frankly that not until that fateful August week-end did they realise the serious nature of the situation. For myself, it seems that my war impressions begin at the State Ball at Buckingham Palace. I could not help remarking the anxious demeanour of the nation's leaders; scraps of conversation furnished food for serious thought; in spite of the superficial brilliance, there was a tenseness in the atmosphere which the serious could feel. And as I returned to my command in Ireland I knew that the cyclone was approaching rapidly: within a few days the storm would break: and I knew, too, that England lay within the area of its breaking.

Yet little did I foresee of the magnitude or duration of the War. In the summer of 1914 a man who anticipated the conflicts of 1918 would have been laughed to scorn. But I did

realise that it would be a desperate struggle, and that we could not fight Germany without suffering heavy casualties, that many dear comrades and friends must fall. Even less did I foresee my own advancement from Brigadier General of a Cavalry Brigade to the command of an Army of half-a-million men. Fate plays strange tricks with careers, and mine was no exception.

This book is not an easy task to contemplate. For many years I have hesitated over the question as to whether it should be written at all. My difficulties in writing it are very real. It is no easy task to attempt in one volume to cater for the needs of three entirely distinct classes of readers—for the historian, for the soldier and for that mass of civilians who, though they are far from being students of strategy and tactics, yet remember that their men fought in the War, many died gallantly and faithfully doing their duty, and many others were desperately maimed and wounded.

Their requirements are so widely varied. The historian wants details and facts in the largest available quantities. The military man (and in my case this term will include many thousands of ex-soldiers) wants reasons and opinions as well; it is not enough for him to know that the Xth Brigade was ordered to do such-and-such a thing—he wants to know *why*. The ordinary reader is not necessarily interested in purely military details: to him the drama of the story is perhaps its main interest. My hope is to hold the attention of each of these classes, for I propose to tell a plain and unvarnished tale of the War from my particular viewpoint. I hope that the few criticisms and adverse comments to be found will not be ascribed to any carping or querulous spirit, for it is not my desire to blame others, when we all made mistakes, but I endeavour to state facts and to be faithful to historical truth, while here and there, where necessary, I venture to deduce lessons and conclusions which may serve as guides in the future. My experience varied from the limited vision of a Brigade Commander to the fairly broad horizon of an Army Commander necessarily in touch with the inner courses of the strategy of the War. I shall make no attempt to write a complete history of the War, but shall try to reproduce the pictures of War as seen by my own eyes, and the thoughts which impelled my own actions.

In the chapters that follow, therefore, the reader will find a



plain tale of the War as I saw it myself. It is a tale not without variety, for its action ranges from casual cavalry skirmishes to desperate battles between enormous armies. To many people, of course, the chief interest in the book lies in the history of the Fifth Army itself, and particularly in its great 'victory in retreat' in 1918.

Many of the essential facts reported are, of course, not new, and students can co-relate them with official histories. Whenever I have to make any of the 'revelations' and 'disclosures' so beloved by certain people, I have tried to write them as unsensationally as is possible. I may say at once that the book is not an 'Apology' for the Fifth Army, as might be anticipated by a reader who had heard nothing of the War since the stupid and incredible rumours of 1918. The Fifth Army needs no Apology, as a bare recital of facts shows.

As I write, I hope that the people of the British Empire will realise something of the immense burden we cheerfully accepted during the War, and of the loyalty with which we served our Allies and the Cause. May it serve to make us understand that we are a great and generous people, that we are efficient, and that, though we may not be infallible, we are by no means stupid; that our leadership was intelligent, instructed and sound—though it was perforce predominantly influenced by the general situation of our Allies—and that our officers and men were thoroughly capable, gallant and devoted.

But let us also remember that we possess these great attributes, and did these great deeds, only because our forefathers before us laid the solid foundations of our characters in a respect for duty, for courage, for discipline in our everyday life, and for generosity and fair play.

If we as a people fail to maintain these characteristics we can never hope again to come successfully through such a stern trial, should it fall to our lot, or even to maintain intact the great heritage which is ours. But if I know anything of the British race, I say with confidence that its steadfast courage and its great characteristics will endure.

I offer but one novelty to the reading public, maybe—I am tremendously proud of the part played by my countrymen during the War. I know that many books have been written—by British authors and soldiers—which tend to show that we were inferior to some of our Allies in the quality of our com-

manders and of our troops. I say most emphatically that this is a ridiculous illusion, utterly unsupported by facts, and an opinion which ought not to be held by British people. That some, and especially some British Ministers, were led into this false conception was deplorable, and many unfortunate consequences during and after the War are traceable to this ill-founded belief. My story does not seek to belittle the French Army, which by its great and often unnecessarily extravagant sacrifices carried the main burden of the first two years of the War. Yet at the same time, by a simple narration of actual events, I hope to show that the British people can be enormously proud of their soldiers and commanders, who compare far more than favourably with Allies and enemies alike, and who will pass into History among the worthiest and most honoured representatives of British arms.

Let us pass on at once, then, to the story of the War : a story of courage and hope, of doubt and despair : a story of success and failure, of the gladness of victory and the bitterness of defeat : a story of anxious decision, of danger and of death. And all through these variations runs the unconquerable spirit of the British soldier, exerting his valour and offering his life for the just cause which his country espoused.



## CHAPTER I

### MONS

*Mobilisation—The 3rd Cavalry Brigade in France—The Deployment of the B.E.F.—First Contact with the Germans—The Battle of Mons—‘The Cavalry Division Field Day’—The Retreat from Mons—The Battle of Le Cateau—‘Orders’ from G.H.Q.—Cavalry Actions—The End of the Retreat.*

#### I

ORDERS for mobilisation were received by telegram at the Curragh at 5.20 p.m. on 4th August 1914, and so complete *Mobilisation.* were the arrangements and organisation of the British Army <sup>4 Aug.</sup> that all orders for this complicated business were issued to units in less than one hour after the receipt of the telegram. Mobilisation proceeded, in truth, ‘according to plan’—a phrase which later on was to become a euphemism to cover up the details of a defeat.

All was bustle, excitement and eagerness; the atmosphere was infectiously patriotic, and the men seized every available chance to cheer, or to sing the National Anthem. The great majority thought the War could not last long; such expressions of opinion as ‘it was too big and too expensive’ were rife, and there was much talk of ‘being back for Christmas.’ I cannot say these spontaneous sentiments reflected my own feelings. I knew the value of the German Army, its size, efficiency and courage; I realised that the near future inevitably portended heavy casualties and the loss of many friends. I knew how small was the British Army—an almost insignificant detail among the European masses. I had made two visits to the French Army during the previous year, and though I thought its system of higher training was good, as also its theory of tactical security, yet it had struck me that the French did not realise sufficiently the value of modern fire power and would experience severe shocks when they eventually went into battle; they were too prone to attack in heavy formation, to rely too much on the bayonet, and to undervalue the power of entrenchments and the defensive. In only one direction were they in

advance of us—in the handling of artillery ; their batteries were trained to fire from behind cover and in concealed positions. A common phrase of their artillery commanders was, '*Une batterie vue est une batterie perdue*' ; I had borrowed this from them, and had inculcated it into the training of my own two horse artillery batteries (D and E). As events turned out, these batteries came into action with me as early as the 22nd August. They opened fire from a carefully-concealed position, and it was well they did so, for the Germans out-ranged our little 'horse-guns' and very soon replied by pitching some twenty shells on or behind the ridge, but they hit no one. It was not till after the Battle of Le Cateau, where too many of our guns were exposed in the open and suffered much in consequence, that our artillery generally began to learn this necessary lesson.

But I am anticipating : let us return to mobilisation. It was a time of bustle, but not of confusion. Arrangements covering a hundred different problems all worked smoothly and without a hitch, and I did not hear one grouse about anything being overlooked or any requirement not anticipated. Major Harvey Kearsley was my Brigade Major, and I do not think any Staff Officer displayed more forethought and care than he did during these very crowded days.

The 3rd Cavalry Brigade was composed as follows :

Brigade Major	. Major H. Kearsley, 5th Dn. Gds.
Staff Captain	. Captain G. Brooke, 16th Lancers.
A.D.C.	. Lt. G. Ramsden, 5th Lancers.
4th Hussars .	. Lt. Colonel I. Hogg.
5th Lancers .	. Lt. Colonel A. Parker.
16th Lancers	. Lt. Colonel M. L. MacEwen.
3rd Brigade R.H.A.	Colonel R. W. Breeks.
D Battery	. Major G. Gillson.
E Battery	. Major A. Foreman.

A minor problem of mobilisation was presented by one's domestic arrangements. My wife decided to move at once to England so as to be nearer the centre of things, and this entailed packing up the whole household, storing all our furniture, and sending over the three children—all in the course of ten days. I remember how early we had to start to entrain Brigade  
 15 Aug. H.Q.— at 5 a.m. on Saturday, 15th August. My wife and all the household staff were up at 3 a.m. seeing to an early breakfast and confirming that nothing had been forgotten from my kit.

All that day, trains bringing troops from the Curragh and other parts of Ireland poured into Dublin ; the units marched at once to the docks ready to embark.

The ships in some cases were not quite ready to receive us—much alteration had of course to be done in order to fit them for the conveyance of horses, guns and wagons. Sufficient gangways were not provided for some of the ships, and nearly every horse had to be slung bodily on board with the help of a crane, so that the embarkation took considerably longer than our calculations had allowed. One incident made me realise how little the people at large comprehended the coming of War, and what it meant, for when the alterations were almost completed, and we were waiting to go aboard, the workmen calmly knocked off for lunch !

H.Q. of the brigade sailed in the *Atlantian* with the 4th Hussars. The captain of this ship was a gallant and friendly 'sea-dog.' He was indeed a cheerful optimist, for he got all of us on board to write our names in his book, as 'it would make it more interesting for him when he studied the casualty lists !' We did not sail until about 3 a.m. on Sunday ; I had dined at the Shelbourne Hotel with my wife, and she came back with me to the docks about 10 p.m. on Saturday. It was then raining steadily, the men were all on board and a large group of women were standing or sitting on the quay, many sobbing loudly. It was not an encouraging atmosphere in which to say farewell, particularly when embarking on such an enterprise. However, it had to be done, and it was no good prolonging the agony and keeping her in the rain, so I said 'Good-bye' and sent her off in a cab, there being no taxis in Dublin in those times.

The next two days were calm and lovely. We passed Land's End, which I saw for the first time in my life. We met very few ships, naval or otherwise, and were unescorted. The German submarine fortunately had not learned to venture far afield at that early date, and our own Navy blocked and safely guarded all approaches to the Irish and English Channels.

We arrived off Havre about 6.30 a.m. on the 18th and started disembarking as soon as we were alongside. On the *Atlantian* there was again some difficulty and delay in disembarking. Nearly all the horses on the lower orlop deck had to be slung out because there was only one gangway of the right length. The carts and wagons were down below, and the French cranes could not extract them. They had first to be slung out of the hold by

the ship's derricks, and then on shore by the French cranes. Hampered by a multitude of these inconveniences, it took over fifteen hours to disembark from the *Atlantian*, whereas the 16th Lancers got off the *Indian* in three hours, as the necessary gangways had been made on board during the voyage. The 5th Lancers had already arrived, and the 16th Lancers came in an hour after us.

19 Aug. That night the various units of the brigade left Havre by train; and after spending the whole of the 19th in the train our destination was eventually revealed as Maubeuge. We detrained the Brigade H.Q. about 11 p.m. under most brilliant electric lights! In these early days we were able to do so without fear of interruption from aircraft, although at a distance of only 30 miles from the frontier; two years later neither side would have dared to keep such arc lamps lit within that distance of the front.

20 Aug. Kearsley and I lay down for a few hours on the floor of the Railway Transport office, but by six o'clock in the morning we had reported to General Allenby's Headquarters in the town. There we received our orders to march the brigade to Cousolre, a village some nine miles east of Maubeuge, but very little other information was forthcoming; in particular, we were not told of the position of the French, in spite of the fact that their Fifth Army was concentrated round Charleroi, less than twenty miles on our right, and a cavalry corps, under Sordet, was still nearer. I knew Sordet quite well, having spent a fortnight with him at the French cavalry manoeuvres in 1913. He was a resolute, active, gallant little gentleman; short, fair-haired and blue-eyed. He was decided in character and intelligent, but was so imbued with the offensive spirit that he would not admit the use of fire by cavalry except in the rarest of circumstances.

He was essentially 'a Commander,' and on one occasion when discussing tactical training with his officers, I heard him say to them that unity of doctrine and ideas was essential in a cavalry division and that he wished his officers to cultivate it, '*mais si non, je saurais l'imposer.*' These tendencies in French training were emphasised in my reports to the War Office.

As we left Maubeuge in the early morning large parties of French soldiers were cutting down the trees and clearing the glacis of the old-fashioned fortress, and it brought home to Kearsley and myself that we were really in the war zone. However, when the Germans invested the place, it held out for



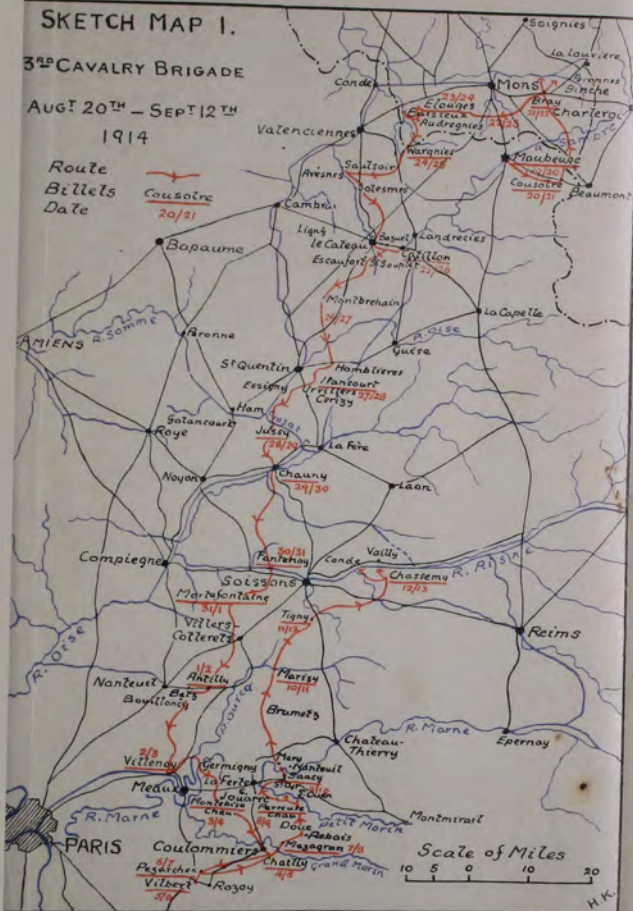
# SKETCH MAP 1.

3<sup>RD</sup> CAVALRY BRIGADE

AUG 20<sup>TH</sup> - SEPT 12<sup>TH</sup>  
1914

Rouge  
Billets  
Date

Cousoire  
20/21



Scale of Miles

10 5 0 10 20

H.K.

SKETCH MAP I.

NEAVARY BRIDGE

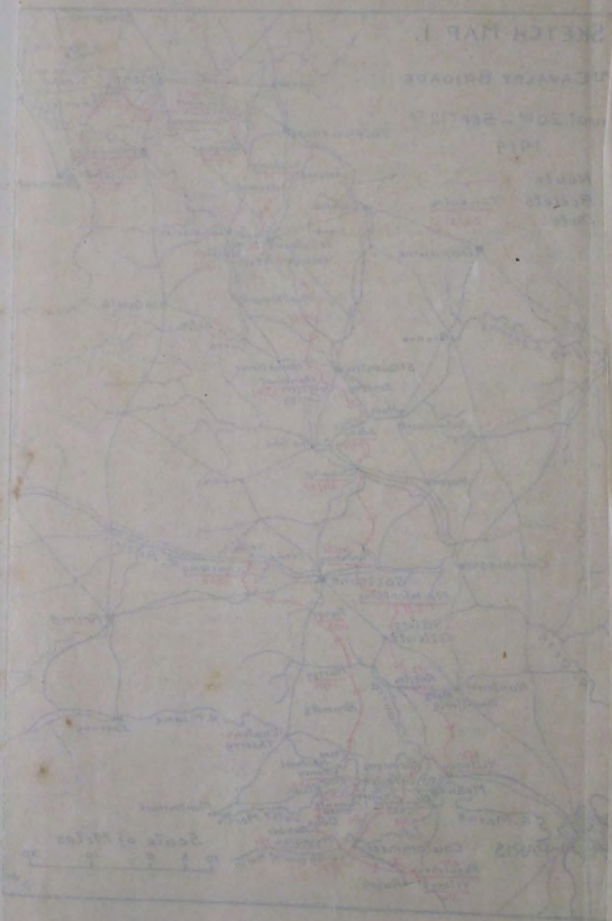
WEST 30W - 80N

1817

WATER

BRIDGE

1817



only twelve days; the garrison, which numbered 35,000 men, lost nearly half its strength in killed and wounded. As events proved, these troops would have done more useful work if they had retired with the main French Army, and had fought with it in the open field.

When we had settled down into our billets for the first time in France, I was invited to attend at the Mairie, where, after some ceremonious addresses, a small French girl dressed in white presented me with a large bouquet of flowers! It was a very sweet little ceremony, but the bouquet was an embarrassing addition to my kit—even though a temporary one.

But the time for courtesies was soon passed by. We were now on the scene of action: the first act of the mightiest drama in history was already being played. Within a few hours we received our cue, and stepped from the wings to play our part in this stupendous tragedy. No one of us could anticipate that the face and outlook of the whole world would be forcibly and radically changed before the final curtain was rung down.

*Note.*—By the 20th August the concentration of the British Expeditionary Force was practically complete: the II Corps east of Landrecies; the I Corps in rear further to the south-west on either side of the Landrecies-Guise road; the cavalry east of Maubeuge. On this day Joffre ordered the general advance. The British were to move north-eastward by way of Soignies so that, when the French Fifth Army had passed the Sambre, they would be ready to wheel to the east and envelop the right of the German advance from Brussels.

## II

In the comparatively humble and restricted sphere of a Brigade Commander in Ireland, I had naturally not been in a position to know the inner workings of the Cabinet, or to have any influence on the military plans which governed the deployment of the French and the small British Army which went to their assistance. Once we entered the theatre of war, however, responsible commanders should have been informed in the clearest manner of the general plan of campaign and of the positions of all forces operating near us. Yet too often we only received such general orders as 'March on X'; 'Assemble at Y'—the object of the movement being withheld. A blindfolded man cannot move intelligently. Of the two dangers—the risk of one's own orders falling into the hands of the enemy,



or the lack of intelligent and coherent initiative in commanders due to the absence of information—the latter is far the more serious.

This complete secrecy about the general situation, the position of forces in our neighbourhood, and the plans of our commanders, was, I think, carried to excess, and it was contrary to all our Staff training previous to the War. It undoubtedly prevented units from exercising their full powers on many occasions during those first critical days. We often groped about in the fog of war, not doing all we might have done—or sometimes doing too much ! At times, troops were committed to an unnecessary action which might sometimes be almost called sacrifice in an endeavour to be loyal to one's friends, whereas the situation impelling the action had been radically altered—or maybe had never existed ! Nevertheless, England should realise that such acts of loyalty and displays of energy are symptomatic of a great people with great leaders ; that war, once entered upon against a powerful, courageous and efficient enemy, can never be free from mischance and buffets and violent turns of the wheel of fortune before victory can be achieved. The British Empire may be eternally grateful that, in spite of inevitable errors and failures, her sons possessed the fortitude to remain steadfast through the long and terrible strain—the quality, above all others, which is essential to win through in such a terrible struggle.

The first great error of the campaign on the Western Front was the strategical deployment of the French and British Armies, and for this the French Staff must be held entirely responsible.

The French left wing did not cover all the avenues open to the German advance ; despite the clearest indications both before and in the early days of the War, no adequate disposition was made against the turning movement through Belgium which actually took place ; the British Army, being on the extreme left flank, was therefore exposed to the full force of the German onslaught.

The French were still suffering from the inferiority complex induced by their defeats in 1870, and in the determination to counteract its evil influences their leaders had cultivated the doctrine that the offensive at all times was the secret of success. Basing their strategy on what they thought was in accordance with the principles of Napoleon, they had studied—and even

discussed in print at great length in one of their principal magazines—a decisive and rapid manoeuvre to break through the hostile centre in the direction of Metz and north of it. Their actual operations closely followed those discussed in this magazine; they might have been sound enough had the circumstances been more favourable and the plan not such an open 'secret.' Furthermore, they required a sufficient concentration of force at the point of impact and the necessary time to make the attack successful. Neither of these essentials was present in 1914. The great delaying and resisting power of modern firearms when in the hands of brave, efficient and well-led troops was overlooked, and the force to overcome this was insufficient, while the deadly pressure of the German flank attack was felt at a much earlier stage than had been anticipated.

The mistakes of the French were also largely due to the fact that their original calculations had not contemplated that the Germans would leave only 4 corps (3 active and 1 reserve) against the Russians on the eastern frontier, nor that they would at once employ a large number of their reserve corps in front line, not to mention the march through Belgium of 3 out of a total of 7 German armies on the Western Front. Political considerations may have induced the French to neglect the anticipation of this latter eventuality, but between the attack on Liège on the 5th August and the battles of Charleroi and Mons on the 22nd-24th August there was plenty of information available to show the true state of affairs, and they had ample time to rectify some of their original mistakes in dispositions. That this was not done reflects seriously on the French leadership.

The British Army would have been better placed, not so dangerously exposed, and would have covered the French flank equally well, if it had been concentrated in echelon a little distance to the left rear of the French Fifth Army. This was the opinion of certain of our military leaders who were against a concentration of the British forces in any area in advance of Amiens. Major General Henry Wilson had, however, already considered with the French the area around Le Cateau and Avesnes. Finally it was agreed to leave the decision with the French, who decided that the place for the British Army should be on the left of the line of the French Armies, which it would thus prolong.

I am not sure that either Lord Kitchener or Mr. Asquith ever forgave Henry Wilson for the dangerous position our Army was placed in, and for which they held him partly responsible.

The faults in the original dispositions of the French invited a defeat that might have proved a disaster: the illogical tactical training of their troops led to appalling losses—it is not generally known that in the first week's actual fighting the French suffered over 300,000 casualties! It was fortunate that these impending events were hidden from us by their own shadows, and it was with supreme confidence in itself that the little British Expeditionary Force marched towards the advancing enemy.

### III<sup>1</sup>

*Friday,*     The Cavalry Division, with the 5th Cavalry Brigade (which  
*21 Aug.*     was at the time independent, but which was now placed under Allenby for this advance), moved northwards on the morning of 21st August, crossing the Belgian frontier, and eventually reaching the line of the Canal du Centre and the River Haine. We set out 'to cover the movement of the British Army north of the Sambre,' but with no information of the position or intentions of our own force nor of the French Army. All that we knew of the enemy was that 'small parties might be expected from the N.E.'

Before our first march was completed my 3rd Cavalry Brigade, which had been moving on the right rear of the 5th Cavalry Brigade and acting as the right flank-guard, was brought up on its left, between it and the 1st Cavalry Brigade. The 5th Cavalry Brigade thus found itself on the extreme right of the British Army at Binche, where it obtained touch with the French cavalry.

*Satur-*     That night the 3rd Cavalry Brigade billeted at Bray, some  
*day,*     2 miles in rear of the River Haine, along part of which my  
*22 Aug.*     outposts were disposed. Next morning we had breakfasted and were saddled up by 4 a.m. and our patrols were pushed some 5 or 6 miles northwards of the Haine. Up to 10.30 a.m. they reported the country clear of the enemy as far as Houdeng-Roeulx and Gottignies in our immediate front, but they obtained from the inhabitants the news of large German forces about Soignies, 8 miles to the north.

Shortly after this hour the Mayor of Binche telephoned that

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 2, p. 10.

'German forces of all arms were advancing from La Louvière on Haine-St.-Paul and Trivières, and their cavalry was already at St. Vaast.'

The interest, excitement and anxiety with which we received these first reports of the enemy's advance can be imagined: the moment was electric, and in spite of the magnitude of subsequent actions in which I was involved, I still retain most vivid recollections of this first clash with the Germans, obscure in proportion though it may be. The climax came a little after 10.40 a.m., when we first descried the German infantry deploying against us. Immediately afterwards we saw some German guns unlimber in the open; they began to fire on the village of Péronnes, which was held by a squadron of the Greys of Chetwode's 5th Cavalry Brigade. I at once moved up a squadron of the 16th Lancers to the high ground north-east of Bray in support of the Greys in Péronnes.

The German infantry advanced on the village in fairly open order down the long bare slope. They were still some 3 miles from us and it was not easy to make them out clearly in the haze of a very hot August day. At this hour my two batteries from the Curragh were sent to me by General Allenby and were at once moved into a position of readiness behind the cover of a ridge.

That guns should come into action in the open was not in accordance with the usual custom of the Germans even in those early stages of the War, but I presume they thought they were dealing with an outpost line, and that we had no guns in the vicinity. E Battery opened on them at 11 a.m.—the first British guns to fire in that long War. None of us could then foresee that it would be more than four years before the last shot was fired, nor could we then anticipate how enormously in numbers, weight and efficiency the British artillery was to increase during that period until it became the best and most efficient artillery in Europe.

But even by digging in the trails and cocking the guns up as much as possible on that day, the shells from our little horse artillery guns fell short of the German battery by several hundred yards. The enemy now opened on us, and put about twenty shells on the crest of the ridge and even over it, close to the 5th Lancers, who were waiting dismounted. But their fuses were not good, and we escaped with no casualties. The German infantry continued to advance steadily on the bridge at



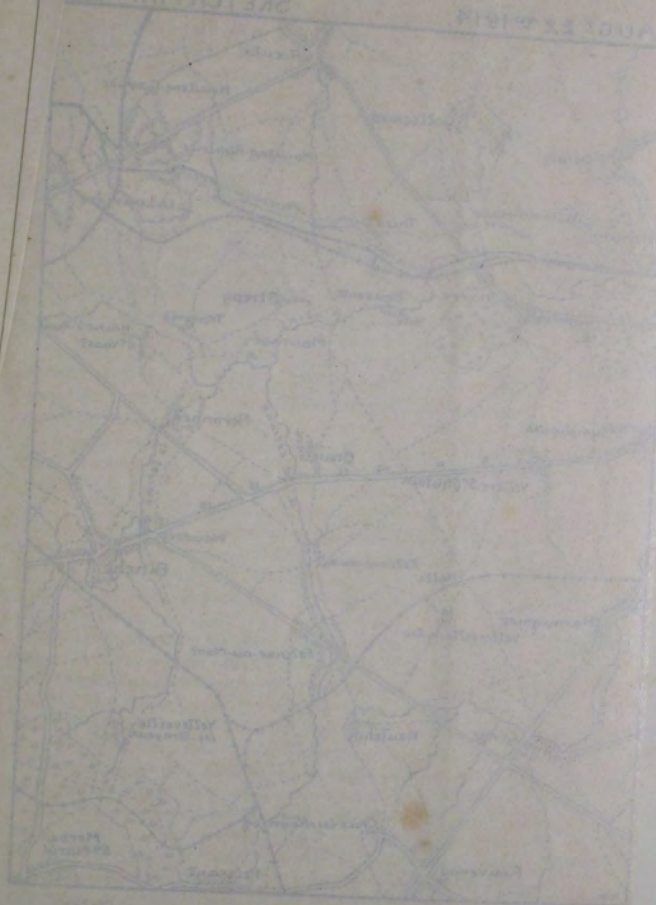
Péronnes. After holding on till pretty close quarters the Greys retired, not before they had inflicted a good many casualties on the Germans, and suffered some on their own part. Shortly afterwards we could see the village in flames and a few hostile infantry appeared among the stooks of corn on the hill on our side of the River Haine.

General Allenby and his Staff Officer, John Vaughan, now came up and joined me. The order for the Cavalry Division to be prepared to move west to the left flank of the Army had already been received, and so General Allenby ordered us to retire about 1 p.m. We sent over to tell the 5th Cavalry Brigade that we were retiring, and told them that General Allenby wished them to fall back through Estinne-au-Val. The 5th Cavalry Brigade in consequence drew back south of my right flank and reported that they were retiring on Givry. The situation was by no means clear, and it was uncertain whether the Germans were going to continue their advance or were settling down for the night. At 3.30 p.m., therefore, I ordered a reconnaissance to be made with a view to finding out what they were doing. This reconnaissance was carried out very gallantly and efficiently by Lt. Tempest-Hicks, of the 16th Lancers, and his troop. It was a thrilling and exciting moment to watch his movements, which, the ground being open, were in full view of all his comrades. He eventually came under heavy fire, and practically galloped through the German infantry holding the top of the hill above Péronnes. His horse was shot, and two other horses killed, and one man was wounded, but we covered the troop with a few well-directed shells from E Battery, upon which the German infantry, who were lying among the corn stooks on the bare open hill-top, ran back over the crest, and enabled Hicks to get his troop safely back. He was one of our most gallant young officers; after being wounded on the Aisne, he went through nearly all the War with his men in the trenches, but was eventually killed by a chance shell some distance behind the lines—within a day or two of the end of the War!

About 5 p.m. I received orders from General Allenby to march the brigade from our present position, which was on the right flank of the British Army, across all the billets and columns of the I and II Corps to the extreme left flank of the Army, a distance, as far as my brigade was concerned, of over 20 miles. A march of such a nature, after being saddled up and more or less in action for over twelve hours, was a severe call

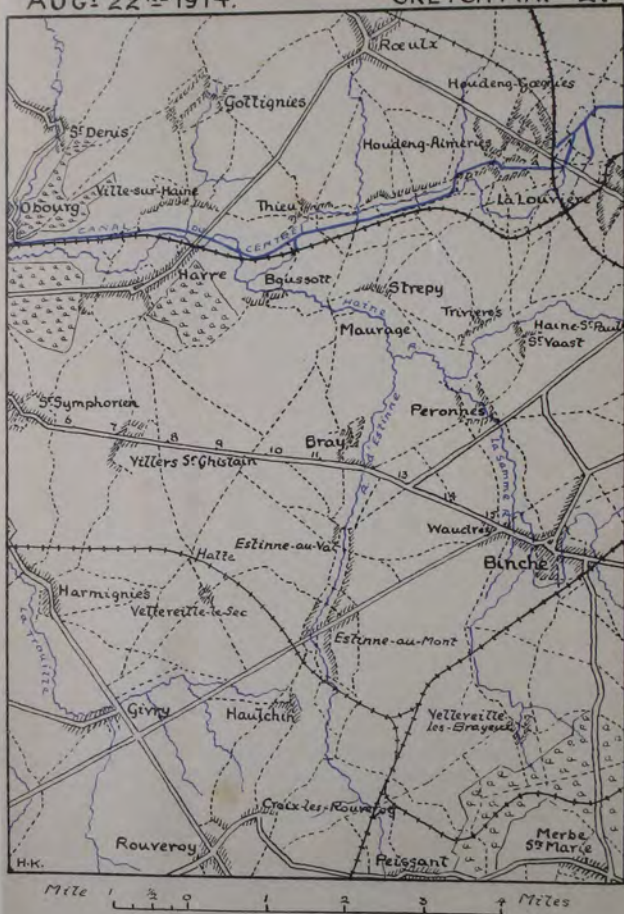
# SKETCH MAP 2

AUG 22 1914



100 Yds

SKETCH MAP 2.





to make on men and horses. We did not get into billets at Elouges till about 2 a.m. on 23rd August after a most trying <sup>23 Aug.</sup> march over stone pavé roads, hampered by the congestion of other troops and wagons in the dark, and with men and horses thoroughly weary.

During this march we noticed some small lights hovering rather low in the sky above us, and even imagined we could descry the dark form of an airship. It did not add to the comfort of the march, though at that early stage of the War we were happily ignorant of the power of the aerial bomb. It was indeed a German airship, as we have since learned, but it did not attack us—a lost opportunity, as the roads, congested far into the night, certainly presented a rare target.

As we came through the southern suburbs of Mons, we found its many great factories brilliantly lit, but all the employees—men and women—seemed to have crowded into the streets to see us pass. Looking at them with curiosity and interest under the bright lights of the factories kept me awake. I am sure if it had not been for these and similar unusual sights I should have fallen asleep in my saddle.

We now found that the four brigades of the Cavalry Division had been moved from right to left of the Army under orders from G.H.Q. The 5th Cavalry Brigade remained in its overnight position, under the orders of Sir Douglas Haig (I Corps). It seemed to us at the time difficult to justify either the move or the dispositions prior to it, when the whole of the cavalry had been ordered originally to the right flank of the British Army. It was by no means solely on this flank that the cavalry were required.

Joffre's instructions of 16th August to Sir John French regarding the use of the cavalry were as follows: 'In any case the (French) Cavalry Corps will cover, to the north of the Sambre, the movement of the British Army, whose Cavalry Division might co-operate with the former.'

'On coming into contact with the enemy, the Cavalry Corps will disengage itself so as to be able to place itself on the left of the British Army.'

This last paragraph involved an absurd waste of time and effort, as events proved. Nor did the position of the French Cavalry Corps cover the movement of the British Army, and our own cavalry on the left of the French only covered the advance of our I Corps, leaving the II Corps entirely uncovered.

Actually, our G.H.Q. should have billeted the Cavalry Division on 20th August north and north-west of Maubeuge instead of to the east of the fortress. The cavalry would then have been well placed to cover the whole British advance next morning. In any event, it was a mistake to place the whole of the cavalry under one commander at this period. The cavalry were required to cover too broad a front, and to fulfil too many missions, to justify such an organisation. It is only on exceptional and rare occasions that a very large body of cavalry can be usefully employed independently under one commander.

The general dispositions of the British Army at the beginning of the operations seem to be open to criticism. Sir John French, at this early stage, deployed all his force 'taking up a line,' as he describes it in his first Despatch. A better disposition would have been to cover his front with two advanced guards, each composed of one cavalry brigade, one infantry brigade and one artillery brigade. Another cavalry brigade could have covered the right flank and established contact with the French, while the remaining two brigades could have moved out to cover the exposed left flank.

The order from G.H.Q. which directed the move of the Cavalry Division from the right flank of the Army to the left throws a curious light on the superficial reasoning which occasionally seemed to guide G.H.Q. at that time. The message begins by suggesting that the cavalry reports of the enemy's numbers and of his advance were exaggerated—an assumption for which there was very insufficient foundation, as the known facts fully supported the reports. The order went on to say that the Cavalry Division was not to become heavily engaged with the enemy, and 'therefore' the division was to be moved from the right to the left flank. There were excellent reasons for placing the bulk of our cavalry force on the left, but this was not one of them. It seems to evince a lack of confidence in the ability of the cavalry leaders to 'keep out of a mess,' but this should hardly have been the reason for the disposal of the mounted forces.

A tone of light badinage was occasionally affected by some of our G.H.Q. Staff in dealing with the operations or suggestions of the cavalry at this time; it was the fashion to imply that the cavalry leaders had but one idea, which was to attack, whereas the handling of the cavalry throughout these critical operations and during the long retreat was marked by com-

mendable prudence and much sound judgment of the tactical situations.

I can remember another instance of this unfortunate attitude, which I admit annoyed me, when I myself was commanding the 3rd and 5th Cavalry Brigades during the advance to the Aisne. I applied for some aircraft to be attached to me, as their close co-operation would have been of great value when acting more or less independently, as my command then was. I was told that it was not considered safe to attach aeroplanes to such dashing people as cavalry officers! I cannot think that grave matters should have been dealt with in such a spirit.

G.H.Q. had issued orders for an advance north, to be followed by a swing to the east, with the object of rolling up the German flank. It is difficult to understand how such an erroneous conception of the strength of the Germans could have arisen or been maintained for so long. Reports from all sources—Cavalry, Air Service, Civilian and Press—were all conclusive that large bodies of the enemy were advancing on a broad front. How far the French Staff was responsible for misleading our Headquarters it is impossible for me to say. The real situation, however, was the very reverse of that envisaged, and it was the British who were to be called on to fight on the defensive; so far from attacking the outer flank of the enemy, we were to feel the threat on our own.

When this uncomfortable situation came to be clearly realised at our G.H.Q., maybe Sir John French was inclined to hurry back too rapidly and too far. His actions cannot be judged, however, entirely by the light of after-knowledge. It is the events as they present themselves at the time to commanders which influence their decision, and these may be modified more or less strongly by attendant circumstances and the personal factor. In this case, the rapid retreat of the French from Charleroi to a line 9 miles behind our right had left our inner flank on 23rd August as exposed as our outer one; furthermore, we had small expectations of assistance, for the mutual antipathy of Sir John and Lanrezac, the French Fifth Army Commander, had undoubtedly resulted in Sir John losing all confidence in his neighbour. Under such inauspicious circumstances the Battle of Mons was begun.

*Note.*—The first stage of the British advance, as ordered by G.H.Q., was accomplished on the 21st August. The Cavalry Division had instructions to pass across to the left flank of the

Army next day, leaving the 5th Cavalry Brigade to fill the gap between the I Corps and the French Fifth Army. Early on the 22nd the Germans advanced in considerable force southward towards Binche, 15 miles E.S.E. of Mons. The movement of the Cavalry Division was therefore delayed; but the German wheel south-westward, much wider in scope than had been suspected, made it all the more important that the cavalry should cover the left flank of the Army. By the evening of this day the French Fifth Army was retreating from the line of the Sambre about Charleroi, and the Allies were thrown upon the defensive. Sir John French agreed to hold Mons and the Mons-Condé Canal position—at this time occupied as an outpost line by the II Corps—for twenty-four hours, in order to take pressure off Lanrezac.

IV<sup>1</sup>

23 Aug. During Sunday, 23rd August, the first day of the Battle of Mons, we (the 3rd Cavalry Brigade) remained in billets round Elouges and were very glad of a rest, for we had been kept in the saddle for 22 hours the previous day. Much desperate fighting, however, was carried on by the 3rd and 5th Divisions of General Smith-Dorrien's II Corps.

The remaining brigades of the Cavalry Division (1st, 2nd and 4th) were extending the British line to the left. They, however, did not encounter any serious action this day, as the extension of the German turning movement had not yet had time to bring the forces of its extreme right wing into action.

During the 23rd and 24th August Smith-Dorrien's II Corps, with only two divisions, fought six German divisions, while the I Corps on its right was hardly engaged at all. It is a legitimate query to ask why the whole of the onslaught should fall on one corps, without assistance from the other. One reason was that, as previously pointed out, G.H.Q. had not moved the Army up under cover of properly constituted and strong advanced guards of all arms, but on the contrary had deployed the Army, 'taking up a line.' The Army was thus immobilised in its positions, lost its capacity for manœuvre, and had to wait on events dictated by the enemy. The I Corps could not be moved up to assist the II Corps and to take its share in the struggle.

24 Aug. On the morning of 24th August the II Corps retired some two or three miles to a slightly more favourable position, after the very heavy fighting of the previous day against superior numbers and on a very extended front.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 3, p. 18.



The 3rd Cavalry Brigade moved out of billets under the order of the Cavalry Division at 4.30 a.m., and we found ourselves concentrated in column of masses on a flat open plain, on the left of the 5th Division. This plain was intersected by strong wire fences and sunken roads, and was by no means favourable to the mounted action of cavalry, but we were at least clear of the narrow streets, factories, mine shafts and slag heaps, among which most of this and the previous day's fighting took place. The flat bare terrain was very unfavourable as a place of assembly for any troops, especially mounted ones, as we could obtain no cover from view, even though we were covered in a tactical sense by the 1st and 2nd Cavalry Brigades holding the line Condé-Mons Canal—in our front. Close beside my brigade the 4th Cavalry Brigade was concentrated, together with the 3rd Brigade R.H.A.

Behind us ran a stream, 12 to 15 feet wide, with high steep banks, impassable for cavalry except by one bridge, in the middle of the village of Audregnies. To make matters worse, a mass of 1st Line Transport was parked on our own side of Audregnies. In the case of a hurried retirement this would be an additional cause of delay. Whatever happened, it was obvious that we must advance or retire; there was practically no cover for men—and still less for horses—where we stood. As soon as a single hostile battery opened on us, our position would become impossible.

I was still left in ignorance of the situation and of the intention of our Cavalry Division, or of the rôle we were expected to play. I had little to guide me except my view of the terrain and what I could see or hear of the battle during these early hours of the day; nor could I see much, as most of the serious fighting was taking place at that time on the more distant right flank of the II Corps. It was not until considerably later in the day that I obtained a clearer view as well as a closer grasp of the battle, for by that time the continued left wheel of the German Army had brought its right wing into action and seriously threatened the envelopment of our left flank.

I spent some rather unpleasant hours considering the prospect opened by the exposed nature of our position and the congestion in our rear. It was a great relief when, after sitting for some time in the blazing sun, the Cavalry Division gave orders for the mass of 1st Line Transport to move through Audregnies and retire to the south of the stream; this move was very



essential, but unfortunately we did not see any of the wagons of our brigade again for many days.

Soon after this, General Allenby ordered the Cavalry Division to retire, and the 3rd and 4th Cavalry Brigades and horse artillery moved south through Audregnies village; the Germans allowed us to retire without putting so much as a single shell into our backs as we went. There was an uncomfortable sensation of cold water down mine as we rode off, and I confess that I was very relieved when we reached the other side of the village in safety. I received no information as to the object of this move, but it was apparently a retirement off the field altogether, because the other brigades all marched away. They returned later, however, owing partly, if not entirely, to a message to which I refer later.

After we had all got through Audregnies, I was told to act as rear-guard to the division; on coming out of the village into a fairly broad valley running north-west and south-east, I therefore turned the brigade up on to the comparatively high ground to the west of this valley. Here a squadron or two were placed in position to cover us, and the main body of the brigade and the two horse artillery batteries (D and E) moved into a hollow a little to the rear.

Across the valley, on the opposite side to that which we occupied, I could see the left of our 5th Infantry Division with some of its batteries in action; the enemy was shelling them rather severely, so I sent a message over to them to ask for information, and to know if I could assist. Finding the gap between us and the left of the 5th Division unduly wide, I despatched the 16th Lancers and two guns across the valley to get into closer touch with our infantry in order to afford them all the assistance they could and to help to close the gap. (I did not know till many years afterwards that the 18th Hussars (2nd Cavalry Brigade) had been left in position east of Audregnies for the same purpose!) I also sent a message to General Allenby about this time to tell him that our own infantry were still in position and were fighting heavily. I did not propose, therefore, to retire further or evacuate my present position until I had seen them safely off the opposite hill, as to do so would uncover their left. As events soon proved, this is exactly what would have happened. This message took a little time to reach General Allenby, but in due course he returned and joined me, bringing with him the remainder of the Cavalry Division.

The two remaining regiments (9th Lancers and 4th Dragoon Guards) of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, commanded by General de Lisle, moved down into the valley of Audregnies and began to water their horses. It must have been about 11.30 a.m. Suddenly I saw many lines of German infantry in open order advancing across the plain we had lately evacuated, with their right extending as far to our left as the village of Baisieux. It was at once apparent that this attack far outflanked the left of the hard-pressed 5th Division on the opposite ridge to whose assistance I had already detached the 16th Lancers and the two guns. It threatened completely to turn and overwhelm that flank. Something had to be done to counter this move, and that without delay.

General de Lisle, who had two of his regiments with him in Audregnies village, decided at once to make a mounted attack against the front of the advancing enemy. To do this he had to deploy from the narrow street of the village in face of the hostile guns and infantry. It was not a promising manoeuvre and ended in heavy losses to the two regiments which took part in it. But it was at least an immediate and determined effort to do something to cover the left of our hard-pressed 5th Division, and as such it deserves recognition and admiration. Moreover, it did have an appreciable effect in checking and delaying the German advance. The solution of the problem appeared to me to lie in another direction. I perceived that if I could seize the village of Baisieux and thence, by fire of dismounted rifles, machine guns and artillery, outflank in turn the German turning force, I might, by this threat, seriously interfere with their plans. This move had the added advantage that it would carry with it the invaluable force of surprise and uncertainty, as the enemy would not be able to tell, on the instant, what the attack portended, or what forces might be supporting it. In consequence, I immediately set in motion the two regiments of my brigade which were still with me. A squadron of the 5th Lancers was ordered forward at a gallop as advance-guard, and I came on with the rest of the brigade (less the 16th Lancers previously detached). The two batteries followed hard upon our heels. Our rapid movement gave the advance-guard little or no opportunity to carry out its function properly, but it was necessary to be quick.

What General Allenby thought of the position, or of the action of his two Brigadiers, is impossible to say. He issued no

orders to me, and we could not wait to ask for them, for the situation demanded instant decision.

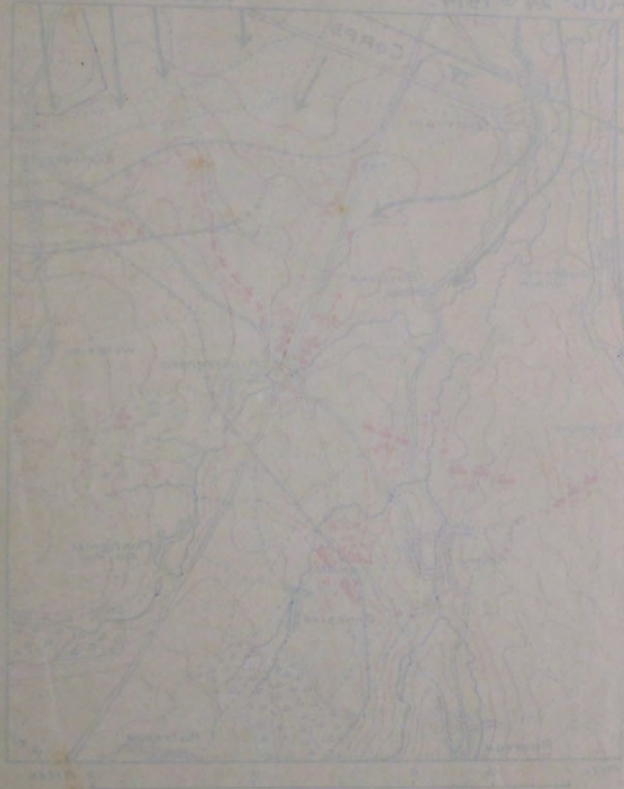
As far as the story of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade goes, the advanced squadron of the 5th Lancers found that it was too late to seize Baisieux village inasmuch as German infantry were already debouching from it along our side of the stream. The Lancers managed, however, to seize some high ground dominating the village, and the 4th Hussars on their right gallantly threw themselves into action dismounted, and made use of any available cover; this, unfortunately, was not very much. A fire-fight now followed, which lasted an appreciable time, during which we suffered some casualties—about 2 officers and 35 men of the 4th Hussars. Colonel Parker of the 5th Lancers also was hit through the leg and I lost his very valuable services. Harvey Kearsley and I walked up to some of the led-horses of the 4th Hussars to see what was going on, and I remember what very unpleasant sensations I experienced when I heard a sounding thump on the ribs of the horse beside which we were standing, and down it went, dead, with a bullet through its heart.

The Germans by now were cleverly pushing forward under cover of a small ravine south of the village, and their fire was getting hot. Under the covering fire of our guns I withdrew the brigade about 1000 yards or so to a ridge in the rear, making use of folds in the ground, and some cover provided by a small copse. Here I brought two guns of E Battery into action. I was standing just behind these guns, and for the first time in my life I saw shells actually in the air! They flew in a long curve like a well-thrown cricket ball, and pitched on top of the hill which the 5th Lancers had just evacuated. The German infantry were just advancing over the top of this hill when Walwyn's shells landed among them or burst beautifully over their heads, and they immediately retired at a double behind the crest. As far as we were concerned, they did not trouble us any further that day.

Lt. Penrose, the Brigade Signalling Officer, now came up on his black cob to arrange a signal service for us. He was quite young in those days, of a cheery disposition, and a reliable and earnest worker. He was talking to me while my hand rested on his horse's mane, when suddenly there was another smack, and a small spurt of blood came out of the cob's neck under my very nose! A bullet had gone right through its neck. The cob,

SKETCH MAP 3

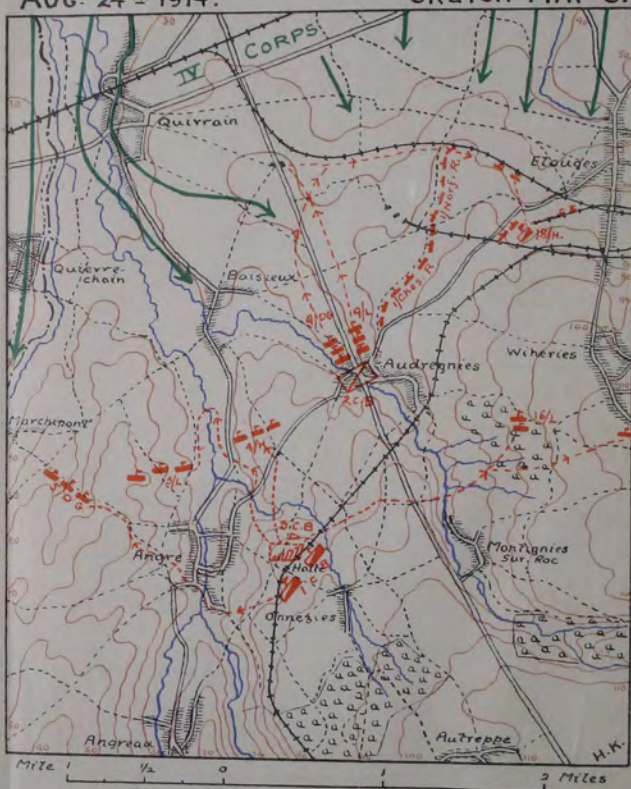
AUG. 24 & 1914





AUG 24<sup>TH</sup> 1914.

SKETCH MAP 3.





however, only shook its head and seemed none the worse, and Penrose rode it all through the retreat, while the hole which had been made by the bullet gradually healed.

Meanwhile, the 1st Cavalry Brigade had come up on the left of the 5th Lancers and thus extended our line to the west. This attack by the 3rd Cavalry Brigade on the flank of the enemy had certainly fulfilled its purpose and, coupled with de Lisle's mounted attack, had so checked and paralysed the hostile advance across the plain, that the left of our infantry eventually evacuated its position in comparative safety. It was some satisfaction to us to feel that we had, after all, played a part in this day's battle, and did do something of value to help our comrades; we learned later that General Sir Charles Fergusson had on two occasions, at 8.20 the previous evening and again at 9.10 that morning (24th August), sent messages to General Allenby asking him 'at all costs to cover his left.'

The whole Cavalry Division now retired, leaving me, however, still in position on a low ridge near Angre. I therefore rode back about three-quarters of a mile to see the ground and organise our further retirement; I had no maps with me, for our 1st Line Transport, in which, among other things, were all the rest of our maps of the country to the south, had marched off under Cavalry Division orders—not to be seen again till 6th September.

I found a fearful congestion of squadrons and limbered wagons, jammed in a hollow—which, however, had at least the advantage of concealing us from all directions, except the air; at the moment this latter source of risk was negligible, as fortunately no hostile planes were about. Those troops and wagons were struggling to enter a narrow, muddy, clay ride leading through a large wood, about a mile in depth, and to get away. I did not know where Cavalry Division Headquarters were, nor what were the dispositions of the rest of the division. The 1st Cavalry Brigade was, however, also covering the retirement further to the west, though I was quite unaware of it at the time, and in any case it was posted too far to my left to cover the retreat of my brigade or of this mass of oddments which I found at the entrance of the wood. I realised that the situation would be desperate if the enemy occupied the ridges which the 3rd Brigade was fortunately still holding. My brigade, therefore, continued to act as rear-guard on these ridges, and my Staff did all they could to organise and clear

the congestion of squadrons and carts through the wood. The Germans made no serious attempt to advance further that day, for which I was devoutly thankful, and after some half an hour of feverish anxiety the jumble was cleared off, and I was then able to withdraw my own brigade and guns through the wood.

On debouching from the wood, we found that we had lost touch with the division, and did not know which way to turn. However, by tracking, questioning, and a good deal of lucky guessing, we eventually found ourselves in touch again near the village of Wagnies-le-Grand (about 7 miles from the battle-field), where we bivouacked for the night on a bare open ridge, in which some trenches had been traced among the corn stooks, north of the village. During all the long four years of war, that night was the only one when I slept in the open fields, for though I often slept in my clothes and on hard floors, I always had some cover, existing or extempore, over my head. Our position on the ridge, though commanding, was not very pleasant, as it in turn was commanded by the ground over which we had retired in the evening, and the possibility of a line of German guns opening on us next morning was not exhilarating. But, fortunately, the enemy did not carry out a very active pursuit, and we were able to evacuate the position the following morning.

Our part in the two-days' battle had not been large, although very essential. But now we were to be more constantly and usefully employed. The Battle of Mons was over, and the retreat had begun.

*Note.*—The Battle of Mons, fought by the II Corps—the I Corps further to the right was hardly engaged at all—on the 23rd August, delayed the German advance for twenty-four hours. But retirement next morning was imperative as the French were in retreat, both flanks of the B.E.F. were open, and the German movement round the left continued to develop. Hence it was that the chief enemy pressure was felt by the left of the II Corps and the flank-guard action of Elouges was fought. On the right the I Corps retired without difficulty from its position south-east of Mons in the direction of the Forest of Mormal. The II Corps eventually arrived on a line almost due west of the I Corps, with the Cavalry Division still on its left flank. The whole direction of the retreat was south-westward, in order to clear the fortress of Maubeuge.

## v 1

Our orders for 25th August were that two brigades were to *25 Aug.* cover the rear of the II Corps and two brigades were to act as left flank-guard. As the orders did not give the lines of retirement of the infantry, it was not easy to comply with them! Brig. General Briggs with his 1st and the 2nd Cavalry Brigades were detailed as the rear-guard, and the 3rd and 4th Cavalry Brigades, under Allenby's immediate command, were to cover the left flank. Long before the day was over, we all got inextricably mixed, but Briggs with the 1st Cavalry Brigade did succeed in covering the rear and did not get into Le Cateau till 2.30 a.m.

We soon became aware that German cavalry units were following us closely, from the fact that they constantly brought their guns into action whenever they had any idea of the positions of our unwieldy masses. Except, however, for the active use of their guns, they were fortunately most unenterprising, and kept as concentrated in mass as we did, making no use of their numbers and never making any serious attack on us, mounted or dismounted. Nor, during all our retreat to the Marne and in our subsequent advance, did the leadership of the subordinate cavalry commanders display much greater capacity than that of their superiors. Their patrols and advanced squadrons did not make much use of the ground, nor had they much idea of manoeuvre or stratagem. Their principal virtue lay in the fact that they pushed on steadily and tried to keep in touch with us, in spite of falling frequently into petty ambushes and the fact that they were continually surprised and out-manceuvred, with the consequent heavy toll in casualties which these little misfortunes caused them.

During the course of our retirement that day I had lost touch temporarily with Allenby and the remainder of his command. One of my squadrons, which was covering the brigade, came in touch with a force of French Territorials which was also retreating. These troops had no cavalry or guns with them, and in that very open rolling country they were in consequence terribly at the mercy of any hostile body which they might encounter. They begged me to stay and cover them in their retreat. At that moment, as I have said, the 3rd Brigade was isolated from

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 1, p. 5.

the rest of the Cavalry Division, and I had to carry out my rôle of flank-guard. I eventually decided that I must do this, but I can recollect how sharply my mind was divided between the duty to the principle of aiding and co-operating with any troops engaged with the enemy and that of carrying out my orders. I eventually decided I could not stay to protect or cover them, but I have never felt so ashamed of myself as when I communicated my decision to the French officer who acted as one of our interpreters. Even now, I think I was wrong. I should have stayed and helped that French infantry, but we were then so completely in the dark as to the situation outside the range of our own patrols or our own eyes that I think I considered too seriously the risk which would have been entailed by keeping back the brigade.

This was a minor incident, but it illustrates in some degree the atmosphere of dark uncertainty and the difficulty of arriving at correct decisions which prevailed during these days.

Later on in the day, that part of the Cavalry Division under the immediate orders of General Allenby found itself concentrated in mass in a large saucerlike hollow, enclosed by ridges within a radius of 1000 to 2000 yards; these ridges, while concealing the country beyond, dominated us on all sides, while behind us lay Solesmes with its streets congested with transport and military impedimenta of all descriptions. General Allenby and his Staff were standing beside a small copse on one of the near ridges, gazing westwards across a deep valley to where some German guns were in action near Avesnes-le-Sec. Apart from this group, I could see no forces covering our concentrated mass.

It was then that the Composite Regiment (consisting of squadrons made up from the three regiments of Household Cavalry and belonging to the 4th Cavalry Brigade) was ordered forward across the valley towards the spot where the German guns were firing. I did not know what their orders were or with what object they were moved, but they started down the open slope with their squadrons closely concentrated (in mass) towards the enemy. Just as the head of their column arrived at the bottom of the valley, the German guns opened on them and they all came back at a steady gallop. They must have lost some men and horses, but the Germans contented themselves with firing a few shells: it was amazing that such an inviting target was allowed to escape comparatively unscathed.



The artillery on both sides in the early stages of the War did not always seem to realise its power to hit and destroy large and vulnerable targets, and usually contented itself with stopping or driving back an attack. Perhaps it was a consequence of the insistence on economy in the use of ammunition at target practice in peace-time. But even though it was now war, there was a very limited supply of ammunition available at this period, and very naturally this shortage affected artillery commanders very seriously. This hesitant tendency entirely disappeared later on, and, given a sufficiently good target, the gunners on both sides never failed to pump all the shells they possibly could in the time available on to their victims, with results often amounting to annihilation.

The hollow in which we were concentrated might have been the scene of a very serious disaster had it not been for the extremely bad and unenterprising handling of the German cavalry. They had but to push forward half a dozen squadrons on a broad front, to seize the ridges (which we had neglected to occupy) with dismounted men and machine guns, and they would have overlooked both our concentration and Solesmes. Had they then brought up their main bodies and their guns into position, we should all have been under a destructive fire to which we should have been unable to reply, and from which we could not have escaped. But, thank God, they did nothing of the kind. They kept concealed in the great valleys which France so plentifully possesses, and merely contented themselves with bringing their guns into action against us at long range. General McCracken's infantry brigade of the 4th Division was now appealed to by General Allenby, and it immediately seized the necessary ground to cover Solesmes and prepared to hold back the German cavalry if necessary. But why the Cavalry Division could not have done this in the first instance, I cannot say.

The position looked threatening, but no orders reached me, although it was patent that the situation and the ground demanded completely new dispositions. Eventually, therefore, I felt compelled to safeguard my own brigade, and I moved it off towards the right flank (east). I intended to retire southwards, avoiding Solesmes so as not to add to the congestion there, but we had not a map among us and were obliged to take our general direction from the sun. This was not a sufficiently accurate guide, and I moved out more to the east than I in-



tended; in consequence we ran into a column of German infantry and artillery advancing southwards. Fortunately, when the first German guns opened on us we were advancing with the squadrons in an irregular formation at wide intervals, which prevented us being vulnerable to artillery fire. Seeing a long valley offering cover on our right front, the brigade was galloped into this and halted in column. Harvey Kearsley and I dismounted on the ridge above the valley and stalked forward a little way, covered by the corn stooks, in order to reconnoitre the enemy. We could see at least a battalion deployed and advancing towards us, still some 3000 yards off, while behind it guns were in action firing at us. These shells whistled over the near crest of the valley and either went clean over it or struck the far one. The squadrons in the valley were quite safe, but nevertheless the shells flew fairly close over their heads, and undoubtedly the men sitting on their horses must have felt rather uncomfortable. On some natures this strain was considerable, coming as it did after two or three days of great anxiety, and I was told that a French interpreter was violently sick. There is no doubt that great anxiety often induces this unpleasant effect.

I did not wish to engage my brigade in an isolated action with the Germans, as I wanted to get into touch with our infantry again, so I slipped the brigade away from this valley by crossing an exposed ridge by single troops at the gallop and dropping into another valley beyond. We thus retired without any loss here, though one of the first shells had wounded Major Mockett of the 4th Hussars, and killed his horse. By dint of great exertion, astuteness, and courage, he eventually escaped on foot through Lille to Calais after the most extraordinary adventures.

We had now, for the time being, shaken ourselves free from the enemy, and retired on Le Cateau without further incident. Late in the evening, about 9 p.m. we came upon the Suffolk Regiment of Rolt's 14th Brigade, of the 5th Division, all of whom we had known well at the Curragh, very busily entrenching on the north side of Le Cateau. I explained to them, and to Sir Charles Fergusson, the Divisional Commander, who happened also to be there, that the Germans were close on our heels, and would certainly attack them next morning. Time had not admitted of their getting their trenches deeper than two or three feet when I passed through, and these seemed to me to

be sited too far down the advanced slope to escape direct artillery and machine-gun fire. However, that fact did not produce any serious consequences in this case, as Rolt's men were withdrawn to the other side of Le Cateau during the night. After exchanging information with General Fergusson, Brig. General Rolt and Colonel Brett of the Suffolk Regiment, we moved on to look for billets for the night. Colonel Brett was killed next day and his gallant battalion suffered very heavy losses, but it fought with magnificent courage through that day's stern struggle.

This day cannot be described as one of severe fighting for the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, particularly in comparison with the very heavy fighting which the infantry and artillery of the II Corps had experienced during the two previous days or that which they were to undertake next day at Le Cateau. It was, however, full enough of anxieties, largely owing to the lack of information regarding the dispositions and situation of our own troops, and of the intentions of our commander. Such information is even more important to cavalry commanders than to infantry, since they are necessarily separated by long distances from senior Headquarters. Moreover, we were moved about in heavy masses with quite inadequate covering forces to protect us, which made us a constant and vulnerable target to the enemy's guns. These lapses created an atmosphere of agonising uncertainty which was far more intense than was warranted by the real situation. Of all the anxious hours and days during the next four years (and all of us spent a good many), I do not remember one when anxiety was written so clearly on the faces of many officers as on that day, and it was for the same old reason, viz. uncertainty and lack of confidence, and not because of heavy fighting—the casualties among the whole four cavalry brigades that day did not amount, I believe, to more than 250. We seemed to drift and trail about in an aimless manner in close masses during a great part of the day. It was a case of concentration run mad, and we at times found ourselves with the squadrons all together in one mass and the guns in column alongside them in some hollow, while the surrounding ridges were unoccupied. It was hardly a position of readiness though it was euphemistically described by that term.

The absence of maps, all packed away in our 1st Line Transport carts, made it still more difficult to grasp the situation as a whole, or to move in the right direction. We had to fall back

relying on our 'eye for ground' and thus deal with the immediate situation, local and restricted in its aspect as it might be.

However, when the day was over and the danger passed, the viewpoint changed with the passing of time: the events of this trying day took on a humorous colour, and the 25th August became known afterwards as 'The Cavalry Division Field Day.'

I tried to find billets in Le Cateau, but the town was full of troops; I had, therefore, to take my brigade on to Catillon, 4 miles beyond the right flank of the II Corps, before I could find an available resting-place. We reached the village after dark and, again without maps, we had the very vaguest idea of where we were or in fact where any one else was. Outposts were carefully put out and the roads barricaded—though, had I known it, these precautions were not very necessary, as in front of me, on the road from Catillon to Landrecies, lay the I Corps. We had no transport, and no supplies, but the French inhabitants fed the men and, to a certain extent, the horses.

While at dinner, provided by the good people of the house, I was told there was a map of France in the Mairie. Kearsley and I at once went across with a torch and found a large map on the wall, of a scale about 10 miles to the inch. It might not be of great assistance tactically, but as a general guide it was most useful, so we proceeded to cut out of it as much as we wanted, viz. a front of about one foot or 120 miles. We took care to cut it down to the extreme south, this including Bordeaux, for at the moment I had visions of the French Army (as in 1870) driven south, Paris besieged, and Bordeaux as the new base of the British Army. From this base, I fancied, we would advance again some day in the tracks of the Black Prince, and refight the Battle of Poitiers, or would threaten an advance, like Wellington after the Battle of Toulouse in 1814.

I already foresaw years of war, though I did not foresee its nature or its locality. But of one thing I was still sure—that *in the end* Britain would win.

Those were the thoughts which flitted across my mind when the events of these crowded days did not demand immediate attention. They were days of anxious uncertainty, when we lived and moved in a kind of fog, in which only one fact stood out plainly—and that, the unpleasant one that the Allies were in full retreat.

We eventually lay down in our clothes, having passed many moments 'on the rack,' but yet with no heavy fighting, and so

'the evening and the morning were the fifth day' of our experience of the War.

*Note.*—The retreat being continued on the 25th August, Sir John French passed the I Corps east of the Forest of Mormal, which formed a serious obstacle to the march, and the II Corps to the west. This division of his forces appears to have been inevitable. The I Corps crossed the Sambre and halted for the night south of the forest, and in the villages east of Landrecies. The II Corps came south-westward to the Le Cateau position, its rear and left flank covered by the Cavalry Division in the fashion described.

VI<sup>1</sup>

On Wednesday, 26th August, the brigade had breakfasted, 26 Aug. fed its horses and saddled up by 4.30 a.m. By that time we had gained some touch with the I Corps, and the 4th Hussars had handed over the advanced posts to the Greys of the 5th Cavalry Brigade.

A brief order from the Cavalry Division now reached me, giving no information or any intentions, but merely instructing me to rejoin the division at Ligny, some 12 miles to the west of our billets. This entailed a move right across what was to be the whole battlefield, without any intimation that a battle was about to be fought. During the previous evening, scattered units of other cavalry brigades had joined us and billeted in Catillon. General de Lisle and some of his 2nd Brigade were there, also Colonel T. T. Pitman with the 11th Hussars of the 1st Cavalry Brigade.

We started off before 5 a.m. with the idea of marching to the appointed rendezvous, and Colonel Pitman undertook the duties of advanced guard. Before we had reached the village of Bazuel, some 2 miles west of Catillon, he reported that Le Cateau was occupied by the enemy and the road full of wagons, carts, ambulances and some troops all retiring from that town, while heavy firing was to be heard in that direction. He thus enlightened me to a certain extent on the situation. It was evident that no move through Le Cateau was possible, so I decided to turn the head of my brigade to the left at Bazuel and then by country roads a mile or so to the south to continue moving westwards, still with a view to rejoining the Cavalry Division; the 11th Hussars, my original advanced guard, now became more or less a right flank-guard.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 1, p. 5.



A morning mist was still hanging about and it was not easy to see much at a distance. We had not moved on more than a mile or so, when heavy rifle fire broke out nearly on our right. I then realised that we were in close proximity to a battle and that our 5th Division was seriously engaged with the Germans, though I was as yet ignorant of its scope. The first thing to do was to lay hold of all ground which was necessary for the security of the brigade, and in consequence the 5th Lancers, reinforced by two guns of D Battery R.H.A., under my young cousin John Gough, at once occupied some commanding ground on a front of about a mile facing north, while the remainder of the brigade was placed under cover at a little distance in rear. This position was taken up, in the first instance, because the ground seized was favourable for the defence and security of the brigade, but it turned out, by a happy chance, to be of great value and assistance to some units of Rolt's infantry brigade, which were on the extreme flank east and south-east of Le Cateau. The position I held was even more important to the right flank of the II Corps, but unfortunately, owing to my entire ignorance of the situation, I did not hold it as long as I might have done. The two guns opened fire on the enemy at once, as did the 5th Lancers, effectively covering the advanced infantry of Rolt's brigade, who were able, in consequence, to get clear of Le Cateau and rejoin their brigade in comparative comfort.

We remained in this position for some time ; we could now plainly hear the roar of the battle, which seemed to have drifted further to the west, and no fighting was in progress on my immediate front. I felt that the brigade was wasted where I was, and that I had better get nearer in to the main fight, in order to be in closer touch with our infantry in case I could be of assistance. I had by this time decided that my duty lay with the fight in my vicinity, and that any attempt to find the Cavalry Division would only be to lose time, and would waste what force I had at my disposal to help in the battle.

I began a flank move, therefore, to bring me close in to where I imagined the right of our infantry was posted, the 16th Lancers covering this movement. It was here that Colonel MacEwen of that regiment was hit through the leg, and so I lost a second valuable commanding officer. As I have said before, it was unfortunate that I evacuated this first position so soon, as it would have been of more assistance to our main



infantry struggle if I had continued to hold on where I was and so prevented the enemy occupying it. But I knew absolutely nothing of the position or intentions of our own troops, nor had I much information of the enemy except that which I could learn from my own eyes, ears or patrols.

We gradually moved in, therefore, towards the battle; crossing the very steep valley of the Selle by the most convenient road which we could find, we took up a covered position west of the large village of St. Souplet, 3 miles south of Le Cateau, on the right rear of the 5th Division, whose positions I set to work to discover.

On the western slopes of this deep valley above St. Souplet the brigade was in a position where it could cover the right flank, but not so well as it would have done from the position we had evacuated. Strong patrols were kept out across the valley whence we had just come, and an officer, Lt. Cross, 16th Lancers, with some troopers, was despatched to get in touch with Sir C. Fergusson. They remained with him during the rest of the battle, reporting the situation to me, and keeping him informed of our position, so that he could call upon us if necessary.

I had no idea at the time that General Briggs with the 1st Cavalry Brigade was also close to us, posted near Escaufort, and was carrying out a similar rôle, covering the right flank of the infantry, but later on in the day he came over to see me and showed me a request, rather than an order, which he had received from Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, asking all the cavalry available, whatever they might be, to cover his right flank.

The situation was still obscure. At one time I saw, from the upper window of a house, some troops and a line of guns being heavily shelled, and then the teams came up in an endeavour to get the guns away, suffering severely in the process. So little did I know of the position of our troops, that I was greatly pleased at the evident hammering these troops were getting, being under the impression that I was looking at the Germans. Unfortunately this turned out to be the reverse of the truth.

The 3rd Cavalry Brigade remained in this position for several hours, during which reports of all sorts came in. At one time, it was reported that a German cavalry brigade or a division was moving round our right flank, and later, that it was advancing on St. Souplet.

The situation appeared threatening, and I was impressed

with the imminence of a mounted cavalry attack in large force. My judgment was influenced by my knowledge of the great cavalry charges that the Emperor was accustomed to let loose during the German manœuvres, and I verily believed for the moment that the Germans were going to charge. I disposed the brigade to meet it; the machine guns, artillery and dismounted men were placed to take the Germans in flank, and the rest of the brigade drew up to attack mounted, while, for the first and last time in the War, I actually drew my sword!

The attack, however, did not materialise, and throughout the War the mounted attack was the last thing for which the German cavalry displayed any inclination or capacity. The British cavalry, on the other hand, in spite of the unfavourable conditions both at the beginning and at the end of the War, carried out several mounted attacks with marked success; yet at the same time was more ready, and far more apt, at fighting on foot than its opponents, and moreover was better equipped for doing so.

It was getting towards 4 p.m. when I received a message from Lt. Cross to the effect that General Fergusson had told him he could not hold his position any longer and must retire, and also he added that the enemy were then so close that General Fergusson had actually drawn his revolver. I determined to do what I could to help our infantry off the battlefield and pushed out a squadron or two of the 16th Lancers to cover them with dismounted fire. They opened fire on the enemy and kept them back. At least the Germans showed no inclination to close on them—probably owing to the heavy punishment they had already received at the hands of our infantry.

Eventually, when all seemed clear, we commenced to retire, which we did entirely unmolested. It seems that though the 5th Division (with whom we were working in co-operation on this day) had suffered very severe casualties indeed, they had fought so magnificently that, despite the great superiority in numbers of the Germans, the losses of the latter had also been so heavy that they had no inclination for an active pursuit that evening.

As we got clear of the battlefield, we came on to the main road leading to St. Quentin, which was blocked by the retreating II Corps, in considerable disorder and confusion, but with no signs whatever of panic. Nevertheless, it was a pitiful sight, and more particularly so as we knew nothing of the general

situation, and were not in a position to realise what a check the II Corps had inflicted on the German Army. The truth was that the three divisions under Smith-Dorrien had fought four corps of Von Kluck's Army while Haig's I Corps was marching south, 5 to 10 miles away on his right. During this evening and the next day the air was full of the wildest rumours. 'We were routed'—'all was lost'—'the cavalry alone remained to cover the retreat, etc.' A certain officer, who was supposed to have a brilliant career before him, was particularly pessimistic and took every opportunity he could find to come and tell me that 'we were bound to be cut off by the enterprising German cavalry, that any halt for rest was certain to end in disaster, to fly was our only hope, the Empire was gone, India would rise at once, the Colonies throw off their allegiance, etc. etc.' An officer of this type does infinite harm in a crisis such as we were then facing, and I must say I never relied on him again.

The sight was very like a crowd leaving a racecourse—wagons, guns, horses and men, all crawling along. In order to leave the road clear for them, we marched across country about a mile on the flank. It was now dark, and having reached the village of Montbrehain, I halted the brigade to give it some rest. Montbrehain was a large village, and it was probable that the inhabitants could provide the horses and men with some food, for we had not a wagon with us. This proved to be the case, and while the food was being prepared, I went out to find a telephone to see if I could get in touch with any one who would be able to give me any information or instructions. It had begun to rain and it was not a cheery sight to see all the horses and saddles getting soaked in the streets. The civilian telephone service was still working, and I went into the musty parlour of one of the houses in the village and started calling up. An operator answered me, and I asked if he could put me through to British Headquarters, which I thought were in St. Quentin. It was a weary and anxious wait: I felt impatient, but could do nothing. At last, somewhat to my surprise and greatly to my relief, I got through and asked for a senior officer to come to the 'phone. I was desperately in need of information on the situation and guidance for the future. It was Henry Wilson who answered me after a moment's pause. I told him that there had been a very severe battle at Le Cateau, that the II Corps was now retiring in considerable confusion, but that

my brigade was quite intact and in good order. I was therefore most anxious to play some part in order to help our infantry, but I knew nothing of the situation of our own troops except what I had seen with my own eyes: nor had I any information as to the direction of the retirement, or of the intentions and plans of our commanders. 'Could he enlighten me so as to enable me to play my part as effectively as possible?' But I could get no information or orders from him. G.H.Q. did not know—or at least Wilson could not tell me—what roads the II Corps was using, or by what stages the retirement would be conducted. He could not tell me what line to occupy as a rear-guard, and had no information whatever as to the positions and intentions of the I Corps. The lack of this knowledge caused me great uneasiness and anxiety for my right flank and rear—though these were actually perfectly secure, owing to the presence of the I Corps. I did get some instructions from him at last—though hardly of the kind I had anticipated or needed. For Wilson's final words were: 'As you are on the spot, do what you like, old boy!'

Such orders might be vague, but they were at least comprehensive! Unfortunately, no one can say that they were particularly helpful.

By the time I returned to my billet the situation had become further complicated by the arrival of some squadrons of the 1st and 2nd Cavalry Brigades in Montbrehain. A large force of cavalry jammed as it was in a large village was in a dangerous position when faced by an advancing enemy, and I therefore decided to continue the retreat during the night.

The whole situation was unsatisfactory. For some days the lack of essential information had given me great uneasiness, and caused me to take all sorts of unnecessary precautions. Nor did the Montbrehain telephone incident add to my confidence in G.H.Q., since its grip of the position was obviously defective.

*Note.*—The sudden decision of Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien to stand and fight at Le Cateau, and the achievements of the II Corps, the 4th Division, and the 19th Infantry Brigade, have become famous. In this action the pursuit was definitely checked and the German plan foiled. During the evening the retreat was resumed, still south-westward, towards St. Quentin and Ham. Meanwhile the I Corps, after fighting at Landrecies and Maroilles on the night of the 25th-26th August, reached Etreux, half-way between Landrecies and Guise, at the end of the following day.



The Corps was engaged in getting clear of the Germans on its own front, and was unable to turn westward and intervene at Le Cateau.

VII<sup>1</sup>

We moved off at 1.30 a.m., 27th August, in the dark, and not 27 Aug. very sure of our road, as the sole map we had was the one we had 'borrowed' from the Catillon Mairie. Unfortunately, this only showed the main roads, on which we were no longer moving. About 7 a.m. we reached a village, Homblières, east of St. Quentin, and having disposed several squadrons to hold all the commanding positions round us, and sent back the guns to some high ground in rear to cover us, every one off-saddled and went fast and comfortably to sleep for two hours in the sun, which by this time was already delightfully warm. Men and horses were thus considerably refreshed. I had gone up into Homblières and found a nice French girl in charge of the post office, where I was able to send a wire to my wife to say I was none the worse for the battle. This wire passed through as if war was not going on and reached her about 2 o'clock that afternoon. The little post-mistress kindly fed Harvey Kearsley, Ramsden, my A.D.C. and myself on coffee and rolls and butter, for which we were very grateful. But within 48 hours the village fell into the hands of the Germans, and remained in their possession for four years. I have often wondered if the little post-mistress got away in time.

Leaving the brigade occupying a good position, I rode into St. Quentin to find out what was going on. We came upon large dumps of supplies, from which we were enabled a little later to feed men and horses. Near St. Quentin, I met a motor in which was an officer of the A.S.C. on the Staff of the I Corps. His arrival was a godsend to me, as I got valuable information from him, and was able to gather a good deal about our I Corps. After some persuasion, he gave me all the maps he had, as he could get others. These were a useful addition to our small-scale map from the Mairie! I sent a note by this officer to my brother John, who was Brigadier General, General Staff, to Sir Douglas Haig, giving him all the information I had at my disposal and suggesting that I might operate with the I Corps, and receive orders and instructions from him. In due course these arrived, Sir Douglas Haig taking charge of my brigade,

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 1, p. 5.



the movement, a squadron of the 12th Lancers charged the Germans. This action took place near Cerizy and resulted in the almost complete annihilation of a German cavalry regiment, which, on its part, exhibited almost every possible tactical lesson in how *not* to do things.

The other affair was carried out by a troop of 4th Hussars under Captain Gatacre and, in its own small sphere, was also a very fine example of British leadership. Gatacre was an officer of the Indian cavalry sent to the 4th Hussars on mobilisation. He was the son of Sir William Gatacre, who had held high commands in the South African War, and he impressed me enormously as one of the most capable, courageous and resolute, but withal modest, officers that I had met. When he was killed about a month later I was indeed grieved. The story of his action here is well worth repeating.

Gatacre had brought up his troop and halted it under cover of a slight rise. He then went forward himself, with an orderly, to a haystack, which concealed him, and had a look over the ridge. There he saw a troop of German cavalry of similar strength to his own, riding up towards him, in line at a walk, with no scouts out. He made a rapid calculation, and grasped the fact that there was time to send his orderly back, bring up his own men at a trot, under cover of the haystack, and still find the Germans at several hundred yards' distance if they continued to move at a walk. He acted accordingly, but he told me the agony of anxiety was very trying while he waited by himself, peeping out from behind the stack and watching the Germans approach. His troop came up in time, however. He at once put himself at its head, drew swords, and swung over the crest at a steady canter, being then about 200 yards from the Germans. He told me of the surprise and shock he could read in the eyes of the German officer when he suddenly saw Gatacre and his troop come over the hill straight at him. There was a second of hesitancy, and then the German officer went about and started to trot away quite steadily down the hill. But Gatacre's troop was gaining on them, and when about 80 yards off, so he told me, the pent-up excitement was irrepressible; his men gave one wild yell, and every horse burst from a steady canter into a full gallop. This was too much for the Germans, trotting away as they were with their backs to a rapidly advancing enemy. They also broke into a gallop, but their horses were too slow, our men were soon among them,

and eight or ten were run through by our swordsmen. Gatacre eventually rallied his troop without the loss of a man.

Friday evening, 28th August, found my brigade established behind the Crozat Canal bridge at Jussy, with the 16th Lancers holding the outposts on the far bank. Our supply officer found us that evening, and got up some food for men and horses on his lorries, but our 1st Line Transport was still missing, and none of us had any change of clothes and very few of us had any shaving things. When occasion offered, I managed to shave with my trumpeter's razor and pocket-glass, etc., which he, having holsters on his saddle, was able to carry with him.

As usual, we hung on to our positions next morning till the 29 Aug. enemy arrived in sufficient force to threaten a serious attack, when we disappeared for a mile or two till he found us once more and he had to begin all over again. This method delayed the German advance and gave our infantry as long a start as possible every morning. As the day wore on, the enemy's scouts, and eventually his advanced squadrons, approached Jussy and appeared before the bridge, where they were promptly ambushed, losing an officer and some men—one or two of whom were killed by the lance as our patrols galloped after them. The Germans now deployed their Jäger battalion and developed a heavy fire, especially from the machine guns, which they always handled extremely well, keeping them well to the front in any advance. Upon this, the 16th withdrew. By a curious coincidence this brigade defended Jussy and the canal once more, during the great St. Quentin battle in March 1918. On this occasion, however, it was no affair of a retreating rear-guard, but the serious defence of a position against far greater odds.

It was while holding this long wooded ridge north of the Oise that we heard, to our surprise, the sound of very heavy artillery and rifle firing some miles to the north of us; evidently a battle of some magnitude was in progress. I sent a message to Sir Douglas telling him of this and suggesting that we should retrace our steps and advance to the sound of the guns. But, when the reply came back, I was not allowed to undertake this move. The rumble was from the Battle of Guise, when General Lanrezac, with the French Fifth Army, turned and attacked the advancing Germans. Haig had already suggested to Sir John French that the I Corps should take part in this battle, but the latter forbade any such action, and was rather annoyed

with Haig for suggesting it. This bold attack was perhaps rather an isolated and disjointed action when viewed in its relationship to the whole of the Allied forces in retreat, but it checked the Germans for a time, and undoubtedly must have impressed them with the fact that the French were still dangerous, and that not yet was 'all over bar the shouting.' It was, however, unfortunate that the antipathy between Sir John French and Lanrezac, to which I have referred, robbed the French of any possibility of assistance from us.

It was while holding this rear-guard position that reports came in from the various units that the horses' shoes were wearing out, and that rifle ammunition was running short; the 5th Lancers in particular were reduced to 30 rounds a man. Where was our 1st Line Transport? I fear that once again we said some hard things about the Cavalry Division for separating it from the brigades.

About 3.30 p.m. on this day, 29th August, a Staff Officer arrived in a motor from G.H.Q. with an order directing me to move my brigade to Golancourt, a distance of some 12 miles north-west, and attack in flank a hostile force which at 11 a.m. had been engaged with General de Lisle's 2nd Cavalry Brigade. This order must have been issued without serious thought of the times and distances involved, and of the general situation. To carry out the order I should have had to march the brigade through wooded and difficult country, and should probably have been 'eaten up' *en route* by the Germans, across whose front I should have been moving. In any case, de Lisle's fight would have been over long before I could hope to arrive. The order was not a practicable one and arrived at a bad moment, for I had just received the reports from my regiments of their shortage of ammunition and other necessities; I told the Staff Officer, therefore, that I could not carry it out, and must continue my mission of acting as a rear-guard to the I Corps.

That evening, all the I Corps being comfortably over the Oise, we fell back and crossed the river at Chauny. As we passed through the little town, we found it still full of inhabitants, all the shops being open. I seized the opportunity to replenish my wardrobe, and asked Geoffrey Brooke to buy me a toothbrush—the first I had had since Mons. Such are the minor privations of war!

The brigade now fell back for seven days, continuously acting with the 5th Cavalry Brigade as rear-guard to the I Corps.

The weather was lovely and the sun very hot. Our days were long—we were usually in the saddle about 4.30 a.m., not getting into billets for the night until about 7 p.m. or even later. However, with the exception of one day, we experienced no heavy fighting, though there were frequent affairs of patrols and rear-guard actions and occasional shelling. Officers and men had an early breakfast and a late supper, provided more often than not by the inhabitants. During the day our normal 'rations' were biscuits and unripe apples from the many apple trees in the country through which we passed. We were all very fit, but were visibly thinner—more gaunt and less beefy!

We reached the Aisne on the 30th at Fontenoy—some 6 *30 Aug.* miles west of Soissons—and that night billeted in a very fine chateau, the chatelaine being a tall and handsome old lady. Here the Brigade Staff had very luxurious and enjoyable baths, the first since the Battle of Mons, and an excellent dinner. We held on to our advanced positions, which were still north of the river, till late the following morning, but as we knew the *31 Aug.* Germans would cross that evening, we persuaded our hostess, with some difficulty, to leave her house and go to Paris. She was not to see it again for four years, and then it was a shattered ruin.

On 1st September a bitter rear-guard struggle took place *1 Sept.* in the great woods covering Villers-Cotterets. I did not know at the time what the circumstances were which forced this fight upon me—it just happened—but speaking generally I would always do everything possible to avoid a serious rear-guard action in woods. The art of fighting a rear-guard action lies in compelling the enemy to deploy and bring his main forces into action while he is still some distance away. The rear-guard can then slip away without much trouble. But in the midst of a forest contact with an enemy is not established except at very close range, and if the rear-guard waits long enough to allow heavy forces to be engaged against it at such ranges, it goes without saying that it becomes a difficult and usually expensive affair to get away. I found some of our infantry holding a line through the middle of this particular wood, and so my rear-guard (consisting of the 4th Hussars) had to comply, and we prolonged the left of the infantry and covered it. Before we could break away we suffered fairly heavy casualties. The Irish Guards this day lost both their colonel and their second-in-command, the Hon.



George Morris and Hubert Crichton, very old friends of mine, and we lost Colonel Ian Hogg, 4th Hussars, shot through the body at close range. The brigade had now, at this early stage of the War, lost all its regimental commanding officers, a very serious handicap. Colonel Ian Hogg came of a brilliant family, and was the younger brother of the present Lord Hailsham and Sir Malcolm Hogg. He died in a village behind the forest next morning, and was buried by the enemy. That night we billeted at Antilly, near Betz.

2 Sept. On 2nd September we saw six or eight German squadrons approaching Bouillancy; these halted, however, as soon as our horse artillery opened on them. We reached the Marne that night, and billeted at Villenoy.

3 Sept. The following day we crossed the Marne at Germigny, being watched and followed by small German cavalry patrols.

4 Sept. During the afternoon of the 4th—perhaps the hottest day of that particularly hot summer—while still covering the I Corps, we saw through our glasses all the operations of a German battery coming into action on Doue hill to our right front. The hill was peculiarly rounded and bare, with the tower of a church and some trees half visible a short distance behind it. We first saw the battery staff arrive mounted; then, after some reconnaissance, the battery was brought up and came into action. The Germans were evidently quite unaware of the presence of our horse artillery brigade, who were in a position of readiness covered by the ridge on which we stood. Our batteries opened fire, and for the moment silenced the enemy guns. However, when the time came for us to withdraw, they reopened on us as we crossed some open ground, but luckily burst their shrapnel well over our heads, too high to do any serious damage.

We thought this but a sign of the ordinary German advance, but we now know that it was the right flank of Von Kluck's movement, which was aiming at striking into the left rear of the French Fifth Army.

That evening we passed through Coulommiers, and billeted at Chailly.

5 Sept. The next day the British Army did not continue its retreat very far, and we halted about 2 p.m. to take up our billets at Pezarches and Vilbert. We could hear the roar of a battle far on our left. This, I have since discovered, was the reconnaissance in force which was made by Kluck's flank-guard when



he became aware of the presence of Maunoury's columns advancing on him, and which eventually culminated in the Battle of the Ourcq with its violent alternations of successes and checks.

We were weary indeed after our continuous exertions. Yet, had we foreseen the morrow we should have slept that night with lighter hearts. For—although we did not know it then—the Retreat from Mons was over.

*Note.*—The 27th August saw the I Corps arrive south of Guise, with the II Corps and 4th Division nearly 20 miles away to the south-west, some troops having already crossed the Somme at Ham. The German First Army, inclining south-west in its pursuit, had, for a time, lost contact with the B.E.F. Next day the I Corps arrived south of the Oise near the Forest of St. Gobain, whilst the II Corps were mostly south of the same river, east of Noyon. The 29th was a day of rest for the British. The Battle of Guise, fought by the French Fifth Army, checked the enemy on the Oise further to the north-east, whilst the German outer flank became engaged with the French Sixth Army now forming on the left of the B.E.F. On the 30th August the 4th Division and the 19th Brigade were organised as the III Corps, the British continuing their retreat with the I, II, and III Corps roughly in line from east to west. The direction was south-westward rather than south, and brought the Army on the 5th September after the passage of the Aisne and the Marne to the position Rozoy-Brie-Comte-Robert, the left flank resting some 15 miles south-east of Paris. These were the final limits of the retreat.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MARNE—THE AISNE—YPRES

*The German Retirement—Our Difficulties—Crossing the Marne—The Aisne—The Second Cavalry Division—The Move to the North—The First Battle of Ypres.*

#### I

6 Sept. ON 6th September General Chetwode and the 5th Cavalry Brigade were placed under my orders, to operate in future in combination with my 3rd Cavalry Brigade, while General Allenby continued to command the 1st Cavalry Division, comprising the 1st, 2nd and 4th Brigades. The 1st Cavalry Division had been moved across to the right of the Army, and my task was now, with the two brigades, to cover the II Corps, connecting with the Cavalry Division on my right and with the French Sixth Army on the left.

This day was one of drama. Without warning—and to most of us in the junior ranks without apparent reason—the long retreat changed into an active advance. In fact, until we reached the Aisne the advance closely resembled a pursuit. None of us had any information by which we could understand the why and the wherefore of this sudden and pleasing change. But when we suddenly awoke to the new situation, and found ourselves advancing, a great change came over the spirits of every one, a reversion from almost sullen resignation to expectant triumph. When I realised a little what was happening, and had already ordered both cavalry brigades to advance, I happened to pass a battalion or so of our tired infantry resting and cooking some food. Their Brigadier was there with his Brigade Major, Gilkison, of the Scottish Rifles, whom I knew very well. They asked me, in some surprise, where we were going, and I replied :

‘The Germans are retreating and we are after them—come along too!’

The whole battalion sprang to its feet and cheered frantically. It was certainly a moment of intense excitement such as I had only once before experienced—the sudden change from defeat,

retreat, disappointments and anxiety, to hope, success and victory. The one other occasion was the evening of 28th February 1900 when I rode into Ladysmith with two squadrons of my composite regiment. On that occasion, even after passing the British lines, we could hardly realise that the long four months' siege was over and that our comrades and our honour, so long held in pawn, had been rescued.

Even on the morning of the 6th September none of us had an inkling that the scene was set for a great and, in fact, perhaps the most decisive battle of the War.

But why were we not warned? Joffre's instructions for the counter-offensive were issued to his Army Commanders at 10 p.m. on 4th September: this attack was to take place on the 6th, and Sir John French had agreed to conform. Yet no attempt was made by G.H.Q. to explain to the Corps and Divisional Commanders the extraordinary opportunity now available for a decisive blow at the enemy. The G.H.Q. operation order issued on the evening of 5th September merely stated in a matter-of-fact way that the enemy was 'contracting his front and moving south-eastward. The Army will advance eastward with a view to attacking.' These words failed to convey an adequate view of the position, and gave no inkling of the fact that the situation had changed from an apparently hopeless retreat to a vigorous offensive, offering every opportunity of turning it into a great victory. We, the advanced troops, were left in complete ignorance of these very important decisions, and had to gather them as best we could from the information of our patrols and the observations of our own eyes. Valuable time was necessarily lost while we were ascertaining the situation. With how much more decision, rapidity and advantage could we have acted had we been kept informed of the change in plans.

But to return to the actual events of that day—6th September. The 12th Lancers of the 5th Cavalry Brigade were holding a ridge as rear-guard for the two brigades near Pezarches. About 8.30 a.m. the enemy shelled them heavily and deployed a considerable infantry attack against them; upon this, in accordance with our usual tactics, the 12th Lancers fell back and were covered by the 5th Lancers in a second position. The Germans now occupied this ridge and we shelled them in turn. They never replied, however, and apparently had not brought up their guns. After some time, to my surprise, I saw that no

further hostile advance was taking place, nor could we see any one on the ridge. The 5th Lancers were therefore ordered to send patrols forward to see where the enemy was, and what he was doing.

They found the enemy had evacuated the ridge and was not to be seen. The patrols were again pushed forward and advanced some way before we gained touch once more with the enemy. Meanwhile, I had ordered both brigades to advance and to press the Germans as much as possible. At the same time, as Sir Douglas Haig's H.Q. was quite close, I galloped over to inform Sir Douglas that the enemy was retiring, and that I was following on his heels with the two cavalry brigades. When I walked into his room I found Colonel Seely with him. We had come into opposition over the Curragh incident in the previous March and had not often met since, so we merely bowed coldly to each other. The War, however, blew away many misunderstandings and brought us all together in an affectionate comradeship—and cold bows are no longer exchanged between General Seely and myself, but warmer greetings more in consonance with the nature of Englishmen. Long before the end of the War I had realised that he was a gallant Englishman and I had learnt to appreciate the value of his courageous heart in maintaining his country's cause. I thought at the time that mine was the first definite intimation of the changed situation on his front which Haig had received, but it is now apparent that he had received information from our G.H.Q. on the 5th September.

We soon found that an advance, though more exhilarating, was more difficult in some ways than a retreat, and that we in our turn were more likely to fall into traps than when we were the retreating party. The country was broken and wooded, with rivers running through deep valleys, and with only a few crossing-places: altogether a very difficult country through which to push forward at all rapidly.

Late in the afternoon, though we could as yet see no large bodies of Germans retiring, we were held up by hidden machine guns in the outskirts of the several woods we encountered, and I kept a section of guns from D Battery, under my young cousin John Gough, well forward, ready to come into action at a fairly close range and shell the edges of the woods. This cleared out the machine guns more quickly, and at considerably less cost, than would have been possible by any other method. The next



day still found us pushing on through a broken and wooded country. We occasionally came in sight of heavy columns retiring amid clouds of dust, and were able to punish the enemy a little with our artillery; but the range of our horse artillery guns, as already remarked, was not very great and we could not always reach him.

By 8th September we had reached the Petit Morin River in a great deep valley, thickly wooded on the far side. Along this the Germans had left a fairly strong infantry rear-guard. I came on a breakfast table out in the open, which apparently had been used that morning, and I remember climbing on to it and using it as an elevated look-out post. I also remember noticing a church tower, some three miles on my left, behind the trees. I brought forward my two batteries to shell the woods in front, and the retiring columns of the enemy.

The Germans had left a battery in position, however, somewhere near the church tower, which was evidently used as an observation post, for it was not long before a heavy shell fire opened on us from that flank. The hostile guns were completely concealed, and it was impossible to reply effectively. It was a mistake to have brought up our guns quite so close or quite so much in the open, where they could be 'spotted,' but we were pressing hard on the enemy's heels, knowing that he had no gun positions existing on the immediate front. Our gunners, however, did not realise the necessity of concealment from the flanks as well. The two batteries suffered heavily, and my young cousin John was killed, as well as another subaltern, Parker, and Major Godfrey Gillson, who commanded D, was wounded. I felt John's loss terribly, for I was fond of the gallant, generous and able boy. We buried him and Parker that evening after dark, near a farm.

We were unable to force the crossings of the Petit Morin at St. Cyr and St. Ouen, a task which was undertaken by the advanced guard of the 5th Division. Sir Charles Fergusson asked us to protect his left flank during this operation, as he had had no news of the III Corps on the left. This caused us to move towards La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, where we found part of the III Corps held up by the broken bridges over the Marne.

As I was standing on the road leading south from La Ferté, a car drove up in which was Sir John French. He got out and talked to me of the general situation, and was pleasant. This was the first time I had met him during the War, and he chaff-



ingly reminded me that our last meeting had been at the War Office after the Curragh incident in March !

*Note.*—On the 5th September the British columns had moved off on the final stage of the retreat before Sir John French received General Joffre's orders for a return to the offensive. At the beginning of the month the German First Army had wheeled south-eastward in order to envelop the Allied left, and was following up the B.E.F. and the French Fifth Army ; but the French Sixth Army was now in a position to commence the envelopment of Von Kluck's right. Sir John French's orders for the advance were issued on the evening of the 5th. The direction was north-eastward, and the I Corps, on the right, soon encountered considerable opposition. By the 8th September a methodical advance through difficult country had established the B.E.F. south of the Marne on a 15-mile front between Montmirail and Meaux. On the right the flank of the French Fifth Army was well up ; but on the left the nearest troops of Maunoury's Sixth Army had been forced back across the Ourcq, and were not in touch with the British.

## II <sup>1</sup>

9 Sept. The next day, 9th September, we were ordered to wait until the infantry had crossed at the bridge of La Ferté. The ground was so open that we could see large columns of Germans moving north-east, but the distance was too great for our horse artillery to touch them. The sight of these retreating columns and the enforced delay was terribly trying, as we were naturally eager to be after them.

As the prospects of our crossing at La Ferté seemed to be distant, we sent off to find out how the 5th Division was getting on. We discovered that it had now forced the crossings of the Marne at Mery and Nanteuil ; without further ado, therefore, I moved the two brigades so as to be in a position to take our place once more in advance of the II Corps the next morning.

Meanwhile, to the right and to the left of the British Army the great Battle of the Marne was being fought—although we in the fighting line were quite ignorant of the magnitude of this great counter-stroke.

10 Sept. Early the following morning, my brigades crossed the River Marne at Saacy and Nanteuil, and resumed their place at the head of the infantry.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 1, p. 5, and Sketch Map 4, p. 50.

We now found ourselves in the wide and open country south of the Aisne, and here we could push the retreating enemy much more effectively. In the immediate front of my two brigades the German cavalry seemed to have disappeared and their rear-guards were composed of infantry of their reserve corps, often oldish fellows not so well trained or commanded as their active corps.

These we dealt with decisively and effectively on several occasions. In that very open ground it was very difficult for infantry alone, inadequately supported by either artillery or cavalry, to hold us up for long and then to escape unscathed.

Near Brumetz we came on a battalion of Germans; holding them in front by a dismounted attack of the 5th Lancers and 4th Hussars of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, the 12th Lancers of Chetwode's brigade, led by gallant Eustace Crawley, galloped across the valley and then charged the Germans in flank, riding all through them, killing many and capturing about 200 prisoners.

This was the second mounted charge that this regiment had most successfully brought off within a fortnight, and it was quite a notable feat.

On 11th September, as we approached the Aisne, we found 11 Sept. the Germans entrenching a position on the high ground south of Soissons. I hesitated to commit the cavalry to an assault on entrenchments and spent some time reconnoitring the enemy, to find out more about him and his position.

About this same time, we saw heavy columns moving northwards on our left, but now the spell of fine weather broke, and a most torrential storm of rain came down, reducing visibility to a minimum. We dared not shell them in case they were French. We had to send patrols to find out, and ascertained that these indeed were French troops. Later on we heard their guns in action.

On 12th September we reached the high plateau overlooking 12 Sept. a plain through which ran the River Aisne in this part of its course, with similar ridges dominating it on the far side. I could not then tell that this was to be the limit of our advance for four years, and that the Allies were to sit on these distant ridges for all that long and trying period.

My patrols reported that the crossings over the Aisne at Vailly and Condé were held, and that they were unable to approach them. On our right front, on this side of the Aisne,

but across its little tributary, the Vesle, ran another high spur with wooded slopes. Owing to the configuration of the ground, any advance to it must be in full view of the enemy north of the Aisne. If the enemy had any guns in position, crossing of that open plain would be an uncomfortable move. It was a problem.

I first sent a squadron of the 5th Lancers across the open and it disappeared up the wooded slope without mishap. I then pushed the remainder of the regiment after the leading squadron, and these also crossed the open space unmolested.

The 5th Lancers were to climb the wooded slope and establish themselves securely on the open plateau above, before the rest of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade would cross and join them. Meanwhile, I ordered Chetwode's 5th Cavalry Brigade to push on further on my right. At last I thought I could venture with the rest of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, and with large intervals between squadrons and batteries the remainder of the brigade crossed safely, much to my relief.

As the main body of the brigade wound its way up the very steep and thickly-wooded slope along a narrow path, what was my horror to find the 5th Lancers coming down the self-same track, having left no advance-guard (or rear-guard, as the case might be) to cover our exit from the woods. I knew that German infantry might be in the vicinity, and if they caught us, mounted, in the woods, we would have been an easy prey. This was one of those minor but very unpleasant thrills to which every one is at times exposed in war. Before the day was over, I was to have an even more alarming one, which, however, eventually turned into a very successful, if petty, victory. But to continue—I ordered the 5th Lancers back at once and instructed them to make good and secure a wide space round our exit from the wood. After giving them time to do this, we followed on, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I found myself, with the whole brigade, safely clear of the dark, close, damp wood, and out on a great open plateau in the evening sunlight.

My thoughts were preoccupied with the position on my front, and in endeavouring to get at and punish the Germans—for I was under the happy delusion that they were still in full retreat. Chetwode should be up on my right at any moment, and beyond the 5th Cavalry Brigade I knew the 1st Cavalry Division was still further to the east.

I therefore pushed a squadron or two northwards across the

plateau to the far edge where they overlooked the valley of the Aisne, so as to cover D Battery, which was moved forward, and opened fire on bodies of the enemy that could be seen on the north bank of the river. Suddenly, while this was going on, a sharp fire broke out on my right rear, and I saw several lines of infantry advancing from the south-east. I could not imagine that any but a large body of infantry could be operating by itself on this side of the river, and I saw at once that if it succeeded in advancing and driving in my right and rear, or in getting into the woods, I should have a most difficult and dangerous retreat; here was my little force engaged with one enemy to our front, when we were unexpectedly attacked on our right rear—which meant that our only line of retreat, and that a most precarious one, was seriously threatened! It was decidedly an alarming situation. Luckily I still had a large reserve in hand. My other battery was at once brought into action against the advancing Germans; a squadron of the 16th Lancers and their machine guns, under Edward Beddington, were galloped off to my right rear, to outflank the enemy's left, if possible, and anyhow, to prevent them getting into the wood behind me; while the 5th Lancers were moved at a gallop over the plateau till they reached the enemy's right flank, when they were to act mounted or dismounted as occasion offered. Harvey Kearsley was sent off as hard as he could gallop to find Chetwode, to hurry his advance, and order him to attack the enemy's left and rear as quickly as possible.

Thus in a few minutes our dispositions were so altered that the enemy found himself under artillery fire from his front, and both his flanks threatened. I breathed again, but of course I did not yet know what further strength the attacking German infantry might develop, or whether these dispositions would suffice to meet the case. However, I still had the 4th Hussars in reserve, and I began the withdrawal of D Battery, which was then in action, almost with its back to the new enemy.

We had not fired a dozen shells into the enemy when, to my relief, up went several white flags; the 5th Lancers galloped forward and about 150 of the enemy surrendered as prisoners, after suffering a dozen or so casualties. We were all very pleased and triumphant at this successful ending to what at one moment looked a very unpleasant position. It turned out that these unfortunate troops had formed part of the German rear-



guard which had defended Braisne against our 1st Cavalry Division; in falling back, having been cut off from their direct line of retreat northwards across the Aisne, they were endeavouring to reach the bridge at Vailly when they suddenly came on us between them and their objective. They were as surprised as we were, and equally horrified at the position in which they found themselves, but—fortunately for us—with considerably more reason.

That night we billeted and bivouacked on the south bank of the Aisne, with our prisoners under lock and key in the small church at Chassemy, which made a convenient prison. We found the bridge at Vailly destroyed, and were not able to cross it till our engineers could come up and make some temporary repairs. This resulted in a delay of at least 36 hours before horses or anything on wheels could cross.

G.H.Q. remained under the impression that the enemy was still continuing his retreat, and issued orders on the evening of the 12th September for the Army 'to continue the pursuit to-morrow at 7 a.m.'

13 Sept. During the whole of 13th September my two brigades stood to, waiting for the word that the bridges had been repaired. A few German shells fell into Chassemy village, while at the same time the road from Braisne was more heavily shelled.

Since the advance had begun I had found that the orders issued to the cavalry in G.H.Q. orders had been so indefinite that I wrote the following letter to G.H.Q.:

13th September: 5 a.m. I would be obliged if I could receive definite orders daily (1) as to what places I am to reconnoitre and what information is required; (2) the axis of march of my brigades and the line they are expected to reach daily; (3) what distance ahead of the infantry I am expected to be. At present I receive practically no orders. In consequence, it is impossible to act with decision and without constant hesitation. Every night the infantry columns come up and crowd us out of billets to the great detriment of the efficiency of our men and horses. This is particularly fatal if this weather is to continue.

Unfortunately the situation altered and such orders to the cavalry were not called for again on the Western Front.

G.H.Q. again on the 13th September ordered the Army 'to continue the pursuit the next morning at 6 a.m. and to act vigorously against the retreating enemy.' 'The heads of corps were to reach the line Laon-Fresne'—some 14 or 15 miles north of

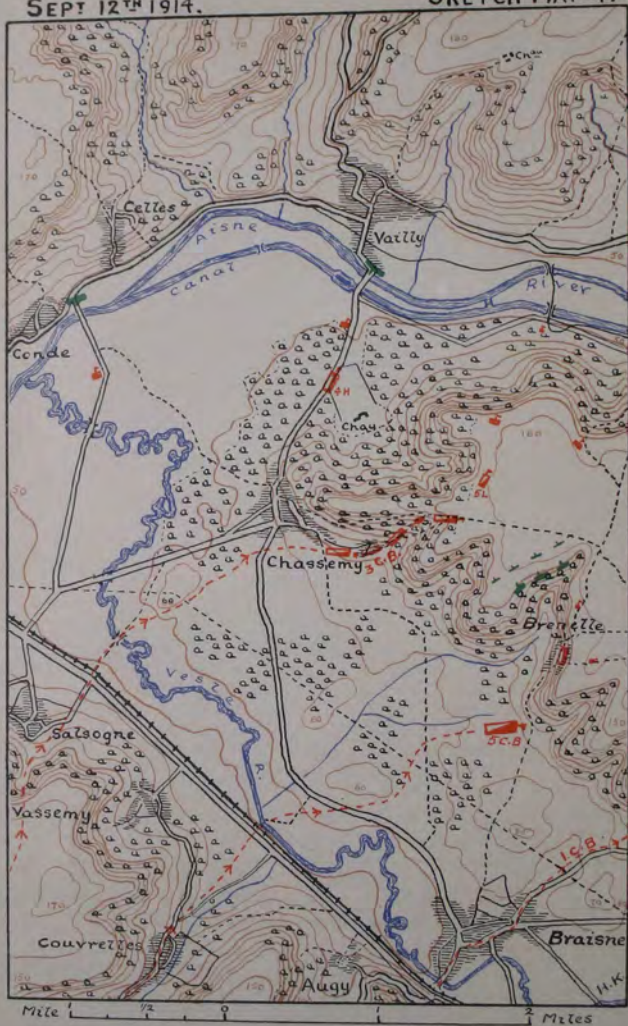
SKETCH MAP 4

SEPT 12-1914



SEPT 12<sup>TH</sup> 1914.

SKETCH MAP 4.



the Aisne. And, in fact, another order from a corps went so far as to say 'disorganisation was increasing.' This, however, turned out to be a complete misconception, and it seems 'that the wish was father to the thought.'

In accordance with these orders, I brought up my two <sup>14 Sept.</sup> brigades to the bridge at Vailly (the repairs to which were to be completed by 6 a.m.) in order to cross the river and 'act vigorously against the retreating enemy.'

The 5th Cavalry Brigade, which was to lead, did not arrive till 6.30 a.m.—a thick mist hanging over the river banks at that hour. The 12th Lancers and Greys crossed at once, and got under cover on the far side of the bridge.

By this time information came back from the infantry on the far side, from which it was evident that there was still neither space nor opportunity for cavalry to advance, our infantry only being able to hold on barely half a mile beyond the river. At the same time the mist lifted, just as the last regiment of the brigade—the 20th Hussars—began to cross, and the Germans started shelling the bridge with 5.9" howitzers, and some field guns as well. I therefore stopped any further forward movement, and recalled those of the 20th Hussars who had already crossed.

Eventually Vailly village began to be heavily shelled, so about 11 a.m. I decided to get back the 12th Lancers and Greys as well.

They crossed the bridge a troop at a time. The 12th Lancers had all crossed safely before the Germans realised what we were doing, but when the turn of the Greys came, each troop had to run the gauntlet of four shells as it crossed the bridge. They must have had a most uncomfortable ride, but considering the fire, the casualties were very light—three officers and a few men being wounded.

The two brigades were now crammed inside the park of Chassemy Chateau, within range of the enemy's guns, though fortunately concealed by the trees. So I now brought both brigades back, and we climbed up the steep slopes, still fortunately concealed by the trees. The Germans, however, were searching the woods, and we had a few casualties—Tempest-Hicks being wounded.

When we got to the open plateau, we found several batteries of the II Corps in action, and they were having a very hot time from the German 5.9" howitzers. We gave these batteries a



wide berth, and took up a covered position in one of the hollows, where we remained for the rest of the day.

We moved back to billets in the evening. The actual day's work had proved to be vastly different to that foreshadowed by our morning orders.

We now know that Von Bülow, commanding the three German Armies on the Aisne, intended not only to stand at bay, but to drive the British across or into the river, and to secure the ground on the south bank. This plan was only frustrated by the determined spirit of the British attack, which made him think large reserves were in close support. But the real situation was that the infantry of the three British corps had practically every battalion in the firing line.

There now began a long and desperate struggle with the Germans in the endeavour to push them back from the river and to continue the advance; this alternated with fierce German attacks, aimed in their turn at throwing us back across the river. Losses were very heavy on both sides and the struggle was maintained for some three weeks.

Although the initial excitement of the about-turn had died away, there was plenty of hard fighting for the men engaged. To my cavalry brigades, however, the time passed tediously, for the confined nature of the operations forbade our serious participation, and my letters home provide evidence that our enforced inaction while our comrades of the other arms were fighting desperately made me fret a good deal. But this period of comparative inactivity for the cavalry did give us the opportunity of thoroughly reorganising all units and making good our equipment after the retreat; that we were able to replace our losses so expeditiously stands high to the credit of the Staff of our Lines of Communication. Yet, had we known it, many calls were still to be made on us. The Retreat from Mons, the Advance on the Marne, and the Attack on the Aisne—all these had been events of immense importance. But the subsequent Move to the North was absolutely vital, not only to the little British Army, but to the safety of England itself.

*Notes.*—On the 9th September the B.E.F. made the passage of the Marne, the II Corps in the centre and the III Corps on the left meeting with considerable opposition in doing so. At night the British right rested west of Château-Thierry—in touch with the French Fifth Army—and the line extended south-westward

to the vicinity of La Ferté-sous-Jouarre. The advance of the B.E.F. on this day—disappointing as it may have seemed to the troops at the time—had very great influence upon the result of the famous battle. Whilst the French Fifth Army was driving back Bülow's Second Army right wing, the British had thrust in between the German Second and First Armies so that the latter, hotly engaged with Maunoury's Army on the Ourcq, found its left flank turned, and was obliged to make a hurried retreat.

The pursuit of the Germans next day carried the B.E.F. (I and II Corps) northward for a distance of 10 miles, the cavalry reaching the upper Ourcq. The III Corps, delayed by the difficulties of crossing the Marne at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, arrived behind the left flank.

The advance on the 11th September was north-eastward, as the right of the French Sixth Army was now wheeling northward on the left of the B.E.F. There was no heavy fighting on this day, and another 10 miles were covered.

On the 12th September, a day of heavy rain, the B.E.F. crossed the River Vesle, and was nearing the Aisne—Bourg to Venizel—when halted for the night. On the right, touch was maintained with the French Fifth Army about Fismes, and on the left, the Sixth Army had reached Soissons.

The passage of the Aisne on the 13th September, and the desperate fighting next day on the Chemin des Dames ridge and the Chivres spur against an enemy well entrenched and supported by heavy artillery, offered little scope for cavalry action. Thereafter, the stabilisation of the front resulted in the beginning of trench warfare. The battle line was prolonged northward, and at the beginning of October the B.E.F., relieved by the French, began its move to Flanders.

### III <sup>1</sup>

On 15th September the 2nd Cavalry Division was formed and 15 Sept. I was given the command with the rank of Major General. <sup>2nd</sup> Cavalry  
The division consisted of my two brigades (the 3rd and 5th), <sup>Divi-</sup>  
to which was added on 14th October the 4th Cavalry Brigade, <sup>sion.</sup>  
under Brig. General Hon. C. Bingham. Colonel Greenly—  
better known as Bob Greenly—became my senior General Staff  
Officer. He was one of the most capable and reliable officers in  
the Army and a very old friend. Major Weir, 3rd Dragoon  
Guards (now commanding the troops in Bombay), Major W.  
Alexander—popularly known as 'the Priest'—and Edward  
Beddington of my old regiment, also joined the Staff. Colonel  
Goodwin, who was appointed my Chief Medical Officer, later

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Maps 5, p. 56, and 6, p. 58.

on became Director General of the Army Medical Service, and is now Governor of Queensland.

On the formation of the 2nd Cavalry Division, my old brigade (the 3rd) was taken over by Brig. General John Vaughan, who had been G.S.O. 1 to General Allenby up to that time.

The Commander-in-Chief and G.H.Q. had now come to the conclusion that our dispositions would be both sounder and more convenient if the British Army was placed on the left flank of the French, rather than sandwiched in, as it then was, with French Armies on both sides of it. In this new position the British would be on almost the extreme left flank of the Allied Army; the move would bring us on the nearest line to the Channel Ports, which were of the greatest, in fact of vital, importance both to our Army and the country. It would give our Army clear and unhampered lines of communication, avoiding the complications caused by French and British lines crossing each other.

To achieve this entailed moving all the British Army northwards, passing behind and under cover of the French.

It is difficult to over-estimate the strategical importance of this move; indeed it is doubtful whether the full bearings and advantages of it were realised at the time.

Had we had French troops (whose base would have been central France) on the extreme left flank either during the First Battle of Ypres or in 1918, it is very possible that the Channel Ports would have been lost to us. This does not mean that the fighting qualities of the French troops are being called in question, but it is merely a matter of lines of communication and the vital necessity of covering them.

Another reason which urged forward this movement was the hope of outflanking the German Army. About this time, however, the German Command also reached the conclusion that a turning movement by the north gave more promise of regaining the initiative, and of essential victory, than a continuance of the battle on the Aisne. The result of these two similar and almost simultaneous but opposing movements was to bring about another fierce clash in the north during October, extending from Bapaume, through Ypres to the Belgian coast. Neither side had started in time, however, nor had either sufficient superiority of force to turn and roll up the opposing flank. Most fortunately for the British, the Channel Ports at least were secured to them.

It is not within the scope of this story to examine what would have been the immediate ultimate effects on the War had the German High Command seized these ports during September, when they were certainly at its mercy for the taking; such speculation would form an extremely interesting study for military students.

The two cavalry divisions were to lead this northward movement into the new position, marching by road, and were to cover the detrainment of the other arms, at points as far north and north-east as possible. The first instructions, given me on 30th September, were to reach Lille and cover the detrainment of our II Corps there. Long before we got as far north as that, however, we knew the Germans had forestalled us at that place. As we started on our march, the information from our aeroplanes told us that large German forces were also moving north-west along their whole front—in other words, on parallel lines to our own movements. Eventually, we came to battle north-east of Hazebrouck, covering the detrainment of our III Corps at that railhead.

This march commenced on 1st October, and was carried out *1 Oct.* in lovely weather and under almost ideal picnic conditions. I received very particular instructions personally from Sir John French to the effect that I was not to accede to any requests from the French which would draw me into action on their behalf. Of course, they did call on us, and on the *7th 7 Oct.* October General Castelnau, accompanied by his liaison officer, came to see me. The latter was Captain C. B. Thomson, afterwards Lord Thomson and Minister for Air, who was killed so tragically in the R 101. General Castelnau begged on urgent grounds for my co-operation on his front, near Roye, which he considered in danger of being driven in. He said that if only the British cavalry would show itself behind his trench lines, his men would be inspired with sufficient confidence to hold on. On account of this moving appeal, and on receiving fresh instructions from Sir John, we stayed our march for one day. One regiment (the 20th Hussars) was moved up to the close support of the French. Nothing serious transpired, however, and that afternoon we resumed our march.

On 10th October the division reached Aire, and we heard *10 Oct.* that the French cavalry on our left had been forced to retire on the Forêt de Nieppe. The Commander-in-Chief had the previous day constituted the two cavalry divisions into a corps,



under the command of General Allenby, General de Lisle succeeding him in command of the 1st Cavalry Division.

12 Oct.

The morning of 12th October was very cold, and in a thick fog the 2nd Cavalry Division moved out of Hazebrouck. The 1st Cavalry Division was operating on our right. The enemy was known to be in the neighbourhood, and we were soon in contact with him. We were now operating in the enclosed country which lies on the Belgian border, high and thick hedges in every field, which made mounted action impossible and scouting extremely difficult. It is very creditable to the training and skill of the officers and men that the scouting, the frequent skirmishes, and at times the heavy fighting which was carried on with so much success during the next few weeks, met with comparatively small losses.

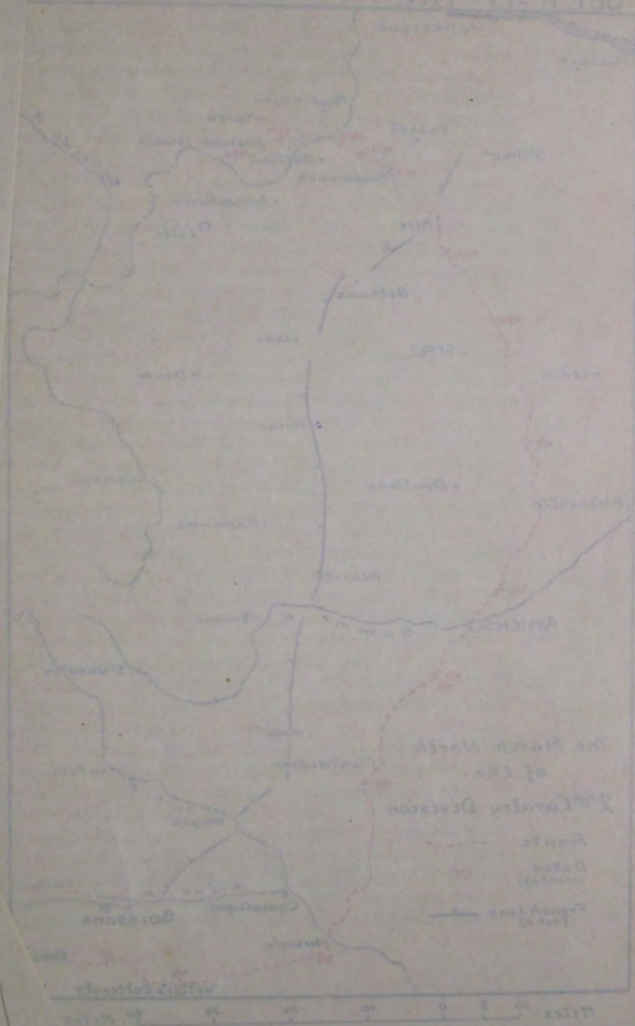
About 11 a.m. the fog cleared and we found facing us the Mont des Cats, on which was perched a monastery, covering the top of the hill with its somewhat extensive and massive buildings. This height completely dominated the surrounding country, and with its broken sides and many enclosures, high walls, and buildings, it looked indeed a formidable position.

Reconnaissances disclosed the fact that it was held. It was during these reconnaissances that Captain Gatacre and Lt. Levita of the 4th Hussars were killed, two particularly fine officers.

I issued orders for the 3rd Cavalry Brigade to attack in front while Chetwode's 5th Cavalry Brigade—on the left—was to swing up and attack the flank, he in his turn making sufficiently strong detachments to guard his own outer flank (left). Meanwhile the 1st Cavalry Division and the 4th Division were in action on our right towards Meteren. The 16th Lancers were entrusted with the main attack. They dismounted, and the troop leaders conducted the advance very skilfully, being well supported by the horse artillery.

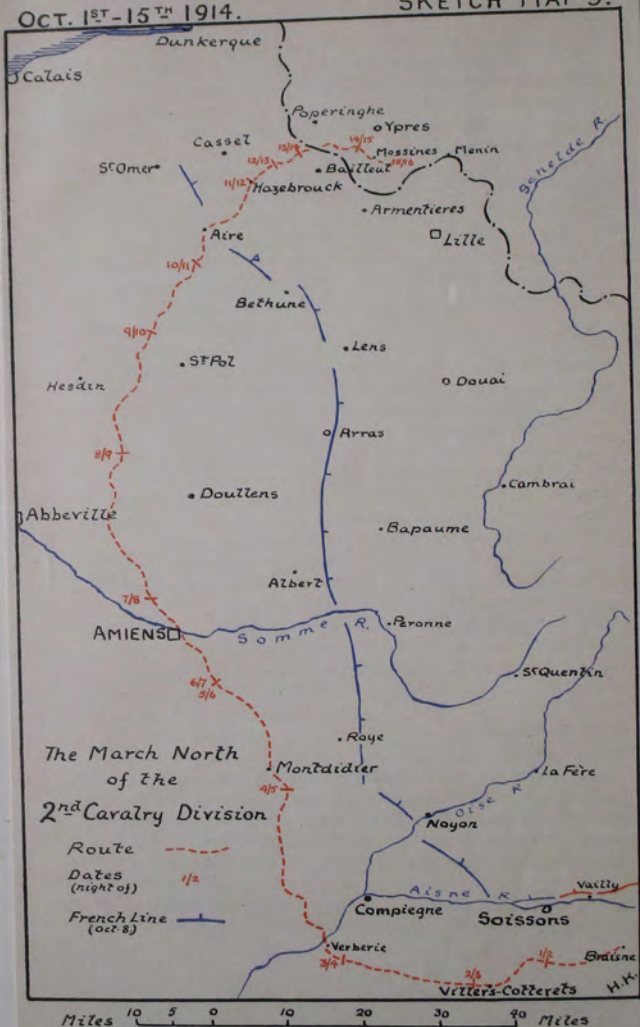
Eventually the 5th Cavalry Brigade threatened the flank of the position. Towards the evening the German cavalry retired, leaving some of their dead and wounded behind, among them being young Prince Max of Hesse, who died that evening. Afterwards, in censoring the letters of the division dealing with this period, it was surprising to find the number of men who claimed that they had fired the fatal shot which killed the young Prince!

A squadron or two were pushed on at once, and occupied for the night the villages still further to the east. About this



OCT. 1<sup>ST</sup>-15<sup>TH</sup> 1914.

SKETCH MAP 5.



time, just before dark, a regiment of French Territorial infantry (three battalions) marched up to join me—much to my delight, for I thought I could make use of them to secure the important position we had just succeeded in capturing; this would leave me free with my cavalry division to push on and threaten the enemy's flank, which was still opposing and holding up the 1st Cavalry Division and the III Corps. I suggested therefore to the French colonel in command that he should push one or two of his companies forward and take over the defence of the villages held by my advanced squadrons. He was a nice old gentleman, but had no intention of doing any fighting if he could help it, and he wrung his hands at my request, saying, '*Pas des munitions, pas des vivres, pas de train régimentaire.*' And I could get nothing more out of him!

We had some experience ourselves of being without munitions, rations, or our regimental wagons; nevertheless, during most of the retreat from Mons we had managed to do some useful fighting without those important adjuncts, so I cannot say that I considered his excuse a very valid one.

Next day, by General Allenby's orders, we were detained in 13 Oct. position on the captured heights, in spite of my protests and requests to be allowed to advance.

It appeared to me that we were on the flank, if not partly in rear, of the Germans who were heavily engaged with our 1st Cavalry Division and 4th Division. The Germans opposite us were only cavalry supported by some Jäger. It seemed a priceless chance for my cavalry to sweep round, roll up their flank, threaten their rear, and thus help our infantry to advance.

That we were not permitted to take advantage of this situation, created by our success of the previous day, was to my mind an error of judgment. Even if the Germans retreated at once, to remain passive on top of the Mont des Cats was to waste a valuable day.

The following day, the Germans having fallen back, we 14 Oct. ventured to advance again, and during the afternoon captured Kemmel, which village with its dominating and wooded hill was to become so well known to almost all the British Army during the ensuing years. We pushed on to Wytschaete in the evening, and found it occupied by a brigade of General Byng's 3rd Cavalry Division (6th and 7th Cavalry Brigades). These were the first of the troops under General Rawlinson we had as yet met; with the 7th Division they had been employed



in the vain hope of saving Antwerp. Thus the junction was safely formed with this detachment, and the whole British Army in France was now concentrated under the hand of the Commander-in-Chief.

About 7 that evening I went into Wyttschaete and found Byng in a house in the main street. I exchanged news with him, and arranged for our dispositions the next day. That night my billets were in Kemmel Chateau, and here I slept most nights for the following weeks, though I was never in it during the day-time.

15 Oct. Next day my division took over the front from Messines, through Wyttschaete, as far as St. Eloi and the canal near Hollebeke.

Byng's division on our left was drawn northwards, and covered the right of the 7th Division. The I Corps was beginning to arrive from the Aisne. The scene was set for one of the fiercest encounters of the War—the epic struggle which is known to the world as the First Battle of Ypres.

#### IV <sup>1</sup>

The 1st Cavalry Division on our right carried on the front from Messines, to the east of Ploegsteert Wood, connecting with the III Corps stretching southwards.

The Germans did not make any very serious attacks against our two cavalry divisions until the 30th October, although they brought very heavy attacks against the III Corps to the south of us, and even more intensive ones against the I Corps to the north of us.

It remains to me a mystery why they ignored for so long this thin screen of cavalry which filled the gap between these two corps. By tearing it aside and bursting through it, they could have overwhelmed either the left flank of the III Corps or—more dangerous still—the right flank of the I Corps, both already in the greatest difficulties, struggling to hold their front. I have always believed that the very active and offensive rôle the Cavalry Corps adopted during this period deceived the Germans, and led them to believe that this part of our line was held in considerable force.

We now know that the Germans opposite us also consisted principally of cavalry; but they might have massed large

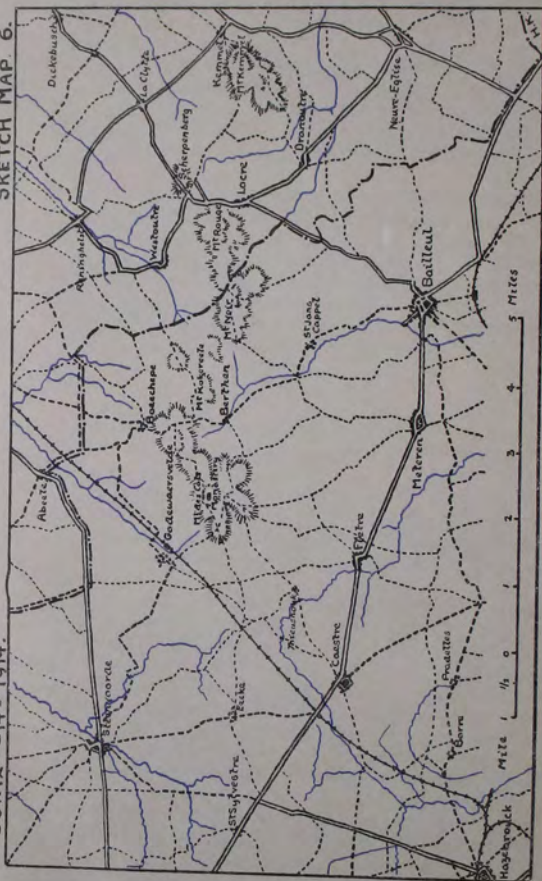
<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 7, p. 70.

20 9471 N 101 00 E

20 9471 N 101 00 E



SKETCH MAP. 6.



forces of infantry and guns against us much earlier than the 30th October and driven us in. It would have been a fine stroke, and might have produced decisive results.

At this time we all hoped and thought that we could push the Germans back, and the first order we got from Allenby was to endeavour to seize the crossings of the Lys—at Warneton and Comines. The 3rd Cavalry Brigade boldly pushed up to the outskirts of Warneton, and on the evening of the 16th 16 Oct. October a determined effort was made to seize the town, and the bridge over the Lys at the far end of it. This brought on a fight which, though a small affair when compared to the terrific struggles which lay before us, is worth recording.

The 16th Lancers pushed a squadron into the outskirts of the town in the late evening, and finding it apparently deserted, stalked forward in the semi-darkness down the silent streets. Other squadrons of the brigade then came up, and soon a fairly large body of our men was collected in the main street, with patrols pushing continuously forward and down the side streets. Eventually—absolute silence still reigning—they advanced to the central square. But here they found a barricade across the entrance; this was held by the enemy and shots were exchanged.

A horse artillery gun was now dragged up by hand, and opened fire down the street on the barricade. I do not believe it hit it, but it enabled our men to rush it. The darkness, the comparative silence and emptiness of the streets up to that moment, and then the sudden loud crash caused by the shot and its violent echoes along the houses, followed by the immediate smashing of every pane of glass in the street, produced a most weird effect.

Having rushed the barricade, our men could advance no further, because all exits from or into the square were held by the enemy, and machine guns at once opened on any one who attempted to pass the barricade and into the square. It was here that we had our first experience of the use by the enemy of 'Verrey' lights, which for brief but distinct periods lit up the whole square and surrounding streets with a bright, clear but bluish light, adding enormously to the eeriness of the situation.

Finding that the enemy was well established and supported by far larger numbers than we could cope with, the attacking troops withdrew successfully. An officer who took part in the attack, writing home, said he had never experienced such



uncomfortable and weird sensations as he did during that evening in the streets of the deserted town.

On this day, the 16th October, the 4th Cavalry Brigade had pushed forward north of Warneton in the centre and occupied Gapaard, while the 5th Cavalry Brigade on my left occupied Hollebeke and obtained touch with Byng's cavalry. During the next day or two we pushed forward advance squadrons into Houthem, over two miles ahead of us, and the 5th Cavalry Brigade occupied Zandvoorde and Tenbrielen. This small village was about two miles from Comines and Wervicq on the Lys, which latter place we shelled. It looked as if there was not much in front of us, and that we would really get on soon. But that was far from being the case, and the next day (20th October) we were driven back to Houthem.

20 Oct.

By the 20th October German attacks began to develop along our front, but still more seriously on our left against the 7th Division and the I Corps.

The 5th Cavalry Brigade retired as far as Houthem. The 4th Cavalry Brigade fell back from Gapaard to a line in front of Messines.

Allenby, who during all these days visited me and his other Divisional Commanders nearly every morning, promised to send the 1st Cavalry Brigade to take over the defence of Messines, which was duly carried out. This relieved my 3rd Brigade, and I moved them round to the extreme left, where they took over the defence of Hollebeke from the 5th Cavalry Brigade—who now became the centre of my line. From the 20th October onwards we began to think more of defence than of advancing, and all the available men in the line or in support spent their time in digging trenches and preparing localities and lines for defence. We prepared a second line behind us, running roughly along the foot of the eastern slopes of the Messines-Wytshaete Ridge, and these two villages were prepared for defence. It was well we did so, for eventually we were driven back to this line, and before being driven out of it, as eventually befell us, we were able to put up a serious fight, to inflict very heavy casualties on the enemy, and to prevent the success of his plan on this part of the battlefield.

With Greenly and the rest of the Divisional Staff, I slept nearly every night at Kemmel, but we were usually at our advance Headquarters by 6 o'clock in the morning, never returning to Kemmel till between 6 and 9 in the evening. At

first, however, we slept and worked in Messines for two or three nights, but Kemmel became our night resort when the 1st Cavalry Brigade took on the defence of that village.

My day varied with the pressure or the interest of the situation. On several days my Headquarters were as far forward as Oosttaverne, in a small stuffy estaminet at a corner in the village. Here, in order to get a breath of fresh air, I often threw myself outside on some straw when there was a pause in the arrival of reports, orders, etc. But it was outside Wyttschaete, at another little estaminet on the main road, that my Headquarters were usually established.

On the 28th and 29th October, when heavy attacks were developing against the I Corps and the 7th Division, and Byng's cavalry were being driven in, I moved my Headquarters to the lodge of the White Chateau north-west of Hollebeke, as this was close to the scene of action.

The chateau was a palatial building in large grounds. Fine gates of ironwork stood imposingly beside the lodge. By the end of 1915 not one vestige of all this could be found, and it was difficult to locate the spot on which the building had stood—there was nothing but a mass of water-logged shell-holes and churned-up mud.

I had meetings with my three Brigadiers usually at 8.30 every morning, and we discussed the events of the previous day, of the night, and our positions and plans for the future. During the day I visited most of them as well, and often some of the Regimental Headquarters also.

There were only 18 horse artillery guns belonging to the division, and by the 22nd many of them were useless owing to their buffer springs breaking from constant firing. We were also receiving urgent reminders to economise our ammunition, as the shells for the horse artillery guns in particular were very scarce.

At times we all helped each other, and sent reinforcements to our neighbours—when they could be spared, and where the need was urgent. About the 22nd, the Corps sent me some cavalry, 250 men of the Munster Fusiliers and 2 howitzers. The cavalry and infantry only stayed 24 hours, but the howitzers remained some days, and were much appreciated.

The Lahore Division from India arrived about this time. The 129th 'Baluchis' and the 57th 'Wilde's Rifles' (of the Ferozepore Brigade under Brig. General R. G. Egerton) were

the two battalions which worked with me at various times during this fortnight.

26 Oct. On the 26th—as the I Corps were staging a counter-attack—Allenby met us at 10.30 in the morning, and it was arranged to launch an attack by the 129th Baluchis on Houthem, and the Connaught Rangers on Gapaard. The latter captured the German trenches there, but nothing serious seems to have been contemplated, and by the evening both attacking forces returned to our lines with very small losses.

That evening at 8.15, having heard that the I Corps were pressed, I suggested to the Cavalry Corps that we could spare the two Indian battalions, a battery, and a cavalry regiment, and that they should be sent to Byng, who was in difficulties. But the Corps did not think the situation admitted of this. During next morning, however, Allenby came to me and gave me orders to get this force ready, and by the early afternoon it was prepared to move. However, it was not called on.

The 129th and 57th Indian Battalions were later placed under my orders. I reinforced my left, the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, with the 129th, and my right near Messines with half of the 57th, and kept the other half under my own hand.

29 Oct. On the 29th, in the afternoon, Byng asked for any help we could send him, but this had been anticipated, and an hour previously 5 squadrons, half battalion 129th Baluchis and two guns had been sent to Klein Zillebeke, behind Byng's centre. These were returned to us, however, that evening. But later on I heard from my brother that the situation of the I Corps was very difficult and they were short of men, so I organised the three regiments in reserve of my brigades and a battery R.H.A. and placed them under Colonel Bulkeley Johnson of the Scots Greys. These marched to the I Corps before 8 next morning. These were critical times for the I Corps, for during the last ten days or so the fighting on their front had been prolonged and fierce.

This detachment under Bulkeley Johnson did some valuable work for Byng on the 30th, but their absence deprived me of reserves that day, which, it so happened, I badly wanted myself. After fighting all day with the 3rd Cavalry Division, this force returned to me in the evening, and the regiments rejoined their brigades. I received letters of acknowledgment from my brother and Neill Malcolm on the Staff of the I Corps,

and as they were hurriedly written in the midst of a great battle, and throw an interesting light on the problems and personalities of our Staff at a time of great crisis, I give them as written.

MY DEAR HUBERT,—Very many thanks for your support. It was like you. I have been up to the front and organised a big counter-attack of close on 8000 to 10,000 men!!! I fancy this will do the trick. Things look better than they did already. Thanks for the letters, I will return them. Best congratulations on your promotion.—Yours,  
J. G.

29th October, 1.30 p.m.

29th Oct.

MY DEAR HUBERT,—Many congratulations on your promotion. It is splendid. We have had a hot fight here to-day. Indeed, we are still having it. The story is not yet quite clear, but we are now gradually recovering the ground we had at one time lost. Johnnie and the Chief are away for the moment looking after the fight and settling what the next step is to be. Roughly, the Chief is pushing forward to the Gheluvelt cross-roads like [here was inserted a rough sketch map of the position], so we are at them everywhere. We are still a little uncertain about the action of the 7th Division, but I fancy the Chief will find out all about it before he comes back.

We are very grateful for your generous support and reinforcements. It was characteristic of you. Johnnie, I need hardly say, is splendid on these occasions.—Yours ever,

NEILL MALCOLM.

The promotion referred to was the rank of Major General. I was then just 44 years of age.

The storm broke over us on 30th October, a few hours after 30 Oct. my reserve brigade had marched to the I Corps. I do not think I can do better than quote a letter I wrote to my wife on 3rd November, describing the desperate events of the previous four days.

3rd November. All well. The whole Army has had some severe fighting, and this cavalry division had 48 hours of it, and I think the regimental officers and men were just splendid. And so were the three Brigadiers. We held a line  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles long, having only 1500 rifles of our own, plus 1000 Indian troops. Such a line, to oppose a really strong attack, should be held by 10,000 men and 50 guns. We held it with 2500 men and 10 guns! On the morning of the 30th, the Germans, who had been moving up guns all night in front of us, opened a heavy artillery fire on our left and centre. A good deal of this fire was from heavy howitzers. About 12.30 the enemy—who had massed a lot of infantry against the 5th Lancers' trenches in particular—began to advance with



about two or three battalions. The 5th Lancers had to retire, suffering casualties of 30 men out of the 90 men engaged. This caused the gradual retirement of the whole line, as we were not strong enough to hold a continuous line of trench, but only a line of small posts, and when the enemy once got one, he outflanked each trench in turn. In this retirement Charles Campbell and Lord Woodhouse were hit, luckily both slightly, and Dickie [Major Clive Dixon] got a bullet through his cap. The 12th Lancers and 20th Hussars also suffered some loss, and the Indians a good deal. We fell back to a second line, already prepared, and held up enemy's further advance. That night sniping and skirmishing going on along the whole line.

The next day (31st) enemy tried to advance but could not, but he heavily shelled the left of the 12th and right of the 16th (my centre). On our right, however, the attack was more severe, and still more so beyond my right on a village called Messines, held by the 1st Cavalry Division. Half of this village was eventually carried by the enemy. I had been sent a battalion of London Scottish (Territorials) by I Corps the previous evening. These were, during the day, moved over to my right, and in the afternoon sent in by me to the counter-attack, to regain my right and help in regaining Messines. They behaved splendidly, and by evening all ground lost had been regained. Meanwhile, during the afternoon, 3 French battalions and 24 guns came up on my left and attacked through the 3rd Brigade, which relieved pressure in that direction, and thus enabled Vaughan to collect most of his brigade by nightfall except the 4th Hussars, who were holding extreme left, with the extemporary brigade under I Corps. The 4th Hussars under Howell were severely shelled, lost poor North and another officer killed, but behaved excellently and held on.

About 10 p.m. (night of 31st) a very strong attack began on my right and centre. The enemy had massed about a division (12,000 men) against 1½ mile of my poor thin line, and advanced in one long continuous line with masses behind, after their bands had played 'Die Wacht am Rhein,' etc. ! Our men stood well and shot and shot, but the enemy got through the many undefended gaps in our line and began surrounding the men in the trenches. The London Scottish were again splendid, and went in with their reserve (½ battalion) to the counter-attack. Eventually, by about 5 a.m. (7 hours' fighting), the enemy had gained a good deal of the ridge and a village in my centre called Wytschaete. But our men were still fighting. I got hold of two battalions (Allenby's reserve) about 2 a.m., and sent them up to Bingham (4th Brigade), on whom the bulk of the attack was falling. About 5 a.m. one of these battalions (the Lincolns) went in to the counter-attack of Wytschaete, supported by the Northumberlands. The battalion eventually was almost sur-

rounded by superior numbers and lost over 500 out of 700! These were part of General Shaw's brigade, and when I woke him up and asked for his assistance and support, he unhesitatingly placed the two battalions, all he had got at the moment, at my disposal. This was both a generous and soldierlike act. [These figures turned out to be considerably exaggerated.] Meanwhile the 12th Lancers (Chetwode's) had been sent in to the counter-attack, also from the opposite side of Wytschaete (*viz.* the north). At daylight, 6 a.m., they entered the village on the right flank and rear of the Germans and killed every German they saw. They must have killed about 300 or 400 or so. About this time, Bob Greenly (my C.S.O.) and I rode up to the front to see the situation and talk to Bingham. The situation looked critical. The roar of musketry was incessant, a lot of wounded and stragglers were coming back. We only had some of the Northumberlands in hand, as Bingham's brigade, spread out on a great front, holding detached posts during the night, were falling back fighting in the darkness and confusion; officers and men had not much idea where to go, and lost themselves, and it was reported that the enemy were coming on fast in numbers out of Wytschaete!

The outlook was gloomy, but all was well! We had ordered up the 3rd Brigade and its battery in the night, luckily, and they were just arriving. They were ordered to take up a position at once to cover Bingham, and the guns to open a heavy fire, and also luckily, Bingham's battery was already busy.

At this moment a French infantry division arrived in Wytschaete, on the right flank of the German attack, and that coupled with the attack of the 12th Lancers completely stopped any further German attack, and Bingham's scattered men and our infantry got back quietly into reserve and were able to rest!

The London Scottish during the afternoon and night lost 400 out of 700. They fought magnificently, and deserve the greatest praise. Their first action, and untried and untrained troops!

The German losses must have been immense. I really think quite 4000.

The Germans are making desperate efforts to break in here, and I suppose get Calais. . . . Another attack reported on our front.

The following extract from my official report also gives some idea of the night-fighting for the ridge Messines-Wytschaete:

Owing to the very small numbers available to hold the extent of front, squadrons fought more or less isolated, liable to be surrounded, and with very few supports behind them. But they continued fighting for three hours at the closest ranges, and still retained their nerve at the end.

There was great confusion, owing to the darkness, to the noise, to the extent of front, and it was impossible for officers and

men to know where to go, or what the situation was ; yet there was no straggling and no giving up the fight.

To return to my own experiences : during the night, after my reserve had marched away to join the I Corps as already related, there was much noise of movement along all our front in the German lines. An attack seemed impending, or was it a retirement ? We were by no means certain. As a matter of fact, it was the German guns moving up into position.

30 Oct. We soon realised early in the morning what was coming, as the shelling increased greatly. It seemed chiefly directed against my left, round Hollebeke and the chateau about a mile north-west of the village. I was now using the lodge at the park gates as my advanced H.Q., the chateau itself being the H.Q. of Brig. General Vaughan and the 3rd Cavalry Brigade. The attack that morning fell principally on the 5th and 16th Lancers, and on some companies of the 129th Baluchis.

Shortly before noon these troops began to fall back, and as the park lodge looked very like being occupied by the Germans, I moved my H.Q. back to the village of St. Eloi.

The front of my division was now withdrawn along the whole line, but it still passed well to the east of Wytschaete. We held up the German attack on this line that afternoon and all next day, 31st October, or perhaps they did not press it.

Meanwhile, General Allenby moved up the 18th Hussars of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade to reinforce my left, and at 5 p.m. they were in position. At 11.30 that night the London Scottish also arrived at St. Eloi, and were placed by Allenby under my orders.

31 Oct. Next morning, 31st October, the German pressure was exerted against the 1st Cavalry Division in and round Messines, and on my extreme right.

Early that same morning a brigade of French cuirassiers arrived. I began to feel quite strong ! I immediately asked them to occupy some of my trenches, but in their cuirasses, and armed with their tiny little carbines, they were incapable of undertaking any such useful action, and after sitting on their horses for some time behind tall hedges, they eventually disappeared and I heard no more of them.

About 9 a.m., hearing of the critical position round Messines, I moved the London Scottish from my left to the right. They joined in a successful counter-attack with the cavalry about 1.30 p.m. and regained most, if not all, of the village. It was

their baptism of fire—they had done well—but more was to be required of them before the night was over.

The fighting now seemed to die down. We were still firmly established in our second line in front of Wytschaete, and three French battalions had arrived in St. Eloi in the morning and relieved the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, which was withdrawn into reserve. I received information that the 32nd Division of the XVI French Corps was to arrive at Wytschaete early next morning, and generally I felt much more comfortable and happy. I thought the crisis had passed. Late that evening I went round to find Bingham and Chetwode, my two Brigadiers in the line, to tell them of the situation and that our anxieties were practically over. As they both had been obliged to change their H.Q. during the day I had some difficulty in finding them.

I had hardly finished a late meal in Kemmel when the whole of the line from Messines to Wytschaete seemed to wake up and burst into one continuous roar of musketry. The heavy tone of numberless guns firing rapidly was not heard that night. I suppose there was some artillery fire, but in that battle it played a minor part. This time the rifle and the bayonet were the predominant partners in the fray. Messages soon came in, scraps from one unit or another, but which, when pieced together, enabled us to grasp the outlines of the battle. Overwhelming numbers were pressing on our scattered and separated squadrons, each holding its isolated trench, and the enemy was pouring through the gaps, outflanking, outnumbering and trying to overwhelm our posts.

The cavalry—especially the Household Regiments—were big men, and though probably using the bayonet in earnest for the first time, were using it with a vigour which must have surprised the Germans.

But our line was falling back; the Germans were pressing through Messines, and were already in the outskirts of Wytschaete. I had no available reserves. It was important to hold up, or at least delay, the Germans somehow, until the French reinforcements due to arrive in the early morning could intervene. I knew that two battalions with their Brigadier—Fred Shaw—had arrived in Kemmel that evening in reserve to the Cavalry Corps. I went over about midnight and invaded Shaw's billet, told him of the situation, and asked for his two battalions. He never hesitated. He did



not wait to ask for authority. He told me to employ them as I thought best, and orders were issued to them to turn out at once.

They were sent up on each side of the Kemmel-Wytschaete road, to attack the Germans in and round this latter village. The Lincolns were on the right and the Northumberland Fusiliers on the left.

They must have burst on the Germans about 3 a.m. Though greatly outnumbered—and soon more or less outflanked in the dark—they shook the German attack, inflicted heavy losses, and prevented any further advance that night, though in their turn they had to fall back, mauled and decimated. But it was a gallant feat, and one of the greatest tactical value.

By dawn Greenly and I were on our horses and rode up to the scene. The first thing I came across was a group of the London Scottish, 20 or 30 men under an officer, in their cloaks—mostly hatless—their dishevelled heads caked with mud. I spoke to the officer and heard from him a brief account of their terrific fight. He did not know where was the rest of his battalion—or indeed if there were any 'rest.' I patted him on the shoulder, told him that they had done splendidly—all that was asked of them. He looked at me with surprise and a half-smile of relief came over his young face, and he said, 'I thought it was an awful disaster.' 'Disaster be damned,' I said to him, 'you have done splendidly.' We then got another officer who happened to be near by to get them some rations, and went on.

A few hundred yards up the road we next met one of my senior officers pacing the road. The strain had been great, and tears were visible on his cheeks, though he was quite sensibly issuing the necessary orders. I could see quite a number of soldiers in the misty light, moving about on the ridge, none of them taking much cover. These I took to be Germans, as indeed they were. No one on either side was bothering about shooting at the moment, though we were within a fairly easy rifle range of each other, and Greenly and I rode about the ridge without a shot being fired at us. Both sides must have been shaking themselves out, seeing where they were, trying to find out what had happened, and differentiating between friend and foe.

I next came on Colonel Smith—of the Lincolns—who afterwards commanded the 20th Division and was one of our most

capable and stalwart generals. He was hatless, and a small trickle of blood was running down his forehead from a scratch where a bullet had gone through his hair and grazed his head. He had only about 200 or 300 men with him, the remnants of his battalion. Undepressed and with evident energy he was arranging his men so as to take up a new line on the bare hill-side. He was in no gentle mood; he was the embodiment of energy and stern resolution. I heard him say something about 'this b——y disaster,' and issue fresh and peremptory orders. It struck me as something fine in the nature of the man, that after the shock of being hit in the head (for even a graze by a bullet in the head invariably knocks a man down), and after all the tension to which he must have been exposed during the night, he could rise superior to all its terrors. I spoke to him and suggested that some of his men should be posted in a farm where the buildings and ditch provided some natural cover. He at once issued the necessary orders. After I had ridden along the line and adjusted it, Greenly and I went back to Kemmel for breakfast. Soon after this the French appeared, advancing from our left on Wytschaete: this involved the Germans in a severe fight for the possession of the village, and prevented them from making any serious effort to press us further.

Chetwode's brigade, now relieved by the French, came back to Kemmel in the early morning, and thus provided something in the nature of a reserve; they were shortly followed by Vaughan and his 3rd Cavalry Brigade. It was a situation still full of anxiety. I had little with which to hold up another serious attack should the enemy come on again—certainly nothing fresh—and I did not know of anything behind me. I at once sent back along the roads to our rear to clear them of transport and all impediments. However, measures of desperation were not necessary. The situation was better than it looked. The Germans did not advance on Kemmel till May 1918, when they drove in the front of the French in one of the subsidiary operations of their great and last series of offensives.

During the night Harry Crichton, a friend of mine to whom I had been speaking only the night before, disappeared. He was in command of the Household Regiment, and when driven out of the forward trenches, he went forward in the early morning into Wytschaete village to see what was the real

situation there. He must have walked into some Germans in the dark and been shot.

Chetwode's brigade came crowding into the grounds of Kemmel Chateau that morning, where there was a large pond at which they could water their horses. I walked down to them in order to have a chat with the officers and get some further details of the occurrences of the preceding night. Among them there was Eustace Crawley of the 12th Lancers, and I remember his ending up his account of his experiences by saying in his bright, laughing way: 'I am afraid we shall not get home in time to have a hunt before Christmas after all.' Poor Eustace, he was never going to ride a hunt again. I sent the brigade, when it had finished watering, to take up a position on my right and thus strengthen our line, and within an hour or two Crawley was killed by a piece of shell.

The London Scottish had fallen back by platoons and companies in various directions, and in the early morning were scattered over a wide front. Their experiences were most severe—heavy fighting in the dark against superior numbers, at the closest ranges, entailing the frequent use of the bayonet. Driven eventually off the ridge in the darkness of the following morning, inextricably mixed up with other units, they fell back in many isolated groups. It was enough to shake the nerves and test the initiative of any troops, but for fresh and comparatively untrained soldiers it was a sudden and terrific ordeal, and nobly they met it.

One pathetic incident of this battle remains always in my memory. Many of the inhabitants of Wytschaete were still in the village until the day before its final capture by the Germans. For some unexplained reason it had not been bombarded previous to the attack—although its sister village, Messines, was severely knocked about. But during the afternoon of the 29th October I was in Wytschaete, and sat down at a table in one of the houses in the main street in order to examine maps and discuss our dispositions with General Bingham. As we talked, a few shells were pitched into the street some hundreds of yards further down. As we came out of the house after our deliberations, a couple of poor women came hurrying past, one of them carrying a limp bundle in her arms. They were sobbing violently, and when I said something to them, all the poor woman could say was: '*Elle est morte! Elle est morte!*' She was carrying the body of her daughter, a child of about five

FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES

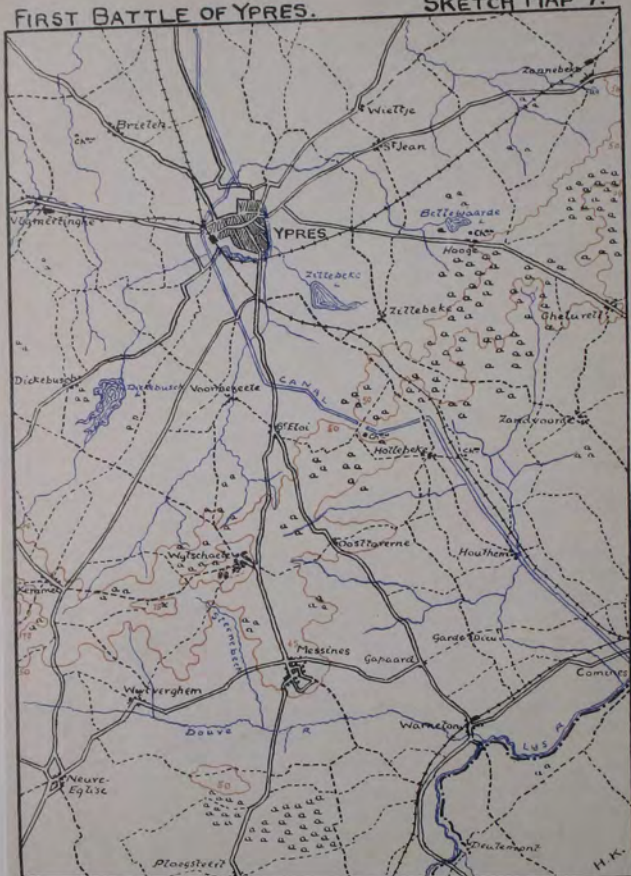
SKETCH MAP 7





# FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES.

## SKETCH MAP 7.



Miles 1 1/2 0 1 2 3 4 5 Paces

years, who had been killed by a piece of shell while playing happily in the street. The misery of innocent civilians was one of the most pitiable sidelights of war. Few hearts could be unaffected by the piteous sight of long streams of refugees plodding wearily from the battle area, their rude possessions carried on their backs. Even more distressing were the scenes which followed civilian casualties, and those which I witnessed are not easily to be forgotten.

## V

The close of the First Battle of Ypres marked the end of the desperate struggles on the part of both antagonists to reach a decision on the Western Front in 1914. As its echoes died down the opposing forces settled down to trench warfare in a spirit of earnest resignation.

The German Staff had studied the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War more profoundly than had either the French or our own; consequently, as regards comfort and efficiency of their troops in that kind of warfare, our enemies were better equipped than the Allies during the winter of 1914. In drainage, 'duckboards' and dugouts—in trench mortars, rifle bombs and hand grenades—in light railways, and rails for push-trolleys, they were a year in advance of us. Although such accessories were novelties to the British Army, the Germans had used them for over six years, and this had been duly reported to the War Office in 1908 by Colonel J. Edmonds, but Finance and Scepticism had combined to prevent the serious consideration warranted by the facts.

The winter of 1914-15, therefore, was a particularly unpleasant one for our troops in the line, and their lot was not made easier by the smallness of our number, which obliged us to hold over-extended lines for too long periods in the trenches without relief, exposed to shot and shell, wind, rain and snow. It was almost impossible to rest the men properly, or to carry on their training, or to spare parties to dig and improve the rear lines and communication trenches. But the British are a patient race, and when once aroused to study a problem, they very rapidly become thoroughly practical and efficient. Thus the British Army gradually evolved a system of trench warfare which equalled that of our enemies in comfort for the men and efficiency for fighting, and quite surpassed that of our Allies;

this, however, was not developed until 1915, and it was not until 1916 and 1917 that a satisfactory position was really attained.

The cavalry divisions, on the whole, got more rest and more time to train and to readjust their ruffled plumes after the heavy fighting of the first three months of the War than did the infantry. Nevertheless, their divisions went up to the front at intervals and took over their share of the trench line. Their duty took them to the various parts of the line extending from a point facing Messines (now in German hands) on the south to Hooze in front of Ypres in the north.

During the winter the Press at home was inclined, out of a mistaken desire to help and encourage our people, to paint misleading pictures of the situation. The smallest advances were magnified into a decisive attack. The impression was created that the enemy was giving way, that he was disheartened, that we should soon clear Belgium and be on the march for Berlin. With such a tone in our Press, and perhaps even in our communiqués and reports, our people at home were apt to be misled into minimising the magnitude of the task which still faced us, but to us at the front who had a shrewd and fairly clear idea of realities it was positively annoying and at times most maddening to find the seriousness of the situation so under-estimated.

Nor had our Chiefs in the field yet learned to measure accurately the magnitude of effort or the weight of the blow which was necessary to gain decisive victories.

14 Dec. The operations of the 14th December were an example of this misconception.

The object of the attack was to recapture the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge, in conjunction with the French XVI Corps on our left. The 3rd Division of the II Corps was to attack Wytschaete with the French, and if they succeeded, the attack was to be continued to the south, the remainder of the II Corps attacking Messines, with the III Corps on its right. All was to depend on the success of the initial attack on the left. 'No arrangement was made nor were orders issued for a combined artillery preparation. The men were provided with wire-cutters and mattresses for dealing with the German line!' (*Official History*.)

At dawn our guns opened, but there were only about 180 available—no great mass of batteries as we later on found so

essential. The rate of fire was so slow that from the spectator's point of view (which was the only rôle I had to play in this operation) the sight resembled a few rockets bursting at a village display of fireworks. The shortage of the supply of ammunition from which the Army was suffering was responsible for this, of course.

Two battalions only were thrown into the attack, and these naturally could not achieve anything. The attack of the French on our left did not succeed in advancing a yard.

Thus ended a great battle! Perhaps it was as well that no more troops were thrown into it, considering our available numbers and our very inadequate supply of ammunition. It recalled to me some of our attacks during the relief of Ladysmith, 'only more so.' There we too often saw in the three or four preliminary battles one, or at most two brigades launched to the attack, while the rest looked on. When the attacking troops had been stopped and could make no more progress, we called the battle off and returned to camp!

It was left to Sir Douglas Haig and his B.G.G.S., John Gough, to be first to organise a grand attack, support it with sufficient artillery, and employ the necessary force of infantry. This was the attack in the following March at Neuve Chapelle. Even this battle is in some ways open to the same criticism—that a just balance had not been struck between numbers employed and results aimed at. It was on too small a scale to obtain the distant objectives and decisive results envisaged, but nevertheless it was a properly organised attack, and provided the first example in the War of how to attack and break an entrenched line. We were, during these first years, too apt to look for decisive victories from merely local successes, and even the Germans, masters of the art of war as they were, did not arrive at the true balance till late in 1917. Then they fought the Battle of Riga, followed by that of Caporetto, and finally fell upon my Fifth Army in March 1918, in front of St. Quentin. All three attacks were organised and conducted on a grand scale, aiming at decisive results and sufficiently found in men and equipment to attain them.

It may be interesting to recall my opinions on the situation facing us at this time. Writing to my wife on 10th November 1914, I say:

The situation here is serious. French has so disposed his army that there are no reserves, and the line is so extended that



it is impossible to relieve them properly.<sup>1</sup> What we want out here are, *men, guns* and ammunition—not cigarettes and mufflers! The sooner England wakes up to this serious state of things, and to what is really demanded, the better. The country seems to think (from reading the papers) that all is going well and that the War will be over in six weeks or two months. It will last at least another year. I do not mean to say that things are going badly or that we are beaten *by any* means, but we are only hanging on by the skin of our teeth, and if we want to attain decisive results we must have many more men, and the country must exert itself to provide them. We ought to have out at once enough Territorial battalions to raise each brigade to six battalions. After that, the remainder of the Territorial Force in its proper organisation of brigades and divisions should immediately follow. We don't want any more cavalry at present.

And again, writing on 5th December on the occasion of Sir John French's address to one of my brigades, I wrote :

It is a very good thing to do, and bucks up the men and cheers them to see the Chief. But he did not speak well. He has not the 'fire' to really enthuse men. He was very nice to me and talked freely. He said two things which did not reflect highly on his judgment, viz. : that he thought the War would be over in three months, and that Germany could not bear the strain longer. There is nothing in the present situation to bring Germany to her knees, but to her knees she will have to come. This seems to show that with French the wish is father to the thought, and that the thought is not the child of the careful consideration of the facts, however unpleasant, as it should be in all great men. It seems to me also to show, to some extent, his failing energy. He does not want to do any more, he does not want to be called on to make further exertions of either intellect or will-power. He hopes it is going to be ended by Russia while we remain passive here. And so his hopes become his thoughts! He also said that events in England had now turned him against conscription.

What those events could have been I cannot conceive, for England only wanted to be told the truth to rise to that or, in fact, to any other call of duty.

Looking back now on those stern days, with a wider knowledge and a more mature judgment, I would not hold up all these criticisms, which are perhaps harsh and unjust, but I give these extracts from letters written at the time as tending

<sup>1</sup> I do not say that he was to blame for these dispositions, however. The front had to be held somehow with the few men available, and over-extension was unavoidable.

to show what was in our minds, and how real was the pressure on the fighting line, continuously calling for more men, guns and ammunition. We who were there were at least able to grasp to some extent the magnitude of our task, the formidable power of our foes, and the inadequacy of our resources then available.

On the 13th February 1915, the 2nd Cavalry Division being again in the trenches in front of Ypres, I received a letter from General Sir William Lambton, then Military Secretary to the Commander-in-Chief, offering me a command at Salonika, where there was, at that moment, a suggestion of sending a British force with a view to assisting Serbia and bringing Greece in on our side.

I went in to G.H.Q. and consulted Sir William Robertson. He said it was likely that I would be given one of the new infantry divisions coming out to France. I therefore refused the offer, as I preferred to find employment in the main theatre of war rather than on a 'side-show,' even though my command there would be of a more independent nature. This decision was proved a wise one, as the Salonika expedition did not materialise at the time.

The trenches occupied by the 2nd Cavalry Division were south of the Ypres-Menin road, and near the now ruined chateau of Hooze. I had once sat in this very chateau, at the opening of the First Battle of Ypres, consulting with Sir Thomas Capper (then commanding the 7th Division) regarding the carrying out of his orders from G.H.Q. to advance on Menin. This advance, however, never took place; on the contrary, it was the Germans who advanced *from* Menin!

The trenches ran through the woods, with the trees still more or less intact and not yet the gaunt spectres they eventually became, and so along the ridges back by Zandvoorde towards Messines. The situation was curious, for at times it seemed quite safe to walk or stand about in full view of the German trenches. But at night the whole line would reverberate with the rattle of musketry and the deeper rumble of gun fire. We had a suspicion that the Germans were mining towards us, but we had no miners with us, and therefore we could not counter-mine, the only protection against this form of warfare short of sallying forth and driving the enemy right back.

One evening, late in February, I received a great shock in

a telegram telling me my brother John had been severely wounded in the stomach ; ' there was some hope.' I handed over the command to Philip Chetwode and rushed down in a car to see him in Estaires—some 25 miles away. I found him stretched on a table, awaiting examination, perfectly calm. At first it was thought the bullet had not taken a dangerous course, but by next morning bad symptoms set in. It was then that I received a wire from Chetwode, saying that the enemy had blown in the line held by the 16th Lancers, who had had heavy casualties, and asking me to return. I told John I must go, and he said, ' Of course ; get on with your job,' and so I left him, never to see him alive again. When I got back to Ypres, I found we had lost six officers and a proportion of men, that we had not regained the ground lost, and that the Germans held the mine craters. A counter-attack in force, with no possibility of effective artillery support, and with no trench mortars of any kind at that time, made the operation likely to be expensive—and there was not much to be gained by it even if it were successful ; we therefore decided to limit our efforts to organising a new line.

This was our first experience with mines, and as usual the Germans were ahead of us in this form of warfare, though in this also we eventually succeeded in organising and carrying on the most efficient mining service of any army.

John Ryan, the Master of a famous pack (The Black and Tans) in Ireland, and a volunteer with the 16th Lancers, had a curious experience when this first mine was fired. He was in the front trenches at the time and was buried by the explosion. He remained buried for several hours, till dug out by the Germans as they cleared up the debris. It was thought he had been killed and he was reported as such, his family mourning him for several weeks until a letter from him in a German prison relieved their minds.

My own personal losses during these days had been very heavy—I lost so many gallant young friends who were dear to me. Besides my only brother John, whom I loved and admired, I lost Arundell Neave, Nash, Jim Beech and Cross of my old regiment—the 16th Lancers—and Coulter of the 5th Lancers, all being exceptionally fine officers, with true and gallant hearts.

Nor did the death of my brother complete the tale of my family losses during the War. I have already referred to my young cousin John Gough, who was killed with D Battery on

the Petit Morin. His two brothers, Owen and Rupert (my godson), were each in turn A.D.C. to me, and all were most gallant boys. Owen was recalled to India, and was drowned in the *Persia* in the Mediterranean. Rupert, who was learning to be a gunner, died in my arms in a Casualty Clearing Station near Poperinghe. After being wounded in one of the Passchendaele attacks, he was lying in a filthy and water-logged pill-box for twenty-four hours before he could be brought back, and he died of his wounds and the subsequent blood-poisoning. I was very fond of these three boys, and felt their passing keenly. Yet my greatest loss was that of my brother. There are some people who write as if generals were aloof from the actual realities of war and devoid of normal human emotions, holding the lives of men only as pawns. Such an impression is illusive at all times, and at moments of personal loss it is grotesquely false. No commander, however high his rank, is free from the heartache which follows the news of the death of a friend. In such a moment the general has no advantage over the private soldier: and his duty is the same—to carry on unflinchingly. But the first duty of a commander in the field is to his country and its cause; the safety of his unit, the lives of his men and of himself—these must come second. No statistics of casualties affect a man so much as the death of a friend. And when that friend is also a loved and only brother, then bitter moments must ensue before their place can be taken by noble memories.



## CHAPTER III

### NEUVE CHAPELLE TO LOOS

*The Battle of Neuve Chapelle—The First Barrage—The 7th Division—The Second Battle of Ypres—Aubers Ridge—Festubert—The I Corps—The Prince of Wales—Mr. Asquith—Lord Kitchener—The Impending Attack—Gas.*

#### I<sup>1</sup>

*Neuve  
Chapelle*

DURING the early months of 1915 preparations were being made for the first serious attempt to break through the enemy's trench line. The plans for this operation were conceived by Haig, and the organisation of the attack was being carried out by my brother John up to the moment of his death. The battle was to begin by the capture of the village of Neuve Chapelle as a distinct operation. Then the front of attack was to be widened and an attack on a five-mile front was to be made with the object of capturing the Aubers Ridge, which dominated the country about there. This was the first attack which was organised by methods which were to become the model on which future assaults were to be based—a close concentration of artillery and an attack following immediately behind the bombardment.

For the first time an artillery time-table was issued, giving to each battery a definite purpose and target for each of the various phases of the bombardment. Also for the first time Objective Maps (with the later well-known 'Red' Line, 'Blue' Line, etc.) were prepared, and for the first time a barrage was ordered.

*The  
First  
Barrage.*

Without entering into a detailed account of this attack, it is sufficient here to say that the first phase was highly successful, the village of Neuve Chapelle being captured and organised for defence; but later on (as was found to be a common experience throughout the War), the energy of the attack spent itself and its strength became exhausted, while the defence, owing to reserves coming up, gradually obtained the mastery.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 8, p. 82.

The rôle of the cavalry was to be in position in close support of Sir Douglas Haig, ready to go through and exploit success if it had been sufficiently decisive. The Cavalry Corps was under the command of General Allenby ; my own division was placed close behind Estaires, and was at first retained under the orders of Sir John French and G.H.Q.—though Haig was allowed to call on one of my brigades should he wish to use it. I was in close touch with Haig, who was temporarily in Estaires so as to be near Rawlinson during the battle. Rawlinson was conducting the battle, and after the news of the first successes had come in, Haig asked for a brigade to be pushed forward and I at once sent on Chetwode's.

I went down to see Haig, and told him that he could count on every man and every gun under my command if required, even though we were in G.H.Q. Reserve ; it seemed to me to be almost a crime to imperil the success of any battle by anything short of full and loyal co-operation with those already engaged, whatever the original orders might have been.

Haig was visibly pleased at this offer of support, coming as it did at a moment of some anxiety and excitement. He had just read the reports of the initial success of the attack, and I found him full of hope that great results could be looked for.

In this, as in many battles, intense flashes of hope would suddenly light up the tense and concentrated atmosphere in which we worked, to be quickly followed by a cold and ample douche of unpalatable facts. I append a brief note to my wife, written during that afternoon : this, in its very brevity, is stamped with the intense feelings roused by hope, decision, action :

*12th Feb. 1915, 3.45 p.m.* 8th Division has just broken through the enemy. 5th Cavalry Brigade ordered forward, followed by the whole division. This may lead to great things.

Loved your letter. God bless you. Ever yours, H.

But the situation on the battlefield was very different—our attack had already been held up, with heavy losses in places, and there was no opportunity for using the cavalry. Three and a half years were to pass, in fact, before such a moment did arrive.

Leaving Haig, I went on to see Capper, commanding the 7th *12 Feb.* Division on the left of the attack, and found him in a dark, poky

little room in a farm. He gave me a more accurate picture of the situation and told me that the cavalry certainly could not get forward on their horses. The road down from Estaires to Neuve Chapelle was crowded—crammed would be a better word—carts, wagons, lorries going forward, infantry, cavalry, various staff officers—all pressing on.

On the other side of the road another stream, of ambulances, walking wounded, other staff officers, and prisoners under escort all helped to block the road. There was an atmosphere of excitement and hurry.

Eventually, as there still seemed prospects of making progress, though not sufficient to justify the employment of the cavalry alone, a mixed detachment to exploit successes was organised and placed under my command; it consisted of one brigade of infantry commanded by Colonel Shipley from the 46th (North Midland) Division, some extra guns, and my own cavalry division. This detachment, however, was never employed, as eventually the attack petered out and the front became stabilised.

The losses had been heavy, but a great deal had been gained—if not in the way of actual ground, certainly in experience and in demonstrating that the British Army could launch an attack on entrenched lines with success. The repercussions of this knowledge—not only on the German leaders and troops, but also on our Allies the French—had a considerable influence on the conduct of the War from this time forward. It is to the credit of the British leaders and Staff that we were the first to put these principles into practice.

It is interesting to note, in fact, that by far the greatest contributions to the science of attack under modern war conditions came from the British Army. We have seen that Neuve Chapelle was the prototype of the prolonged bombardment and barrage by massed artillery which was later developed to almost incredible extents by both sides. This method of attack, in fact, had only one serious competitor—the Tanks. Both these emanated from the British; the French, on their part, contributed little of major importance throughout the War. The Germans, too, were satisfied with intense and elastic forms of the British model, and offered only one original method of attack—in the use of gas! These points are worth remembering, particularly when French and British military records are being considered.

II<sup>1</sup>

Trifles direct our destinies : my career was now to be radically affected by a flying fragment of a jam-tin !

We had already realised the value of the bomb as a weapon in trench warfare, but as yet the supply from home had not been organised. Divisions and corps were therefore extemporising and experimenting behind the front lines, and all sorts of make-shifts were being manufactured, usually consisting of old jam-tins filled with explosives ; a few inches of flexible fuse were added, sufficient to retard the explosion for 5 seconds after it was lit with a match, thus giving a man a fair chance of throwing the bomb among the Germans and away from himself before it exploded. It was a clumsy affair at the best, and it can be imagined that it asked something of a man who was under fire, and perhaps being bombed himself, to light a match in the open air in any weather, apply it to the fuse and then throw the bomb ! But the men did it whenever bombs were available : this was not always the case, as we could not manufacture enough behind the lines to meet the greatly increasing demand.

It was during a practice demonstration that Sir Thomas Capper, commanding the 7th Division, was wounded by a splinter from one of these improvised bombs, on 18th April. He was a man of the highest ideals—a quick, witty, intelligent mind—and possessed of a wonderful personality which inspired his subordinates and gained their affection. The division felt his loss very much, but in it he left to me a great and finely tempered weapon.

I was appointed to the command, and thus early in the War *The 7th Division* my connection with the cavalry was severed. I parted with many old friends whom I was very sorry to leave, and I never acted again as a purely cavalry officer. But I came among new friends, and during the remainder of my time in France I was brought into contact with every type of the manhood of the British Empire, from the highest to the lowest, and found among them many friendly faces.

An infantry division was a much larger force than a cavalry division—both in men and in artillery—but the principles of training and tactics in the main were the same for both. The auxiliary services—engineers, medical and supply—were larger

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 9, p. 90.



in proportion and broadened the scope of my interests and duties. Three cavalry divisions on paper had not the strength of one infantry division, but the pace of movement is, of course, all in favour of the former.

Moreover, orders and communications cannot be transmitted as rapidly throughout an infantry division, and the realisation of these facts was one of the first lessons for me to master in my new command.

The 7th Division had already established a great reputation. It had been formed from the regular battalions stationed abroad and replaced by Territorial units from home, and it had been sent out hurriedly in the attempt to relieve Antwerp. Thence it retreated with Rawlinson's force and took a prominent part in the First Battle of Ypres on the right of the I Corps.

It was composed as follows :

20th Brigade	.	Brig. General F. J. Heyworth.
21st	„	Brig. General H. E. Watts.
22nd	„	Brig. General S. T. Lawford.

The G.S.O. 1 was Lt. Colonel the Hon. F. Gathorne-Hardy. The artillery was commanded by Brig. General Noel Birch.

In my Brigadiers I was fortunate to find three most gallant and imperturbable officers, experienced and capable, and the successes of the 7th Division were principally due to their leadership in battle and their care and organisation before it. In Birch, I found a keen, quick mind with whom I could work in harmony, and we set to work to develop the method of the heaviest concentration of artillery fire on special and important objectives in battle that our resources would admit, rather than a more scattered and desultory fire on all points.

*The  
Second  
Battle of  
Ypres.*

I found the division in the line in front of Estaires, but soon after my taking over the command we were withdrawn for rest and training. We did not enjoy this for long, however, as the Germans suddenly commenced an attack round Ypres, which is known as the Second Battle of Ypres. This was opened by the first, and quite unexpected, use of gas, which came on us all as a complete surprise, and found the troops in the trenches with no means of protection except their handkerchiefs and their stout hearts. The effect on the French in particular was to induce a panic, resulting in the complete evacuation of a large part of their front to the north of the Ypres Salient.

The situation was undoubtedly critical, and caused grave

MARCH 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> 1918. SKETCH MAP B.

BATTLE OF  
NEUVE CHAPELLE

ORIGINAL  
LINE  
NEW LINE

IV

Mont  
St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

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St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

St. Eloi

INDIAN  
MOUNTAIN  
CORPS

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

CHAPPEL

Scale  
0 1000 Yards


SKETCH MAP 8.

# BATTLE OF NEUVE CHAPELLE

ORIGINAL  
LINE

NEW LINE

IV

 Moated Grange

Orchard

Armenians

A sketch map showing a road or path. A dashed line runs diagonally from the top left towards the bottom right. To the left of this line, the word "Orchard" is written at the top, and "Sunken Rock" is written further down. To the right of the dashed line, the letters "W", "R", and "T" are written vertically. A small rectangular area is marked with the number "99" inside it, located near the top of the dashed line.

8 signpost lane

Product ne

Neuve  
Chapelle

□

lay

## INDIAN

MEERUT

CORPS

Arthur

Borgies Road

1a Ba<sup>3</sup>Se  
3m

yards 500

500 yds

H.K.

anxiety in the minds of both the Commander-in-Chief and the Commander of the Second Army—General Smith-Dorrien.

The 7th Division was moved up towards Ypres, as a reserve : we remained there a few days, until the anxiety was lessened—though not entirely removed, for this Second Battle was prolonged for at least a month. But we were not called into action at Ypres, as the front was once again established, largely owing to the devotion and fighting capacity of the British and Canadian troops.

In spite, however, of the pressure on our front at Ypres, Sir John French was making preparations to meet the demands made by General Joffre for our co-operation in his plans for an offensive.

The French were planning to attack early in May, in Artois between Lens and Arras—and Sir John French issued orders to Haig to assist with the First Army as far as his limited means would admit. This involved, first, the Battle of Aubers Ridge, to be followed a week later by the Battle of Festubert.

The 7th Division was ordered back to the south, and we rejoined the IV Corps under Sir Henry Rawlinson. The contemplated offensive was to be carried out by the 1st, 2nd and Meerut Divisions of the I and Indian Corps, and the 8th and 7th Divisions of the IV Corps. The rôle of the 2nd and 7th Divisions was limited to supporting the 1st and 8th Divisions respectively with a view to exploiting any success.

The 1st and Meerut Divisions attacked alongside each other, while the 8th Division attacked a point about 4 miles away to the north. The object of this attack was to gain possession of the Aubers Ridge and cut the Lille-La Bassée road.

The attacks were launched on the 9th May, but they were not successful and unfortunately all three divisions met with a decisive repulse, largely owing to insufficient artillery and ammunition to deal with the enemy's greatly improved defences. The Battle of Neuve Chapelle had awakened the Germans to many weaknesses in their trench system, and, thorough and efficient as they were, they did not waste any time in rectifying these matters.

We had been moved up to positions close behind the 8th Division. My own Headquarters were in a small house about 2½ miles behind our front line, with the three brigades of the division concentrated and handy.

During the afternoon I went forward and had a talk over the

9 May.  
*Battle of  
Aubers  
Ridge.*



situation with Brig. General R. Oxley, commanding a brigade in the 8th Division. His Headquarters were in a tiny cellar of a ruined building with little more than a sheet of tin roofing above him ; considering the shells bursting all round, I thought this most unpleasantly insufficient as head cover !

I walked past rows of small narrow trenches which were crowded with men, many of whom were dead or wounded. These trenches had been dug for assembly purposes, to cover the attacking troops. They were quite insufficient for that function, as they were not very deep, were cramped and narrow, and all too close together. The Germans had spotted them from the air and shelled them heavily, making them into death-traps rather than cover. I saw some shells land among them as I passed, and the proximity of these did not fail to bring home sharply to my mind that our situation was not a happy one.

Late in the evening (after 6 p.m.) orders reached me through Rawlinson from Haig to take over the front of the 8th Division and renew the attack next morning. My Brigadiers therefore went down to the 8th Division front to examine the position.

They found that the small and narrow assembly trenches held by the 8th Division were still being heavily shelled, full of dead and wounded, with the living in great confusion owing to the losses of all ranks in the heavy fighting during the day. In these circumstances it would have been folly to move up my division and to attempt to assemble the battalions in these same trenches with any hope of a successful attack next morning. My Brigadiers reported the facts to me and I went over to meet them and hear what they had to say. We sat crowded round a small table in a cottage by the roadside, lit up by candles and electric torches, and decided that it would be throwing the division away to comply with the order, so I took it upon myself to cancel the operation and telephoned through to Corps Headquarters to say what I had done—or, rather, not done. But when I met Rawlinson next morning, I found that he approved of this decision.

We had a very short time to wait before another attack was decided on.

10 May. At 10 a.m. the following morning (10th May) we received a message that the 7th Division was to march south that night and come under the orders of General Sir Charles Monro, commanding the I Corps.

The three brigades and the artillery set off at 8 that evening,

a march of about 8 to 10 miles being involved, and Gathorne-Hardy and I went on by motor to report to Monro, and to find out what we were expected to do.

We fixed our new H.Q. at a tiny hamlet called Le Hamel, about 3 miles north-east of Bethune, and found that a new attack was to be launched by the 2nd, the Meerut Division, and ourselves. This prospective attack was to be made solely to assist the French, and to tie German reserves to our front, in order to prevent them being free to move south and oppose the French in Artois. Considerable pressure was brought on Sir John French by both Joffre and Foch, and under this he had agreed to attack. The difficulties facing the British were dismissed lightly by the French Command.

The Battle of Artois was continued on the 15th June by Foch in the neighbourhood of Vimy, but met with very little success and at the cost of heavy casualties.

I found that my division was to attack on the right of the 2nd and Meerut Divisions, who were to advance over the same ground on which the 1st Division had met with so severe a repulse on the 9th May, but the actual point of attack was left to me to select. I cannot say that I approved the idea of leaving this matter to me; inasmuch as the attack of my division was part and parcel of an attack by a whole corps, the locality of its attack and its immediate objectives were hardly matters which should have been left to the decision of the Divisional Commander. Moreover, I was in entire ignorance of the ground, and had never been in this neighbourhood before. As I walked out of the I Corps Headquarters I ran into Lord Cavan, who was then commanding the 4th (Guards) Brigade in the 2nd Division. As I knew he had been in this vicinity for some time and knew the ground well, I told him my orders and asked his opinion as to where he would attack if he had received my instructions; he replied: 'I have always said that an attack on The Orchard is the most promising, as the Germans are in a salient there which allows you to attack them on two sides at once.' I went straight down to this spot and spent the rest of the day reconnoitring it. The position did seem favourable for an attack, as Cavan had said, and as I had no time to see if any other locality offered anything more favourable I decided that the division should make their attack on this spot. Besides, there is an old adage in war, 'That the better is always the enemy of the good.' And this locality seemed good enough.

Meanwhile the three brigades and the artillery marched in early on the 11th—the infantry going into billets after their night march, but the guns going straight into their battle positions and commencing forthwith to register. The 7th Division may have had its weak points, like most human institutions, but to waste time was not one of them.

The division came into the trenches very shortly afterwards. The bombardment of the German defences was carried out on this occasion in a methodical manner with careful observation. It was continued over several days with the object of shaking the German *morale*, tiring out his troops by depriving them of rest, and keeping them in the expectation of an attack at any minute. This was different from the short, sudden, hurricane bombardment which had been so successful at Neuve Chapelle, but had failed so completely on the 9th May. For this purpose the division was reinforced by some heavy batteries and French guns which all came under the orders of Birch, the Divisional Artillery Commander. Even by the 12th we had succeeded in breaking down some of the enemy's solid breastworks.

The attack was to be made by the 22nd Brigade under Lawford on the right and by the 20th under Heyworth on the left.

During the 14th we carried out three similar bombardments at 1 a.m., 2 p.m. and 10 p.m., and as the ideas actuating them are of some interest I am inflicting the details on the reader.

- (1) 3 minutes' bombardment by all heavy guns, during which the infantry were to keep up a heavy fire.
- (2) 2 minutes' dead silence.
- (3) 2 minutes' rapid fire by field and horse artillery and by the infantry.

The idea was that the enemy might be induced during the 2 minutes' silence to believe that we were on the point of attacking, and to man his trenches; then the sudden reopening of fire by the field guns and infantry would inflict severe casualties upon him, and also make him rather chary of manning his trenches when the real attack came.

A great deal of work was done by our engineers during these few days, in the preparation of ladders to help the men out of the trenches, light bridges to cross the many wide wet ditches which intersected the battlefield, and in the general improvement of communications. Before the assault was delivered, we moved 6 field guns with muffled wheels right into our front line

trench, and at a range of less than 200 yards blew holes in the enemy's parapet during the 30 minutes preceding the actual advance of the infantry.

The 2nd Division under Horne on our left, leaving a gap of about 500 yards between us, attacked in the dark just after midnight on the 16th May. He attacked at that hour because the distance between his trenches and those of the enemy was great, and his men knew the ground. This attack was entirely successful in gaining its preliminary objective, which was only the front line trenches; but on the left the Meerut Division failed to surprise the enemy and met with a severe repulse.

By dawn, however, when the advance of the 2nd Division was to have been continued, the Germans had had plenty of time to reorganise themselves and were fully prepared: moreover, the left of the 2nd Division was in the air owing to the failure of the Meerut Division. The result was that it was able to do little more in the ensuing battle.

The 7th Division attacked at 3.15 a.m.—dawn—the day of 16 May. battle being Sunday, as so frequently happened in the War. The attack of the 22nd Brigade—carried out by the Queen's on the right and the Royal Welsh Fusiliers alongside them—was successful, in spite of meeting heavy machine-gun and rifle fire. It was a fine and most gallant performance. Both Colonels, Bottomley and Gabbett, were killed. The leading companies of the Queen's met with a check, but Bottomley carried forward the two supporting companies after arranging for another 15 minutes' bombardment by our artillery, and it was during this second and final advance that he was killed. The Brigadier—Lawford—had also sent forward the 1st S. Staffords, and the two battalions, charging across No-Man's-Land, burst into the German position. That Bottomley managed to bring back the artillery bombardment for those 15 minutes, and at the same time avoided shelling the Welsh Fusiliers who were already in the enemy's trenches, speaks volumes for the coolness, efficiency and co-operation of all concerned, gunners and infantry alike.

The supporting battalions of this brigade (22nd) had now come forward, and, swimming dykes, and in face of a stout defence, the brigade gained all its objectives, going forward to a depth of nearly 1000 yards, when it eventually came to a standstill opposite what was afterwards known as the Canadian Orchard. Here Captain Stockwell, now commanding the Welsh Fusiliers, arrived with 39 men of various battalions.



On the left, things did not go so well with the 20th Brigade, though the German front lines were successfully carried.

The 2nd Scots Guards were on the right of this brigade, and the 2nd Border Regiment on the left. The latter, however, were soon checked by fire from their left, where there was a gap between them and the 2nd Division ; this gap had now become a still greater source of danger owing to the failure of the 2nd Division to get forward.

The Scots Guards fought their way to all their objectives, but with their left in its turn now exposed they were counter-attacked and forced back, but only after the left company had fallen to a man.

It was now 9 a.m. and practically six hours' heavy fighting had already been carried through. Nothing more could be done until our left was cleared, and our efforts were now concentrated on that object, and on joining hands with the 2nd Division.

A joint attack by both divisions was arranged, but the troops of the 2nd Division were so exposed that reinforcements and supplies of ammunition, and even orders, could only reach them with great difficulty. Their co-operation, therefore, was not forthcoming, and it was left to the 20th Brigade to do what it could. By the afternoon two attempts to clear out the Germans had failed, though some ground had been gained by bombing. No more was attempted in this direction that afternoon, but meanwhile, on the right, further gains with prisoners had been made by the South Staffordshires ; but before evening closed, our advanced troops under Stockwell, tired, with one flank in the air, insufficient defences, and exposed to a heavy concentration of enfilade and cross artillery fire, were forced to fall back a few hundred yards, taking up a straighter line.

During this and the following days the Army Commander (Haig) and the Corps Commander (Monro) paid me several visits to learn the situation as we knew it. Conferences with the Corps, with the 2nd Division, and with Brigadiers were also held. If the I Corps had allowed an unwise amount of initiative to its Divisional Commanders as regards choosing localities and hours for the assault, once the battle opened there was no lack of energy and grip in Monro.

*17 May.* By the early morning of the 17th arrangements had been made to concentrate every available gun on the Germans holding up our left. The bombardment began at 2.45 a.m., and by

7 a.m. the enemy had been so punished that the survivors, about 500, had surrendered, putting up white flags and then running towards our lines. Of course it now began to rain; it always did in our offensive battles! This increased the difficulties and the discomforts of the men enormously, turning the ground into mud and marsh. But we were more blessed than usual by the weather, in that we had had at least one fine day.

The 21st Brigade, which had been in reserve during the 16th, had come up to assist the left of the division in the early hours of the 17th, and by 10.15 a.m., largely thanks to the artillery bombardment, its two leading battalions had attacked and captured the German position on our left, with little loss.

The attack of the 2nd Division shortly afterwards succeeded in getting its right forward and joined hands with us. Having cleared our left, we again turned our attention in the afternoon to pushing our front forward towards La Bassée. All our attempts ended in failure, nor could the 2nd Division advance on our left. At 7.30 p.m. an attempt to extend our extreme right was made by two battalions of the 21st Brigade, 2nd Bedfords and the 4th Camerons (a Territorial battalion): this also failed, but only after some of the Camerons, in spite of broad dykes full of water, soaked and muddy kilts, and the loss of their gallant colonel, had forced their way into the German entrenchments. The Bedfords bravely attacked again at 3 a.m. 18 May. on the 18th, but without success, and the remnants of the Camerons were eventually driven out of the captured trench. On the 18th the 3rd Canadian Brigade, under Brig. General Turner, V.C., was placed under my orders, and in the late afternoon, in accordance with Corps orders, it was ordered to attack alongside the Guards Brigade of the 2nd Division. But sufficient time was not given to the artillery to put down a proper bombardment, nor to the infantry to make the necessary preparations. The Guards were stopped after heavy losses about 5 p.m., and the Canadians had not been able to get up into a position to attack till some time after that hour. But they succeeded in getting forward, and by 8.30 p.m. reported that they had gained all their objectives, and were consolidating.

A good deal of my attention, from midday of the 17th onwards, had been turned to pulling out as many troops as possible from the front, so as to thin it, to reorganise and rest as many of the units as we could, thus re-creating reserves of

fighting value, and at the same time easing the confusion inherent to the battle area.

19 May. Later in the evening of the 18th we received Corps orders to the effect that we were to be relieved immediately by the Canadian Division which had now come up, and by midday on the 19th all the infantry of the 7th Division had been withdrawn and was on its way to billets near Bethune. Our artillery, however, remained behind to support the Canadians. The battle was continued by the latter up to the 22nd, and they carried out several successful minor operations before it died down.

One incident of the battle is worth recording. A private, Thomas Hardy of the Queen's Regiment, was very severely wounded in the right shoulder, and had his wound dressed on the field. This entailed ripping up the right sleeve of his coat and shirt and leaving his shoulder and arm bare; he nevertheless ran straight back to the firing line, and seizing some bombs in his left hand rushed into the attack once more. With his white and bare right arm and shoulder, hurling bombs with his left hand and constantly jumping out in the open, he was of course a conspicuous mark to the enemy, and he was eventually shot dead. For this very gallant action he would have been recommended for high recognition and reward, had he lived. Shortly after the battle, the *London Gazette* announced that a Captain Smart of the 53rd Sikhs was removed from the Army for desertion. It appeared that Captain Smart was at home on leave from India when war broke out, and finding that Indian officers were not allowed to go to the front and were being sent back to India, he enlisted as a private in the Queen's Regiment. The night before the Battle of Festubert, Private Hardy had told his Company Sergeant Major, Barker, that he really was Captain Smart of the Indian Army. (Company Sergeant Major Barker, by the way, himself gained a V.C. in this battle.) When it was reported to me that Private Hardy was really Captain Smart, I was so impressed by his gallant and ardent spirit, not only in the battle, but in enlisting under such circumstances, that I reported the matter to Headquarters with a recommendation that the notification in the *Gazette* dismissing Captain Smart from the Army for desertion should be expunged. This was done; it was at least some small acknowledgment to a very great and most gallant spirit, which, even if it carried him so far from the path of strict duty, deserved our genuine admira-





SKETCH MAP 9.

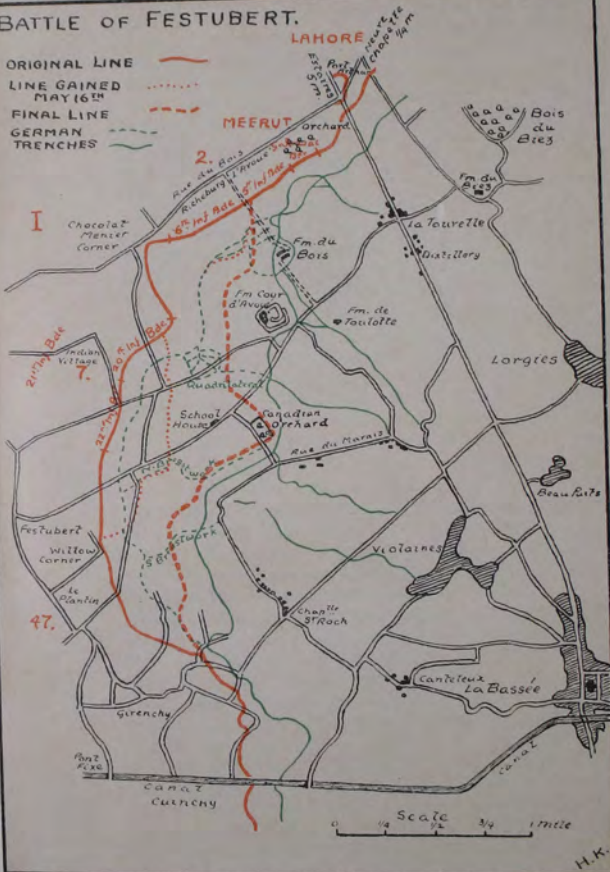
LAHORE

LINE GAINED  
MAY 16<sup>TH</sup>

## FINAL LINE

GERMAN

## TRENCHES



H.K.

tion. His spirit and his fate appealed greatly to me, and Britain can be proud and content when she finds that such a spirit exists among her sons.

After the Battle of Festubert the 7th Division went back to rest, and on the 26th May we were officially inspected by *26 May.* Marshal Joffre, Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig, and received the congratulations and thanks of these Commanders. This was the first time I had seen Joffre—a strong, heavily-built man, with a round white head of closely-cropped hair: an atmosphere of placid calm emanated from him which was in sharp contrast to the conventional idea of a Frenchman. He inspired confidence rather than enthusiasm, but of the two the first is more often the more useful quality!

It was during this summer of 1915 that Major Ernest Swinton, who was then an officer of the R.E. serving at G.H.Q., paid me a visit. He brought me the outline of a scheme for constructing heavily-armoured cars, propelled by caterpillar traction, and capable of crossing wide trenches and crushing down or climbing over wire, embankments, etc. The idea had come into his mind owing to our losses and difficulties in crossing No-Man's-Land, in face of the enemy's wire entanglement and machine-gun fire, in our battles of that year—Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge and Festubert.

His idea was that if we could only protect the advance of the leading men from machine-gun fire, smash through the enemy's wire and trenches, and in our turn enfilade and sweep them with our machine guns, the main body of the attack would swarm over behind the Tanks—as they came to be called—with comparatively little loss. He came over to discuss the idea and to ask for my opinion. It is needless to say that it struck me as a most valuable conception, if the engine could be made to work.

This was, as far as I know, the genesis of the Tank, and within about one year from that date our Tanks made their appearance on the battlefield, proving themselves to be an immense support and very powerful adjunct to the infantry when used under favourable conditions of ground.

There was one enemy, however, which checked, if it did not conquer, the Tanks—Mud! This is an enemy to which all soldiers have to bow, and to which they have never yet found a satisfactory reply. There was logic in the British soldier's contention that Mud was in German pay, since the British were

attacking for the greater part of the War, and since Mud handicaps advancing attackers infinitely more than it does defenders. Clever men spent incalculable hours considering schemes of overcoming this wretched handicap: it is a factor which an historian might belittle and a writer of romance would ignore, yet its influence on the course of the War's greatest battles was often decisive. It was an insidious enemy, mean and deceptive. Napoleon once said of his operations in Poland that 'God—besides water, air, earth, and fire—has created a fifth element—mud!' General Winter, of Russia, could not offer more problems to Napoleon than did General Mud, of Flanders, to the British Command.

## III

July 1915. *I Corps.* As the summer of 1915 progressed, divisions of the new volunteer armies came over to France in increasing numbers, and the forces at the command of Sir John French were greatly augmented. The Third Army was therefore formed, of which General Monro was given the command on the 18th July. The Third Army took over a front from the French some 20 miles south of our First Army, with the Tenth French Army sandwiched in between them. To my surprise, I was appointed to succeed General Monro in the command of the I Corps. This Corps consisted at that time of the 2nd Division under General Horne; my own division, the 7th, to which Capper now returned, having recovered from his wound; and later on the 9th Division under General Thesiger. It was holding the line in front of Bethune, with Givenchy as our main bastion of the defence. The B.G.G.S. was Brig. General Alexander Cobbe, V.C.—a most capable Staff Officer, and a very sound and a good soldier.

The 9th Division was the first division of Kitchener's Army to come to France. The spirit which animated it, its training, and its composition in officers and men, are magnificently described by Ian Hay in his book *The First Hundred Thousand*. All who wish to understand something of the spirit animating the men of Britain who flew to arms in those days, to learn their thoughts, feelings and traditions, should turn to that book. I know of no description which can give a better idea of the enthusiastic and devoted work which was necessary to meet the great crisis which faced us—a crisis which was largely the result of our neglect of proper preparation.

Before I left the 7th Division to take over the I Corps, Mr. Asquith, the Prime Minister, visited the Army in France. He paid a visit to the 7th Division, and after seeing some of the billets of the division and the men in them, he came back to tea at my Headquarters, which were then in a little chateau a few miles behind Bethune. This was the first time I had ever met him, and I was naturally very interested at making his acquaintance. I had been involved in that exciting episode at the Curragh in March 1914, and I could not help wondering what our meeting would be like. But we did not talk Irish politics; there were other matters of more pressing importance to engage our thoughts. I found Mr. Asquith very natural and simple in his manner, and from that moment I developed a great liking and respect for him. Later on his son, Arthur Asquith, then commanding a battalion in the 63rd Naval Division, came under my orders at the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel in November 1916. There were few finer leaders than Arthur Asquith: courageous, thorough, resolute, and always calm.

When I arrived at the I Corps, I found the Prince of Wales working with the Staff, and he stayed with us for some months. He worked in what was known as the 'Q' side, and his duties dealt with the supply, movement and comfort of the troops, and the hundred and one questions which must not be overlooked when preparing for a battle. I suggested that he might care to transfer to the operations side of the Staff, as the work was more interesting. He preferred, however, to remain where he was, remarking with simple truth that the supply work was just as essential as the more showy operations side. He was always pleasant, frank and simple, and he never failed to take as much violent exercise as he could cram into the day in the intervals of his office work. He was always up early, had a cold bath and went out for a ride, usually without stirrups. I had had a couple of fences put up, over which I exercised myself and my horses occasionally, and over these the young Prince regularly rode, never using his stirrups. He used to bicycle up to the front with a friend of his on the Staff, as a motor was not always available for junior Staff Officers. Most days saw him at Divisional and sometimes at Brigade Headquarters. It was no easy task riding a bicycle on the extremely bad roads round Bethune, either bumping over the stone cobbles or, more often, pushed by the transport lorries, wagons and marching troops on to the slippery and muddy sides of the road. We had the



greatest difficulty in trying to keep him out of the front line trenches, and I am quite aware that, in spite of my efforts to do so, I often failed. Every one knew him by sight, and of course the men all loved seeing him. They were quick to notice that he was working away at his job, and just as attentive to it as they were to theirs.

For the first month of my command of the I Corps no active operations were carried on, and my time and attention were concentrated on getting to know my divisions, on learning something of their trenches and seeing that they were organised for defence, and on looking after the comfort of the men—and, the necessity of sanitation. The battles of Festubert and the attacks in the middle of June had left many dead close around, very often even in our trenches. We had never had sufficient time to bury these properly, and large numbers were not covered with more than a few inches of earth. Even as late as August there was much still to be done to remedy this unpleasant but very necessary business.

I was now a Lieutenant General at the age of 45, and I found that such early advancement brought with it some special difficulties. It took me a little time to establish my position with some of my subordinates, often many years senior to myself. Small misunderstandings and even suspicions are almost inevitable in such circumstances: fortunately, they were entirely temporary. For example, I claimed the right to see things for myself in the course of my almost daily peregrinations, and this was sometimes resented. To act as a spy on my Divisional Commanders was the last thing I wanted to do, but I was convinced that personal contact with the greatest possible number and variety of officers and men was of immense value. Not only could I thus appreciate some of the difficulties and the characters of my subordinates, but it cheered and encouraged the latter to see and to talk to their commanders and to realise that generals are also human beings.

The situation of the Allies at this period was particularly serious, and this had a decisive effect on our plans. The German High Command had now concentrated its reserves against the Russians with the intention of knocking them, for all practical purposes, completely out of the War. When that was accomplished, it would be free to bring back the mass of its forces to the Western Front, to crush the French and the British. The great measure of success that crowned the German

efforts against the Russians can be judged when it is realised that between April and the winter of 1915 they drove the Russians back on a front of approximately 600 miles and to a depth varying from 150 to 250 miles. Meanwhile the Central Powers continued to hold their own successfully on their defensive fronts. The Italians were repulsed on the Isonzo for the second time, and our efforts to help the Russians by the diversion at Gallipoli had met with failure.

Joffre now persuaded his Government that not only did the critical position of Russia demand our active intervention, but that he was also confident that he had sufficient guns, ammunition and troops to break through the German front and to clear France of the enemy. Such a prospect was naturally very tempting and alluring to the French Government, and much pressure was applied to Sir John French and later to Lord Kitchener to enforce the active co-operation of the British. No heed was given to our great lack of heavy artillery and ammunition, to our young and as yet insufficiently trained troops, and to the certainty of very heavy losses if we attacked before we were ready. Joffre's plan briefly was to attack northwards from about Rheims and at the same time to attack eastwards from about Arras and north of it with a view to cutting through the flanks of the German salient which reached down to Noyon.

Both Sir John French and General Haig were emphatically opposed to any serious offensives being undertaken by the British Army at this time. They realised full well the incompleteness and deficiency of the training of many of our new divisions. Our resources in heavy guns and ammunition were then less than half of those available to the French, and were a great deal less than was considered necessary to break down the German defences. We should not be sufficiently equipped till the spring of 1916 at the earliest. Haig pointed out that the question of ammunition supply and heavy guns dominated the problem. In fact, everything pointed to the wisdom of postponing our offensive until the following year. But wisdom cannot be one's only guide in war, particularly when it is carried on with Allies on widely exterior lines. Necessity, and the insistent demands of our Allies, the precarious position of one, the somewhat ill-founded optimism of another—all these had in turn to be taken into due consideration in reaching any decisions.

Early in June, Joffre was pressing for our co-operation in his

contemplated offensive. Sir John French had assented, but when it came to the choice of locality, Haig had emphatically pointed out that the ground between Loos and the La Bassée Canal was very unfavourable for an attack—the enemy defences were powerful and well organised and he was daily and rapidly increasing them. The ground gave all the artillery observation to the Germans and exposed our troops when assembling for the assault; the defended villages, mines and factory buildings in the neighbourhood of Fosse 8 and Auchy in the north, and round Lens in the south, formed powerful bastions which would threaten the flanks of any attack made over the open ground which lay between them. The subsequent Battle of Loos gave ample proof of these serious military disadvantages. Finally, the shortage of ammunition and heavy guns made it 'of little use to make plans for offensives.'<sup>1</sup>

Another important factor strongly supported General Haig in his opinion that this ground was unsuited to attack; this was the existence of a very powerful second line which the Germans had just constructed two or three miles behind their first line. This line was more or less protected by the ground from our artillery. Both Sir John French and General Haig desired, if it were necessary to launch any infantry to the attack, that such an assault should be delivered north of the Canal and directed on La Bassée, or even in the neighbourhood of Ypres, but they were, in fact, both averse to the idea of attacking with infantry at all at this juncture. They wished to help the French only with as heavy a bombardment as our resources in guns and ammunition would permit. At this period we had in France only 71 heavy guns of a calibre of six inches and over, and at a conference presided over by Mr. Lloyd George in July on the question of munitions the conclusion had been arrived at that the only hopeful form of attack was one on a front of 25 miles carried out by 36 divisions and covered by 1150 heavy guns and howitzers. We were indeed far from this ideal when Sir John French was forced to agree to assist the French offensive!

Towards the end of July an interview took place with Foch, who was then commanding the group of French Armies on our immediate right. He was preparing to renew the attack in Artois, just south of Lens—an offensive which had already received a severe check in May.

<sup>1</sup> See *Official History*, vol. iv. p. 114.

Foch insisted on our attack being delivered close to his left, immediately north of Loos. True, a successful attack there might possibly be of more assistance to the French, but Foch swept aside all consideration for the British. He refused to appreciate inconvenient facts, such as (a) the extremely unfavourable ground for the attack, (b) the great shortage of guns and ammunition, and (c) the strength of the enemy's defences. A successful attack made towards La Bassée or on the Ypres front would have relieved our troops in those vicinities from exposure to the miserably wet conditions and heavy artillery fire from which they were suffering, but this, apparently, was not a factor which was allowed to count.

Sir John French emphasised his opinion that the prospect of any success south of the La Bassée Canal was most improbable; for that matter, he had no great faith in the prospects of success in the French attack—in which belief events proved him to be right. By the middle of August, however, Sir John had agreed to a British attack immediately north of Loos, but still wished to confine it to artillery action. At this juncture Lord Kitchener came over to France and had an interview with Marshal Joffre and the French Government.

Although he had been a firm adherent to the policy of patience and of waiting, and of the postponement of a vigorous offensive until we were equipped and ready, the general situation and the arguments of the French now caused him to change his mind. He came on to British Headquarters after his visit to the French, and directed that we 'must act with all energy and do our utmost to help France in their offensive even though by so doing we may suffer very heavy losses.' These were strong and decided instructions, and thus it was that the Battle of Loos came to be fought.

During the previous months the question of the supply of men necessary to enable us to win the War was always giving me cause for much thought, and my letters home continued to convey the conviction that we could hope for no successful issue without calling on the whole of the manhood of the country. This problem, as well as that of ammunition supply, was engaging the serious attention of the Government at home, and Lord Kitchener was anxious to explain to Army and Corps Commanders his attitude on the question of Conscription. The four Corps Commanders of the First Army were therefore sent for by General Haig to meet Kitchener. We met him in the open, in a



little garden of some house, I have forgotten where. Besides a few members of the G.H.Q. Staff there were present only General Haig and his four Corps Commanders: Rawlinson of the IV Corps; Pulteney, III Corps; Willcocks, Indian Corps; and myself, I Corps.

Lord Kitchener began by saying that he was anxious to explain to us his views on Conscription, and to say that he was not in favour of it. His arguments were that the politicians would put in so many exemptions for skilled labour that there would be nothing left over except the dregs of the nation. He went on to say that there were other difficulties, such as differences in rates of pay, bad feeling between the volunteer and conscript, and the possibility of trouble at home in enforcing it. He said he was 'not convinced that it was necessary or sound, anyhow at present'—'he was still doubtful'—that 'there were many risks'—that 'he was alone in bearing this burden and it was a very heavy one.'

The impression on me at the moment was that he spoke as a man lacking a firm resolution and a clear conception, that the risks and the difficulties were uppermost in his mind, rather than the objects and the duties. It seemed to me somewhat mean that the Cabinet should be thinking only of those at home and what they might think. Such people at least could express themselves and give some vent to their feelings. But the soldiers at the front, bearing by far the heavier share of the burden, had no opportunity of saying what they thought or of stating their needs, which indeed were pressing heavily upon them.

As none of my fellow Corps Commanders said anything, I took it upon myself to speak. I am afraid I flared up, and said most emphatically that I thought Conscription was vitally necessary and urgent, because our numbers were inadequate even for the daily work in the trenches, much less to drive back the German Army. I said that reinforcements would raise the spirits and discipline of the whole Army. 'And speaking for the officers and men in the trenches, I would like to tell him that the work required from them was so heavy that no one would quarrel with any reinforcements that were sent up to them, conscripts or not, but would very soon set them to work or to fight, in order to relieve the pressure.'

Kitchener was a little taken aback at this outspoken expression of opinion, and perhaps a little annoyed at the decided

tone in which I had spoken. He said, 'Oh! here is a young conscriptionist.' I was, I suppose, many years younger than any of my fellow generals, and this led him to use the adjective 'young,' a term which I was still youthful enough to resent, and it did not make me express my feelings any less emphatically. I replied that 'I was not a conscriptionist on principle, but that I did know the situation facing the British Army, and that I realised that our numbers were hopelessly insufficient' and that 'before we can beat Germany, we shall want every man in England.'

He then said that he agreed with me, but it was the question of exemptions that made him doubtful. General Haig now took up the argument and said 'the country was most resolute,' and 'if Kitchener was firm and insisted on a proper Bill he was sure the whole country would agree.' He pointed out that Kitchener's position in the country was so strong and he was so respected that the country would always back him, he 'should insist on the exemptions being done away with,' 'there were no risks'—'it could be done if only Lord Kitchener showed a firm front.' The interview now ended, and Kitchener went off to lunch with Haig at his Headquarters at Hinges. I was the only one of the Corps Commanders invited, and when I went into the dining-room I took some pains to sit as far away from Lord Kitchener as possible, feeling that the atmosphere might be somewhat difficult. However, directly lunch was over, Kitchener came across the room to talk to me. He was very gracious in his manner and explained the difficulties with which he had to contend in dealing with the Cabinet; he was anxious that the army in France should not misunderstand him, and should realise that he had its welfare and success at heart. As I felt that I had perhaps overstepped the bounds of courtesy and respect, I explained at some length that I had spoken with such emphasis because I felt it was vital that those in authority should speak for the officers and men in the trenches, and that the people at home should understand that the inadequate numbers with which we faced the Germans placed a terrific strain and much hardship on the overworked troops, besides exposing us to the serious danger of defeat. I repeated what Haig had already said, that the country had every confidence in him and that his word 'went' if he would only say it, and that if the people were told the real position they would always face the necessary sacrifice to ensure the safety of their country. He

replied that 'he felt the best course would be to tell the country the truth.'

This was one of the few occasions on which I ever met Lord Kitchener, and it was the last. My impression of him was that though he was no soldier in the technical sense, he had energy and drive, and he was capable of being considerate and would listen to opinions of his juniors, even when they disagreed with him, if they were not afraid of him; but he would bully them if they were.

Kitchener's attitude at this time on the question of Conscription is the more incomprehensible because he was fully alive to the very critical position of the Allies in August of this year. He must have known that the maximum effort of England would be called for in order to win the War. Although he hesitated (in fact to me it appeared that he almost feared) to take a firm line in this matter with the Cabinet and with the people at home, yet he demanded the greatest sacrifices from the British soldiers at the front when he ordered us to attack at Loos even 'though by so doing we may suffer very heavy losses.'

At this time, however, the prospects of the battle were materially altered by the possibility of our being able to use gas. The artillery and ammunition at our disposal were entirely inadequate to justify launching any infantry to the attack at Loos, but the arrival of an ample supply of gas made it possible not only for the attack to be made but for it to be successful. The Germans had used it against us and the French with considerable success for the first time on the 22nd April. Till then the use of any poison had been considered as outside the rules of civilised warfare, but after the use of poison gas by the Germans the Allies had decided that they also must use it in self-defence. That the War Office and those civilians working under their direction should have been able to provide us with a sufficient quantity of gas by September reflects considerable credit on the organising capacity of the British Staff, both civilian and military, for producing it in so short a period.

But the use of gas from cylinders on an extended front presents many difficulties in practice because the results depend entirely on the wind being favourable. Even if it be favourable on one part of the line, it by no means follows that it will be favourable along all the line. An attack by over 50,000 men on a front of 8 miles, relying principally on gas for success,

would be an extremely uncertain venture and presented many grave disadvantages. To wait for a favourable wind once all the preparations had been made, would mean moving up the attacking troops and then, if the wind were not favourable, marching them back again: it might be necessary to repeat this movement several times, exposing the troops on each occasion to the fatigues and risks always incumbent on men in the front trenches or moving up or down from them. Everything depended, therefore, on a wind which was not only favourable in direction but sufficiently strong to carry the gas well over to the enemy's support and reserve lines.

Towards the end of August, General Haig, his four Corps Commanders and many of his Divisional Commanders had gone to see a demonstration of gas and smoke, and the wind being favourable, it had raised great hopes in our minds. It can be imagined, therefore, with what anxiety we studied the weather reports and consulted our meteorological advisers. For several days previous to the attack the weather was cloudy and rainy—which, by the way, also prevented our getting the full use out of the few heavy guns at our disposal—and the wind as well was usually unfavourable. I know of nothing so tantalising as weather. I do know that it has to be considered by every commander at least as seriously as any question of troops, guns or ammunition. The introduction of our new weapon brought a fresh complication into our climatic considerations. It needed little imagination to see that Gas might be a boomerang ally—a tremendous but treacherous friend.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE BATTLE OF LOOS<sup>1</sup>

*Plans for the Battle—Reliance on Gas—The Attack of the I Corps—Success and Failure—German Counter-Attacks—Absence of Reserves—Bombs—Lessons of the Battle.*

#### I

H AIG had already issued orders to his Corps Commanders to prepare for an attack on the line Hulluch-Loos. Now that the definite orders to carry out the attack had been received from Sir John French in accordance with Lord Kitchener's instructions, and as the employment of gas offered new possibilities of success in spite of our great lack of heavy guns and ammunition, Haig loyally adopted the plan and devoted his mind and energies vigorously to carrying it out.

On the 6th September he held a conference of his Corps Commanders and amplified the plan. In the memorandum of this conference he said :

' The losses incurred by the Russians have forced the Allies in the West to abandon their defensive attitude, and so we are about to attack in order to help our friends, although our resources have not been fully organised.

' This is the plan as far as it is known to me.

' The French are attacking along their whole Front. Of 90 divisions I am told 65 are to attack.

' There will be two main efforts, one near Rheims and the other near Arras. That is to say, the two flanks of the German salient are to be attacked.

' The orders received by me as G.O.C. of the First Army are :

" To support the French attack to the full extent of my resources."

' My orders are to secure the line Loos-Hulluch and the ground extending to the La Bassée Canal with the ultimate object of gaining Hill 70-Pont-à-Vendin.

' Thus far it may be seen the objective is a tactical one.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 10, p. 122.

‘ It is not enough to gain a tactical success. The direction of our advance must be such as will bring us upon the enemy’s rear so that we will cut his communications and force him to retreat.’

The detailed orders said that the IV Corps would assault with its right on the Double Crassier north of Lens and its left on the La Bassée Canal.

The I Corps was also ordered to assault the enemy’s trenches opposite Givenchy and attack the village of Canteleux north of the Canal, as a subsidiary attack and to cover our left. Both Corps were ordered to push on their main attack and seize the passages of the Haute Deule Canal between Pont-à-Vendin and Beauvin. In other words, these orders instructed us not only to carry the enemy’s main defences in our front, but to carry his second line, which varied from a mile to three miles further on, and finally to advance another three and a half miles to the Haute Deule Canal. These were far-reaching ambitions, and the hope of success depended firstly on the gas enabling us to seize the German main defences so rapidly that we could reach his second line before he could bring up, from his supports, sufficient men to defend it, and secondly on the French gaining such decisive successes on our immediate right that they would advance in close proximity to us in the direction of Douai and thus hold out their left hand to us. It is important to realise that the forces of the British attack were not sufficient to push into the midst of the German Army for any such distance if such attack were to take the form of an isolated operation.

From these instructions we can see that Haig was taking a broad view of the situation, and he looked for success by first breaking through the enemy’s defences and then developing the advantage to the utmost. All depended, however, on the initial tactical success. This we partially attained, but the French under Foch suffered a complete reverse.

The instructions issued by Sir Douglas Haig to his Army show clearly that we were not fighting for our own hand, but were fighting for the ‘ Cause,’ a stern necessity which weighed more heavily on us every year as the War continued. We who were engaged at the front had not always a clear view of these great and broad issues at the time, nor indeed had the public at home. Blame was often laid on our military leaders for

offensives and the heavy losses they involved. Yet we know that both Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig made energetic protests against launching this attack at Loos. It is beyond dispute that the British Empire did suffer very heavily in thus serving the 'Cause,' but we may gather some consolation from the thought that some one had to take up the burden and to be equal to the task if the War was to be won. To my mind, it would have been quite possible for Germany to have won the War if the *morale* of her people and her resources in man-power had not been persistently and severely worn down by our constant attacks. Our own country may be proud and thankful that her people had the endurance and capacity to face the unenviable task, and thus to ensure final victory.

On receipt of the orders from the First Army I ordered the I Corps to attack with the 7th Division on the right, the 9th in the centre and the 2nd on the left. The task before the 7th and 9th Divisions was to take advantage of the surprise and panic which the gas might cause and push through with the utmost rapidity, if possible to the Haute Deule Canal. The task of the 2nd Division was different. It was only to capture enough ground to protect our left flank. But though it had not to go so far as the other two divisions, it was faced with perhaps the most formidable system of defences of this tremendously strong line. The village of Auchy and the embankment of the Railway Triangle were veritable forts. The 2nd Division, not being required to push through to any distance, attacked with all three brigades in line; the other two divisions, aiming at seizing the German second line and then pushing three miles beyond it, attacked with only two brigades in line and one in support, the mission of the latter being to go through to the more distant objective.

The I Corps kept no Corps reserve, nor did the IV Corps. If success were to be obtained it was only possible by great rapidity of action, and this demanded that all troops available as reserves must be close up, ready to push on at once. Moreover, it was understood by us all that the XI Corps, which formed Sir John French's reserve, and consisted of three divisions, the Guards, the 21st and the 24th, would be placed under Haig's orders from the outset and would be immediately available and fresh to follow up close on our attack.

Such distant objectives as we gave to our divisions could only be justified by our knowledge of the weakness of the enemy on

our front and reliance on the effect of gas. The defences which we were to attack were indeed most powerful. The second line was out of reach and largely out of sight of our artillery, and was covered by heavy belts of wire along its whole front. If these defences were adequately held, there was no hope of success, but we knew that there were few Germans in front of us, and it would take many hours for their reserve troops to come up. If we could only be quick, if we were not stopped and delayed, it was possible to carry out our whole programme. However strong a defensive position may be, it can always be taken if the enemy is not occupying it. It is the man who, in the end, must count. The artillery at our disposal was totally insufficient to break down and smash up the strong defences in our front. There was only one hope, our gas, and that, in its turn, depended entirely for its effect on the direction and the strength of the wind. If the gas were effective it would enable our assaulting troops to get through with little loss and practically no delay. Any serious resistance, however, instantly meant delay, and delay would be fatal to our hopes. As things turned out, the wind failed us; the gas was only in part effective and serious resistance was met with in places. Yet in spite of all this, of heavy losses and serious delays, we were within an ace of success.

Each of the two divisions which were to go through had to carry out the attack in three stages—firstly, to seize and pass through the enemy's first system of defence; secondly, to seize his second line and the villages of Hulluch, St. Elie and Haisnes; and thirdly, to push on three miles to the Haute Deule Canal.

The 25th September was fixed for the attack in conjunction with the French attack in Artois on our right. But ours was to be launched at 6.30 a.m. provided the wind were favourable for the gas, while the French, four miles away on our right, were not to attack till about six hours later.

In the period between the 1st and the 21st September the work of preparation was most actively carried on. New trenches and blinded saps were dug, to be opened up subsequently and joined into a trench at the last moment. These were for the purpose of shortening the breadth of No-Man's-Land, which was very wide in places. New communication trenches, bomb-proof shelters for Battalion Headquarters, signal posts, observation posts, bomb stores and first-aid posts, all had to be made

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along the line. Machine-gun batteries were arranged behind our front line to fire on the German communications. New roads had to be made, and the routes for our cavalry through our front system of trenches had to be prepared in case of success. Bridges over ditches and trenches for field guns were also put down. The work of making emplacements and bays for the gas, as well as carrying up the cylinders, entailed some very heavy work. Each cylinder required three men to carry it, and the journey down the wet trenches in darkness for sometimes two miles was a very exhausting business. The cylinders were arranged in bays in the front line trenches, and there was enough gas to emit a gas cloud intermittently mixed with smoke for forty minutes, except on the extreme left, north of the Canal, where there was only sufficient gas to last for ten minutes. But here the distance to be gained was comparatively short.

Before the battle opened we moved the Corps Headquarters forward from Chocques to a chateau south of Bethune and considerably nearer the battlefield. But even from here the roads to the Headquarters of the 7th and 9th Divisions, which were entrusted with the main task, were rather roundabout and would certainly be congested with all the traffic which a battle attracts behind the lines. Thanks, however, to the reconnaissances of my A.D.C., a sandy track which avoided all traffic was found, and this enabled me to ride. By travelling at a steady canter I could get to either of my Divisional Headquarters in twenty minutes. During this battle, therefore, the horse was my ordinary mode of conveyance and not the motor; in those days such a procedure was very unusual.

Nearly all our artillery had to be moved into new positions, aeroplanes had to be allotted to the artillery and reconnaissances arranged, cables laid, ammunition brought up, and all arrangements for the advance co-ordinated.

Wire-cutting and the general bombardment began on the 21st, and continued night and day until the hour of the assault, but we had neither the guns nor the ammunition to cut the wire thoroughly everywhere, or to smash up all the strong points.

A west, a north-west or a south-west wind amounting to a fair breeze was necessary to carry the gas over the enemy's position. During the two or three days previous to the battle, however, the weather was wet and misty, with little breeze, and that not in the direction we wanted. Our meteorological

experts were taking observations over a wide area, and reported that the chances of a westerly wind were fair. Still it did not come. During the night before the attack, however, a westerly wind was promised us. The tension and anxiety of watching and hoping for this was very trying. It threw a heavy responsibility on all the senior Commanders, but more especially on the Commander of the First Army. If the wind were definitely unfavourable the attack was only to be carried out by one division in my Corps and one division in the IV Corps. Half an hour before the time the attack was due to be launched the wind was in the south-west, fairly favourable, but very light. The First Army telephoned to me to ask whether we could then stop the attack, but I considered it was too late to get the orders to the men in the front trenches. Nor did it appear at the moment that the wind was definitely unfavourable. To postpone the attack would have exposed the men assembled for the attack in the trenches to serious risks and disadvantages. The gas was turned on all along the front at 5.50 a.m., the wind being south-west or south-south-west. But it was light, and nowhere did it carry the clouds of gas and smoke rapidly across to the enemy. In some places it moved so slowly that the attacking troops either were kept back by it or ran into it, and in other parts it never reached the Germans at all. During the time of the discharge, the wind became fitful and commenced to veer south-south-east. In consequence the gas attack was not a marked success. On the extreme right of the attack, in the IV Corps area, the wind was more suitable. As the line proceeded north it became less so, until opposite my centre and left the wind was so unfavourable and so light as to fail to carry the gas away from our own front line trenches. In many places the gas had to be turned off altogether.

This was not the first time in history that generals have prayed for a west wind. Dunois at Orleans wanted one, and Bernard Shaw in his *St. Joan* shows him gazing anxiously at the flutterings of the tell-tale flag. Haig watched the weather with even more acute interest than did Dunois, for his need was even greater. He set his aide-de-camp smoking furiously—Haig himself was a non-smoker—and gazed intently on the clouds of smoke gently carried by the light and variable breeze. Dunois got his west wind and won his victory: unfortunately, we had no Joan of Arc to work meteorological miracles on our behalf.

## II

25 *Sept.* At my Headquarters the day preceding the battle had been one of great anxiety and intense concentration. We were up most of the night in order to watch the wind and get the earliest reports on its vagaries, for the fateful decision to discharge the gas or not had still to be made. The orders to attack once having been launched, reports very soon began to come in about what the gas was doing. In places they were hopeful, 'the gas was going across to the enemy's lines'; in others they were doubtful, 'the gas was hanging about,' 'the wind was taking it up No-Man's-Land instead of across it'; and again in others they were definitely unfavourable, 'the wind was taking the gas over our own lines,' 'the discharge had to be stopped.' Then followed the reports of the infantry action. Everywhere they started well.

The 7th Division attacked with the 20th Brigade on the right, alongside the IV Corps; on their left was the 22nd Brigade. The two leading battalions of the 20th Brigade (2nd Gordons and 8th Devons) carried the German first lines in twelve minutes, but several German strong points containing machine guns had not been damaged by our artillery nor affected by the gas. Moreover, the German guns, further to the rear, had an excellent view over all the ground of the attack. By the time the 8th Devons had crossed the first German lines, sixteen officers out of nineteen had been hit. Nevertheless, these two battalions gallantly pushed on and captured the German supporting trench known as Gun Trench, charging and taking eight guns therein. The Gordons still continued to press on, and arrived close to the German second line in front of Hulluch, where they saw a German battalion just entering the village of St. Elie. The 8th Devons on their left had also pushed on, but were stopped by the fire from this village and the heavy line of completely undamaged wire. Although the supporting battalions now came up, an attack on this second line, which had been occupied at this spot by the Germans, was quite impracticable without a very heavy artillery preparation.

The 22nd Brigade on the left in advancing came across a considerable amount of uncut wire screened from our artillery observation by the long grass. In spite of heavy machine-gun fire taking them in the flank, the troops scrambled across the wire and captured the German trenches. A small redoubt with

a machine gun held up the attack for some time, but eventually it was captured and the supporting battalions went forward and captured some strongly-defended Quarries which lay half-way to the German second line. They then pushed on up to this and parties even entered it, but the uncut wire on this line and the German supports coming up prevented the advance of any more of our troops. Eventually the men who had entered the second line were driven out of it and fell back to the Quarries. The reserve brigade now came up, its mission being to capture the two villages of Hulluch and St. Elie. Before it even reached our front it also had suffered heavy losses, and finding the German second line now occupied, it was decided to consolidate the ground gained and renew the attack next day on the villages of Hulluch and St. Elie, after an artillery preparation. Before the day was out the 7th Division had lost four commanding officers, all of them of the very best type of English officer, with a thorough knowledge of their profession, a selfless disregard of danger, and all extremely able. Their loss was a very heavy one for the 7th Division, and was part of the heavy price the country had to pay in its unselfish effort to support its Allies.

On its left the 9th (Scottish) Division—the first of Kitchener's Army to arrive in France—went forward to its first attack with the 26th Brigade on the right and the 28th on the left. It was faced with the Hohenzollern Redoubt and the Dump, two most formidable defences. The latter is thus described in the *Official History*: 'The Dump was a huge flat-topped slag heap twenty feet high, with excellent view over the district on all sides. It was the chief German observation station in the centre, and would be equally valuable in British hands for the further advance to and beyond Haisnes and St. Elie. It was tunnelled in many places to form shell-proof shelters both for machine guns and observers.'

By 7.30 the two leading battalions, the 7th Seaforths and the 5th Camerons, had carried the Redoubt, the Dump and the miners' houses all round Fosse 8. The 28th Brigade on the left, however, met with a complete reverse. The smoke and gas, far from putting the Germans out of action, had drifted across our front and had seriously affected the men of this brigade. Three strong points armed with machine guns in the enemy's front line trenches swept the whole of No-Man's-Land and practically annihilated our attacking battalions. Our artillery, which was not sufficiently numerous to deal with all the enemy's



defences, had failed to smash up these machine-gun nests, and as the gas and smoke here drifted across our own lines, the attacking troops were left fully exposed to the German machine guns, which took a fearful toll of our gallant men. The attack here was definitely repulsed. A second assault delivered after 12.15 failed again in spite of the utmost gallantry displayed by the assaulting troops. Still further to our left the three brigades of the 2nd Division were eventually all forced back to the trenches from which they started.

This repulse to my left had serious results on the further operations of the 9th and 7th Divisions. The troops which had captured Fosse 8 and the Dump had to turn their attention and all their energies to securing the ground they had won and turning the captured German defences into trenches suitable for their own purpose. The further advance to the German second line was therefore made by small forces only. These, however, succeeded in carrying on and occupied the German second line before any German reserves could get up to oppose them. The village of Haisnes appeared empty and was to be had for the asking. But before advancing to take it, the leading troops waited for the arrival of the Seaforths and the Camerons, whom they imagined were also advancing. But, as already explained, these men had had to remain round Fosse 8 to put it in a state of defence, and especially to take steps to protect their left flank.

The 27th Brigade, which was in reserve to the 9th Division, was now ordered by General Thesiger, on instructions from me, to go forward and capture Haisnes, but owing to the forward movement which had already been inaugurated, and perhaps to some inexperience on the part of the brigade Staff, the Brigadier had only one battalion under his hand. Moreover, although this order had been despatched before 10 o'clock, it did not reach the Brigadier till 3.30, and by this time two of his own battalions were already in possession of the German second line, having moved forward in close support of the leading brigade. But time had now been lost and these battalions were being severely counter-attacked and bombed by the German reinforcements which by now had had time to come up. Before night fell, these gallant troops, who had penetrated a long way into the enemy's position, were driven back.

At the Corps Headquarters the first reports which came in were cheering, but as the day wore on the tone changed and we

heard of our difficulties, set-backs and repulses. The reports which came in from the 7th Division on the right told us that it had driven through the enemy's front, had captured eight guns, and was already in Hulluch and St. Elie. Its left brigade, after some checks and heavy fighting, had eventually succeeded in capturing the Quarries and was also pushing on to St. Elie. The right brigade of the 9th Division also had been most successful, the Dump and Fosse 8 were in our hands, the leading troops were occupying the German second line, and the village of Haisnes was unoccupied. This was magnificent—so far so good. We soon heard that the left brigade of this division, however, had met with a severe repulse and was back in its own trenches. The same bad news had come in from the two brigades of the 2nd Division south of the Canal, but its left brigade from Givenchy had successfully carried the enemy's front line trenches. Then came in the report that it had been driven out and was back in its own line. Such was the outline of the picture as it was presented to me at Headquarters. It still seemed full of hope, however, and the main consideration was to exploit our early gains as rapidly as possible.

Shortly after 9.30, as already stated, I had ordered the reserve brigade of the 9th Division to push forward as one body and capture Haisnes. General Capper had already issued similar orders for his reserve brigade to capture Hulluch and St. Elie. I was hopeful that a forward movement would shake the enemy's defenders in front of my left. It was most important to bring forward my left and secure a good defensive flank, and therefore, shortly after 11, I ordered the 28th Brigade to make another effort to capture the trenches in their front. It would have been better if this brigade had followed the successful 26th Brigade on its right and then attacked northwards, taking the enemy in flank. However, it attacked straight to its front and was again repulsed with cruel losses. I had early decided that any further attempt by the 2nd Division would be futile. Orders were therefore sent to it to hold its line as thinly as possible and to send me its three fresh battalions, which were organised into an extemporised brigade under Colonel Carter. This force was moved down to my right, and by 10 p.m. was in position near Vermelles behind the 7th Division, ready to carry on the attack next morning.

Later on in the day reports became less optimistic and showed that the position was not as favourable as we had been led to

suppose. The 7th Division had not captured either Hulluch or St. Elie, nor had it been able to seize the German second line. The attack on Haisnes did not materialise, but, on the contrary, reports began to come in giving news of heavy counter-attacks by the Germans on the troops of the 9th Division who were already in the German second line. These reports were soon followed by others showing that our leading troops had been driven back from the second line on to Fosse 8. As the afternoon wore on, further news from Fosse 8 began to reveal that a dangerous situation was arising in that neighbourhood. Heavy shelling by the enemy was being concentrated on our tired and rather inexperienced troops. Great difficulties were being found in the work of consolidating and communication, and counter-attacks on their left from the direction of Auchy were now developing.

During the course of the morning the 73rd Brigade, 24th Division, had been sent to me by the First Army. The situation at Fosse 8 was causing me great anxiety, for the troops holding this important locality had been exposed to heavy fighting and losses and were now becoming very tired. It was most important to retain our hold of the commanding ground we had seized there. It not only secured my left but it was of immense value for any further advance. As long as we had any troops in the German second line the retention of Fosse 8 in their rear was vital to them. I therefore ordered the 73rd Brigade to take over the defence of Fosse 8, and to release the 26th Brigade for reorganisation after its magnificent effort.

The 24th Division, of which the 73rd Brigade formed part, had only just been brought over from England, and was quite inexperienced. Neither the brigade nor battalion Staffs had any knowledge of the type of warfare in which we were then involved. Nevertheless, I thought the brigade was fresh, and fresh troops holding Fosse 8 should have made it secure. They did not reach the position, however, till about 8 p.m.—seven hours after I had issued the order. They did not complete the relief and take over the responsibility for the defence of Fosse 8 till 2 a.m. the next morning, after having taken part in repulsing the German counter-attack earlier in the night.

The result of the battle so far, although it had brought many disappointments, had on the other hand provided us with some marked successes and some important gains. We had failed to gain the great tactical objectives, the German second line and

the Haute Deule Canal beyond it, owing to the delays caused by the enemy's resistance on various points along the front of both Corps and to the absence of fresh reserves close at hand. This had given time to the Germans to bring up their own reserves, and their second line was now firmly and strongly held.

But, even if we had been successful in carrying out all our plans, the British Army would have found itself in an awkward position, as the French attack under Foch on our immediate right had been, to all intents and purposes, completely held up. Only the advance of the French would have enabled us to make further progress.

By the afternoon, I had decided that attacks against the German second line were not feasible under existing conditions, and orders were issued for our troops to consolidate the position they had gained.

Thus, although the day had been full of vicissitudes, disappointments and difficult problems involving grave decisions, I felt fairly satisfied that evening about the position of my Corps. We had captured a line running from Gun Trench, through the Quarries, to Fosse 8, all most valuable positions. This line was adequately held, in places by fresh troops, and was being well consolidated. I had a reserve of three battalions behind my right in Carter's extemporised brigade and I had a call on the 8th Cavalry Brigade. In the afternoon I had ridden down to see Capper and Thesiger and discussed with them the situation of their divisions, and found them satisfied with the positions, though doubtful of our capacity to push on, now that the Germans had had time to bring up reinforcements.

### III

During the night the First Army orders for the 26th arrived. 26 *Sept.* General Haig, still under the impression that the German second line was weakly held, and anxious to help the French on our right by pressing an advance which would tend to weaken the defence on their front, had decided to renew the attack at 11 o'clock next morning. For this purpose he was employing the two reserve divisions, the 21st and 24th, of the XI Corps (General Haking), which had at last been placed under his orders. The considerable delay in handing over those reserves turned out to be fatal to our chances of success.

These two divisions, the 21st and 24th, less a brigade detached



from each, were to attack the centre of the German position in the middle of the IV Corps front. The IV Corps was to co-operate by the capture of Hill 70 on the right and Hulluch on the left of the attack. The task of the I Corps was to capture St. Elie. For this purpose I intended to employ Carter's fresh battalions. But during the night serious events took place on my front which materially altered the situation to our great disadvantage. The Germans, who had been considerably reinforced on my front and on my left, launched strong counter-attacks during the night. They established themselves in a small portion of Gun Trench; they captured the Quarries, making prisoner General Bruce, commanding the 27th Brigade of the 9th Division; and they assaulted our front at Fosse 8, but here were repulsed. The result of these attacks was to throw back the left of the 7th Division and leave it considerably exposed, as was also the right of the 9th Division and the 73rd Brigade holding Fosse 8. The difficulties of these units were very considerably augmented, as the right flank as well as the left was now uncovered. Fosse 8 became a bastion sticking out of our main line, but with both its flanks inadequately protected.

When day broke I was faced with these fresh anxieties. It was now impossible to carry out the orders of the First Army and attack St. Elie, as before we were in a position to do that, the Quarries would have to be recaptured. It was not until 4.30 in the afternoon that Carter's brigade was able to carry out the attack there. This attack failed, however, to recapture them, in spite of a concentrated bombardment. General Capper had gone forward to organise this attack and he was mortally wounded. The spot where he fell was exposed to a heavy rifle and machine-gun fire, and Humphrey Noble, his A.D.C., getting his wounded General on to his back, had to crawl a considerable distance on his hands and knees before he was able to bring him safely under cover. Tommy Capper died the following day in hospital. His loss to the British Army, and to the I Corps at this particular juncture, was a heavy blow. To me personally it was also a very sad one. I had known him for twenty-five years and I had been closely associated with him many times both as a soldier and in many sports and games. There was no man who had left a greater or a more valuable impression on the character and training of the British Staff. An ardent student of his profession, with a strong and taking personality, he had

not only set the highest standard of professional knowledge, during the years in which he was a Professor at the Camberley Staff College and Commandant of the one at Quetta previous to the War, but he had also inspired those around him with the noblest ideals of duty and unselfish devotion. Unfortunately, this was not the only blow which I was to suffer in this battle among my Divisional Commanders.

But to return to the events of the 26th. During this day a very heavy bombardment by the Germans was concentrated round Fosse 8 and the Dump, accompanied by constant bombing attacks, especially from our left. Reports began to come in from the 73rd Brigade which tended to show that its battalions were becoming demoralised. Owing to the confusing nature of the situation, the congestion of the trenches in rear, and the inexperience of their Staff, the officers and men were finding great difficulty in getting food and water. I felt that it was essential that an experienced officer should be placed in charge, and Colonel Rudolf Jelf of the 60th was sent to take over the command. But with all his experience, his fearless and gallant spirit, and his great energy and activity, he could not, under the conditions existing in Fosse 8 in the midst of a desperate fight, instantly create a system of command and communication. Such can only be developed by thorough training under more or less peaceful conditions. Information from Fosse 8 continued to cause me the greatest anxiety. In the afternoon two battalions of the 73rd Brigade were reported as retiring from Fosse 8, but later on the situation was re-established. When night fell, the situation of the I Corps had materially altered for the worse. My only reserve, Carter's brigade, was already engaged in the fighting. During the previous night we had lost the strong position of the Quarries and my centre had fallen back, and we had failed to regain the lost ground. The situation round Fosse 8 was undoubtedly precarious. The Germans had evidently been considerably reinforced. As a matter of fact, by this evening they had received 16 battalions as reinforcements. But during the afternoon I was informed by the First Army that the 28th Division was advancing and was placed under my orders in order to relieve the 9th Division. By 6 p.m. the leading brigade (83rd) reached Bethune—8 miles from the battlefield.

On my right the IV Corps had also had a very difficult day. All attempts to retake Hill 70 had failed, as had the attack on

Hulluch. The 21st and 24th Divisions of the XI Corps had been repulsed and were in considerable confusion. The Guards Division had been brought up and was re-establishing the line, but there were now no reserves left behind it. The general situation, in fact, was considerably worse than it had been twenty-four hours before—and infinitely less hopeful than it had appeared in the first few hours of the attack. This was a common experience in great offensive actions throughout the War, as commanders on both sides were to find to their cost.

## IV

27 Sept. During the night bombing attacks and heavy shelling had continued without intermission round Fosse 8 and the Hohenzollern Redoubt, and as early as 6 a.m. disquieting reports reached me to the effect that the 73rd Brigade was being driven out of our hard-won positions. Heavy and confused fighting continued in the labyrinth of trenches, blocked with dead, wounded, and fighting troops, in the neighbourhood of the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The great superiority of the German bombs, both in type and supply, placed the untried troops of the 73rd Brigade at a terrible disadvantage. We could do nothing to surmount this. There were not enough bombs in France to supply our wants, and those that we had were clumsy and inefficient weapons. The difficulties, dangers and anxieties of Jelf struggling to hold up the fight were terrific.

About noon, Thesiger, commanding the 9th Division, went up to the front to see if he could help to restore the battle. He and two of his Staff were killed. The loss of its commander in such a critical moment was almost a disaster for the division and to the I Corps. In him I lost another friend, and England a great servant and faithful son.

Haig was at my Headquarters when we received the news of Thesiger's death, and he gave orders that Bulfin (28th Division) should take command of the 9th Division, as well as his own, until it could be relieved. Haig was visibly worried and, as is often the case under such circumstances, he was sharp—perhaps I might say, without injustice, cross: I also must have been very worried, and perhaps those below me thought the same of me.

I was particularly anxious to save Fosse 8—it was a very valuable position, and it had been won by a display of wonder-

ful gallantry. I could feel the pulse of the divisions, and I knew the 73rd Brigade could not hold on, so I pressed Haig to send me some immediate reinforcements—a cavalry brigade—but he sharply refused and told me I was not to use up reserves, that the men in front must be made to fight on and retake their lost ground. Unfortunately a time arrives when merely ordering men to fight is not sufficient, and nothing but good and fresh troops could save Fosse 8 for us. But I did not get them, and Fosse 8 was lost, and eventually half of the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

By 10 o'clock I had ordered up the 85th Brigade of the 28th Division to Vermelles, and the two remaining brigades to move forward as well. By 2 p.m. the 85th Brigade was ordered to counter-attack and retake Fosse 8. Bulfin came on to report to me. He was a bluff, red-faced man, and at once on entering the room commenced to explain that infantry were not cavalry—and it seemed to me that he was more intent on instructing me how to command a corps than he was to deal with the serious problem before his division and to help the troops already in great difficulties round Fosse 8.

The new troops did not reach the Hohenzollern Redoubt till 6 p.m., and in the confusion of trying to relieve the 73rd Brigade they were unable to attack till 9.30 next morning. But their arrival at the Hohenzollern was most helpful. The position here was extremely critical: the unfortunate 73rd Brigade, new, half-trained and quite inexperienced, insufficiently equipped with bombs, had been bombed, shelled and shot at and engaged in the closest fighting for over eighteen hours under conditions of the greatest difficulty.

The leading battalion of the 85th Brigade at once drove the Germans out of some of the trenches in the Redoubt and stabilised the line. During the night the Berkshire Regiment from Carter's brigade made a most gallant attempt to retake Fosse 8. They might have succeeded, but at one time they ran into some Germans, and not knowing the ground and the position of our own troops, they hesitated to fire and rush them, believing them to be men of the 9th Division. In spite of all difficulties they gained a footing on the Dump and held it for a little time.

After a night of difficulty relieving the 73rd Brigade and 28 Sept. the 9th Division, the 85th [Brigade (28th Division) commenced its attack on Fosse 8 at about half-past nine on the 28th. After desperate fighting it at one time had recaptured



practically the whole of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, but by 2 p.m. it was driven back finally into its original trenches. On the rest of my front the day was comparatively quiet, although desultory bombing attacks were made against the right. During the next morning I asked Jelf to come and see me in order to find out the real story of our loss of Fosse 8, and its lessons. I sat him down and just listened to his story, which he told me very simply. No commander had ever been called on to undertake a more terrible task—an inexperienced and disorganised brigade, under a terrific artillery fire, an enemy superior in training and equipment—especially in bombs—all was crumbling around him. That the fight did not end in complete disaster was due to the great qualities and devotion he had displayed, but when I told him so he was very surprised.

29 Sept. The 29th September saw a continuation of the heavy and close fighting round the Hohenzollern Redoubt, entailing heavy losses to both sides, but no material change took place. We were now busy with reorganising our front; the 28th Division, being fresh, was coming in to hold as large a portion of it as possible. This enabled the Corps to rest and re-equip the divisions which had suffered most. The 2nd Division on my left, which had been holding a comparatively quiet sector, was brought across to my right to relieve the 7th Division, which had now been fighting continuously since the opening of the battle, and the 7th went across to take the place of the 2nd.

1 Oct. On the 1st October the Germans violently renewed their attacks on the Hohenzollern and the trenches were lost and retaken several times, but the end of the day again found comparatively little change in the situation. During the previous night the Germans had also attacked my right, and although their main attack was driven back they did succeed in capturing and holding a small portion of Gun Trench. The close fighting round the Hohenzollern Redoubt was continued during the 2nd and 3rd October. Early on the 3rd the Germans succeeded in capturing the larger part of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, but in the afternoon of the same day an attack from the Quarries on our centre was easily repulsed. On the 4th October we made another effort on a big scale to retake the Redoubt. The 83rd Brigade carried out the attack. This was again repulsed by the German machine guns. The Germans spent the rest of the day attacking us and trying to gain some more ground, but they were completely unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, during these days the IV and XI Corps had been actively engaged on my right, endeavouring to push forward against the German second line and to capture Hill 70. None of these operations succeeded, but a new line was consolidated and the German counter-attacks were heavily repulsed.

Further south, the French under Foch were making no headway and were gradually adopting a more and more passive attitude. As the operations of the British were dependent on those of the French, it is necessary to mention the progress of events on the latter's front. Their attack from the north of Rheims had at first opened more hopefully on 26th September, and General Joffre, finding that Foch's attacks had failed, contemplated stopping the attack in Artois and sending all the divisions that could be spared from there to the Rheims sector. He went so far as to give Foch the following instructions on 26th September, the second day of the battle: 'Stop the attacks of the Tenth Army, taking care to avoid giving the British the impression that we are leaving them to attack alone, or the Germans that our offensive is slacking off.'

This was indeed to leave us in the lurch! Our attack at Loos had only been made under urgent pressure from the French, in order to help them in Artois. To continue the attack without their co-operation there was merely to waste British effort and British lives. The British Army could achieve nothing by pushing on alone at this time. In fact, any marked advance would have probably led to a disaster.

On the 27th Sir John French, becoming anxious at the difficult position of the First Army, had informed Joffre that unless the French under Foch attacked with energy and quickly, he would stop further attempts at the offensive, but on the 28th another conference was held between the Allied Chiefs and the continuation of the offensive was agreed.

However, Foch persuaded Joffre to abandon the idea of sending any of his divisions from Artois to Champagne, and after a consultation with Sir John French he agreed to send one division to relieve one of ours on the right of the IV Corps, thus enabling Haig to bring the latter back into reserve. Later in the day Foch promised to despatch two more divisions, taking over the right of the IV Corps as far as and including Loos, and undertaking the attack on Hill 70.

Haig then held a conference with his three Corps Commanders

—Rawlinson, Haking and myself—and issued the following instructions: Haking's XI Corps was to make the main attack on the German front south of Hulluch. The IV Corps was to cover the right towards Hill 70—pending the arrival of the French—and my I Corps was to cover the left by capturing Hulluch; the attack aimed at breaking through the German line and pushing on to the Haute Deule Canal, and was to take place on 2nd October. Difficulties of movement and reliefs subsequently caused the date to be postponed till the 3rd, and then till the 4th October.

But the Germans had no intention of being passive, and were determined to drive us back to our original trenches along the whole front. For this purpose they had brought up the Guard Corps, but before it could be launched against us, the French Tenth Army on our immediate right succeeded on the 28th September in capturing the high ground on the Vimy Ridge; the threat of the serious consequences which might ensue caused the German Command to divert the Guard Corps to this point. The great counter-attack which the Germans were contemplating, quite unknown to us, was therefore delayed, and did not, in fact, take place till the 8th October.

The constant and very bitter struggle round Fosse 8 and the Hohenzollern Redoubt, which culminated on the 3rd October in the capture of the Hohenzollern by the Germans, has already been mentioned, and this further upset the plans of Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig. It was not considered possible to make the attack as originally planned, for the difficulties were very great. On both flanks, Hill 70 on the right and Fosse 8 on the left, the Germans held dominating positions from which they could observe and 'knock out' any batteries brought forward either to cut wire or to support the XI Corps, which was to carry out the main attack on the centre.

It was decided to make another attempt to capture Fosse 8 before the general attack was launched, and this again caused the postponement of the date to the 6th. The troops of my I Corps were too worn out, however, to undertake this task. The XI Corps, which was now receiving two fresh divisions, the 12th and the 46th, was therefore ordered to extend its left and take over my front up to the Hohenzollern. The attack on the Quarries was to be made by the 12th Division, and that on the Hohenzollern and Fosse 8 by the Guards. My front was considerably narrowed by this reorganisation, and I was enabled

to bring the whole of the troops of the 2nd Division back into reserve and rest them.

On the 8th October the Germans made a counter-attack along their whole front from Lens to the La Bassée Canal with the object of regaining their original line, but they were repulsed with heavy losses. By this date a first consignment of 9000 Mills bombs reached the British Army and had been served out to the Guards Division holding my old front round the Hohenzollern Redoubt and the Quarries. With these to aid them, our men decisively repulsed the Germans. These bombs—which remained our standard pattern for the rest of the War—were, I always consider, the best type of bomb in any army. Perhaps this is another example of our capacity for efficiency once we grasp the necessity for it, but how dearly do we pay for not being prepared, and for not seeing early enough when changes are inevitable, until necessity forces us to take action.

On the 13th October the great and final effort was made by the XI Corps to recapture Fosse 8 and the Quarries, but it ended in failure once more. This marked the conclusion of the active operations for 1915.

Although the final result of our operations had been disappointing and we had suffered very heavy losses—the First Army as a whole losing over 50,000 casualties—the confidence of our troops was by no means shaken. They had been able to carry by assault very powerfully defended positions with very inadequate artillery support and without gaining much assistance from the gas. It had been a notable achievement. There were several reasons for our losses and failures. The rain which had begun to fall very early on the morning of the 25th had a very adverse effect. It turned the chalky ground and the trenches into muddy and most slippery and difficult communications. The bomb had played an especially great and decisive part. The Germans, amply supplied with an efficient bomb, capable of being thrown a good distance, had our men at an enormous disadvantage. In their counter-attacks—nearly always carried out down the trenches and not over the open—which involved heavy fighting lasting over many days, they gradually forced us back. In this bitter struggle the bomb was the principal weapon. We were unable to supply our men during this battle with anything approaching a sufficient quantity, and the bombs sent up were clumsy affairs. They were made by our own engineers behind the lines without



machinery and with any material that came to hand. An old-fashioned and very heavy hand grenade was also supplied to our men. The fuse of this could only be lit by striking it on a piece of emery paper and this was sewn on the man's left sleeve, but by 8.30 on the morning of the 25th the rain was coming down heavily, the emery paper was soaked and the bomb useless.

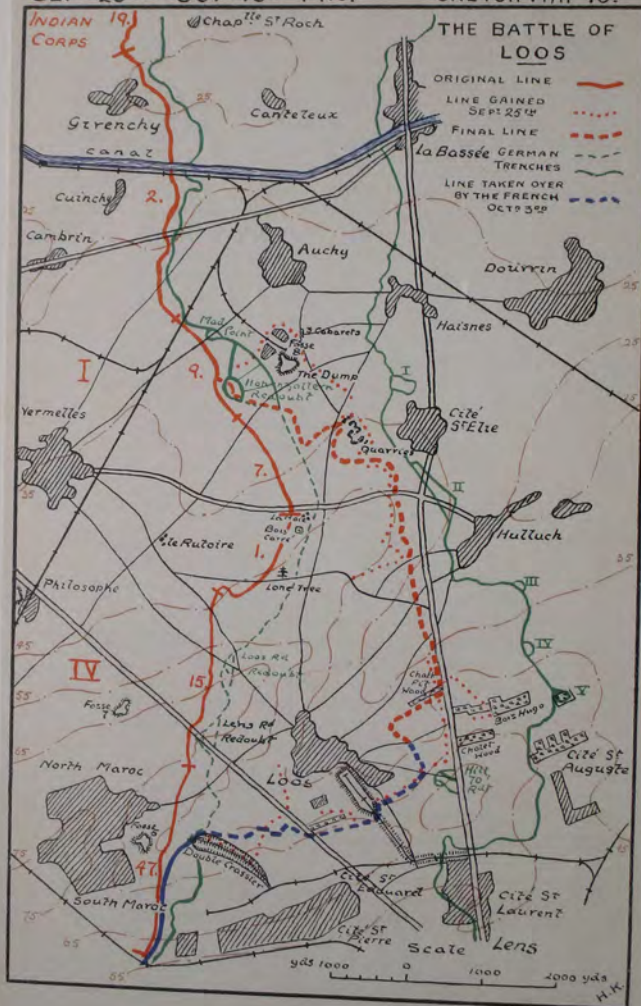
Another cause of our want of success lies in the fact that the reserves were kept too far away from the battlefield and not under the immediate orders of the officers who were conducting the fight. Considerable criticism has been levelled at Sir John French for keeping his reserves too far back and for not allowing Haig to have the use of them earlier than he did. There is no doubt that a great opportunity for breaking through the German second line was lost because there were no fresh troops at hand to push on. By the time they arrived the German supports were in occupation of their line. Writing subsequently of this battle I said (see *Official History*, p. 250): 'What was required was the arrival of three infantry brigades, fresh and in good order (*i.e.* the division of the general reserve) at 9 a.m. on the front of the I Corps; one brigade in front of St. Elie, another on the left in front of Haisnes and another on the right in front of Hulluch. Such a reinforcement (at that moment) would have carried the whole of that portion of the German line of defence.' As a matter of fact, the 73rd Brigade, which was the first reserve sent to me, did not arrive on the battlefield till 8 p.m. on the 25th, that is, nearly 14 hours late.

It is one thing for a commander to keep reserves in his own hands when great operations are impending and plans and objectives are yet uncertain, but in the assault or defence of trench lines, once a battle is imminent, experience has convinced me that if you expect to get the most out of the force at your disposal, all troops in reserve should be moved up and be close at hand. In the attack, a fresh battalion or two may easily carry a position which is held by a shaken enemy, whereas, if the enemy has had time to bring up fresh troops, that same position will successfully resist the attack of four times that number. Similarly in defence, a fresh battalion may enable you to hold your position, but if it is once lost, a whole division will be required to recapture it, and even then the chances of a repulse are great. Another point which was conducive to our failures and losses in this battle was the employment of the 21st and



SEPT 25<sup>TH</sup> - OCT 13<sup>TH</sup> 1915.

SKETCH MAP 10.



24th Divisions. They were totally inexperienced and had only just arrived from England. It would have been better to put them in to hold the line elsewhere and thus release two experienced divisions for the battle. In this way, these new divisions would have become gradually inured to shot and shell, hand bombs and gas and all the terrors that modern warfare brings with it. Moreover, there would have been an opportunity to test and sift out any inexperienced commanders. To emphasise my point about the value of battle experience and to be perfectly fair to the 21st and 24th Divisions, it should be remarked that, once acquainted with the manner of practical warfare, they built up for themselves great fighting reputations, and by the end of the War could be classed among the best of the British forces.

Our losses in this battle had been heavy—over 50,000—and it may be asked whether these, as well as those due to the battles round Festubert and Neuve Chapelle, were justified by results.

The only reason for our attacking on all these occasions was pressure from Joffre and the French Command, and our desire to co-operate with and assist the Allied cause. Our own Command was against all these attacks, and wished to wait until 1916, when our training and the supply of guns and ammunition would have made great steps forward. All that was required on the Western Front that year was sufficient troops to hold the line securely.

A more decisive and a more effective diversion at Gallipoli, which would have helped the Russian situation very materially, was open to us, and all it wanted was that our spare troops and material should have been concentrated there in a decided and whole-hearted spirit.

If that had been done, all other side-shows, which were expensive and dissipated our efforts and resources—Salonika, Palestine, Mesopotamia—would have been unnecessary.

Gallipoli was the one diversion from the main theatre of war that could have led to decisive results, and which success would have fully justified.

If we could have escaped these other ventures, all the troops and guns could have then (in 1916-1917) been in France. But the French Command, supported by some of our General Staff, was obsessed with the hope of a decisive victory on the Western Front in 1915, of which our resources did not admit. The



French Command had not realised that it was quite impracticable to bring the War to a successful conclusion as the result of a single battle of the dimensions visualised by Joffre in 1915. Superficially-minded people have sometimes blamed French and Haig for our losses during this year: they should rather commend them for their sane outlook and their strong protests against these attacks, and, when once obliged to undertake the task, for their courage and loyalty in placing the interests of the Allied cause before those of their own Commands.

## CHAPTER V

### THE WINTER OF 1915-16

*Trench Warfare—Visit of H.M. the King—Retirement of Sir John French—Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief—Mine Warfare—Plans for 1916—The Reserve Army—'Birthday of the Fifth Army'—Its Staff.*

#### I

FOR the next four months life on our front might be described as almost without incident—if the common round and the daily task of life in the trenches could be so characterised, for although no great battles were being fought during this period, the life of the officers and men in the front line was one of arduous work, hardship, danger and sometimes adventure. A great deal of time and attention were given to organising and improving our trench systems and to training of every description behind the line. Much labour and care were given to the preparation of a reserve line behind the I Corps known as the 'Village Line.' Brig. General R. P. Lee, my Chief Engineer, and I spent many hours elaborating cunningly-concealed machine-gun emplacements and other methods of defence. The machine-gun emplacements were strengthened with concrete and were sited especially with a view to enfilading a line rather than firing straight to the front. We looked on this as a model of a defensive system and took the greatest pride in it.

Mining operations came more and more into play on our front this winter. Gradually we established a superiority in this extremely unpleasant form of warfare, thanks to the devotion and capacity of our engineers and tunnelling companies.

During a period of passively holding a defensive front there is a similarity in the lives of most of the generals commanding, and I do not suppose that mine was very different from that of other commanders. It was taken up with visits to the trenches, sometimes in the front lines, and sometimes to the support lines and strong points. During these visits I came into personal

touch with many of the officers and men and was able to get their views on life in general and the War in particular, and I got some idea of their troubles and difficulties. Their minds were chiefly occupied with the improvement of the trenches, organising defensive lines, siting the machine guns, and arranging supplies of ammunition and comforts for the men—in fact, the task which faced them; the political and philosophical considerations on the War played a very small part in their healthy lives, beset with danger though they were. It always interested me to know to whom I was talking, and I seldom spoke to an officer or man without finding out something about his home and his previous life. I often ended by knowing more about them than they did of me, and sometimes they were quite unaware to whom they were talking. I could not help feeling that although we were 'all sorts and conditions of men' we were alike in this, that one great call had brought us there, and we were all thrown together, *pêle-mêle*, into the cauldron of war; that feeling created a bond of fellowship which had an enormous effect in holding us altogether steadfast in serving the cause. I was interested to discover how many schoolmasters had risen to positions of trust and responsibility—quite an exceptional proportion, I thought, for one profession. It was no bad augury for the future of the Empire when once we got back to peace conditions. Except for my tramps through the trenches, it was not easy to get enough exercise, and when possible I always stopped my car and walked or rode for one hour.

In addition to the trench lines, there were many other important activities to which serious attention had to be given—the hospitals, the troops at training, the schools, the bomb factories, the gas school, with an occasional visit to the Divisional 'Follies.' For the benefit of the uninitiated, I must explain that these were small theatrical troupes or concert parties, organised by some officer in each division who had a turn that way. They were always staging new entertainments and helped very much to relieve the strain on our lives: the shows were usually staged in huts or barns, but they triumphed over discomfort and made us forget the War for a few hours of invaluable relaxation. In addition to all these everyday activities, plans for the future conduct of the campaign had always to be considered, involving many conferences with the Army Commanders and then in turn with our Divisional Commanders.

One day in November Colonel Page Croft, commanding the 1st Hertfordshire (Territorials), asked me to inspect the battalion and to address them after a parade which was being held on the anniversary of their first entry into battle at Ypres. This battalion was popularly known as the 'Herts Guards,' because in all matters of smartness, cleanliness and other military virtues it took the Guards for its model, and I must say that the men followed pretty closely on the heels of their models. After inspecting the battalion I addressed the troops and made what I hoped was a moving and appropriate speech. I emphasised the fact that I thought the War was far from over, but I was confident that the men of England meant to 'stay the course,' and to win the War—however long it lasted. I was sure they would never give in, they would never throw up the sponge, whatever they were called upon to endure, and I reminded them that there had been such wars as the Seven Years' War and the Thirty Years' War and even a Hundred Years' War. Having delivered this oration, I felt I had done well, but I received a chilly reminder that no sentiments, however well-founded, can suppress the innate sense of humour in the British soldier, for I was told that as the battalion marched away, one of the men was overheard to remark to his neighbour, 'Cheer up, Bill, I've always been told the first five years are the worst!'

By this time, owing to the great increase which had taken place in our Army, difficulty was encountered in the provision of capable officers to command battalions and brigades. The new armies were coming out with many senior officers of an age too advanced to meet the terrific physical strain which was certain to be imposed upon them, gallant and eager as they were. Moreover, a large proportion of them had only served a few years in the Army, and had left it years before. Their training in modern tactics and Staff work was, therefore, quite inadequate to enable them to deal with the problems with which they would have to contend. They were patriotic and inspired by the best sense of duty, but it was necessary as and when occasion arose to place young, active and experienced officers in positions of command, as we could find them. The War was too big an affair for sentiment, and large proportions of the officers of the new formations had to be replaced, because lack of knowledge and energy was reflected in the training of the troops under them, as well as leading to heavy losses and expensive



reverses when active fighting had to be undertaken. I felt strongly that, for the sake of the Army and the Empire, it was necessary to promote efficiency, energy and courage wherever found, regardless of youth or seniority. But to act up to these principles created many heartburnings and forced me often into unpleasant situations, and it certainly detracted from one's popularity with many people. On one occasion, however, when I called on the Divisional Commanders to forward the names of all officers under the rank of Major whom they considered fit to command battalions, the list came to me, and I noticed that the name of Captain John Stormonth Darling, Adjutant, Scottish Rifles, was not on it. Now, I knew Darling extremely well. He had been one of my subalterns in the South African War. I knew of no officer more capable of commanding and inspiring his men than he was, so I sent down to the Divisional Commander to ask why his name had not been included in the list. The answer came back that he was quite happy and did not want to command a battalion. I got some amusement out of my reply, wherein I pointed out that the question which had been asked the Divisional Commander demanded the names of officers *fit* to command a battalion, not the names of officers who *wanted* to command a battalion. Within a month from that date, Darling was commanding the Glasgow Highlanders, a battalion with few Regular officers or N.C.O.'s. He was not in command of that battalion for more than a month before he had made it into a body of great soldiers who would follow him anywhere, and in consequence it played a gallant and most efficient part in the War. Darling was killed at Delville Wood in the Battle of the Somme, and again Britain lost one of the best of her sons.

Shortly after the close of the Battle of Loos, His Majesty the King came out and spent several days with the troops in France. He inspected divisions, brigades, and even individual battalions, and visited a great many of our billets. This visit was suddenly brought to a close by his horse, which reared up and fell over on him when he was inspecting some troops. I think it was the sudden outburst of cheering that upset the horse, and I have always noticed that no noise will alarm a horse more than the shout from many human throats.

During these visits the King gathered much of the real situation in France and what we were thinking, while, on the other hand, the men loved seeing him.

## II

The end of the year 1915 saw the return home of Sir John French to command in England, while Sir Douglas Haig became Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in France. His command was to lead us to final and complete victory, but only after another three years of war, many desperate struggles, heavy losses, disappointments and reverses.

With all the qualities which Sir John French possessed as a soldier, he had not the broad strategical insight, the knowledge of Staff work and modern tactics, and the resolute and steadfast character which at the time were essential to a Chief who must impress his ideas and his spirit on his subordinate commanders and on the army as a whole, and who also at the same time had to deal with our Allies and with the Cabinet at home. These qualities were possessed to a far greater extent by Sir Douglas Haig than by any other officer in the army. There was no one, I believe, who could have taken his place and who could have inspired the confidence of his subordinates and supported the immense burden, moral and intellectual, which Haig carried successfully to the end. Criticisms have been made against him for lack of imagination, but in my opinion these are ill-founded. He had plenty of military imagination and a capacity for conceiving far-reaching strategical plans. If I had to offer criticism of him it would lie in quite another direction, in that perhaps he was apt to be too optimistic and to expect greater results than the forces engaged could obtain. But after all, we all fell into these mistakes, friends and foes alike, in the early days of the War. We always thought that the capture of the front line, or at most the second line, would ensure a complete victory and the retreat of the whole hostile army, however narrow was the front of the attack. It was only long and bitter experiences which eventually brought all the great commanders on both sides to realise the due proportion between the objectives aimed at and the force necessary to obtain them.

We were always looking for the GAP, and trying to make it, hoping that we would pour through it in a glorious, exciting rush, and so put an end to any more heavy fighting. But war against a great, efficient and brave enemy is not so quickly ended as this. Under such conditions, war is a matter of hard blows, heavy loss, long, stern and desperate struggles, and victory will not be gained until the morale of one side or the

other be broken. Even the genius of Napoleon only won him great victories against wretched inefficiency in command or insufficiency in the number and quality of the troops, or a combination of both. When his enemies had learnt from him the art of war, and assembled heavy masses of troops against him, victory was only purchased at a heavy price, or was denied him altogether.

The I Corps in the early months of 1916 was composed of the 2nd, 12th, 15th and 16th Divisions, and we kept two in the line while the others rested and carried on their training.

The 16th South Irish Division had just arrived in France, under command of General Hickey—a well-trained Regular officer. I was glad to have my own countrymen with me, and I therefore specially asked G.H.Q. if they could be sent to my Corps, and they duly arrived. Among many whom I knew—or at least knew of—there were Captain Willie Redmond and Stephen Gwynne. Brought up, as I had been, in an atmosphere of hostility to Home Rule and all who supported it, I found in these two—and in many other Irishmen of this division, Home-Rulers though they may have been—a loyalty, a devoted sense of duty, and a gallant spirit, which won my esteem and affection.

My own Headquarters were in Chocques, a dull little village about three miles behind Bethune. But in March we moved further south, as my front was now shifted considerably to the right. The IV Corps on my right also extended southwards. These moves were necessitated by our taking over more front from the French.

During the winter of 1915-16 a very active mine warfare was carried on along my front. Mines by one side or the other were blown almost daily. These often induced a bitter little fight to secure the craters. In the first week in March the two largest mines which up to that date had been prepared on the British front were exploded opposite the Hohenzollern Redoubt. This was immediately followed by an attack carried out by the 8th and 9th Royal Fusiliers of the 12th Division under General Boyd-Moss. These two battalions, comparatively new and inexperienced as they were, attacked in a really magnificent manner and succeeded in capturing all their objectives, and occupied the two craters, which they put into an elaborate state of defence. Lord St. David's boy was wounded in this attack, and when I was visiting the wounded in hospital afterwards he gave me, while sitting on his bed, a most graphic account of the

details of the fight, and his own gallant part in it. I could not help coming away filled with admiration and wonder at the indomitable spirit of our young officers and civilian soldiers. We did not hold our gains for long, however, as during the next three weeks the Germans concentrated the fire of some very heavy trench mortars on these newly-won positions. To these weapons we could make no adequate reply, having no heavy mortars of our own. By bursting enormous shells within the confined space of the craters the enemy eventually succeeded in driving us out, although the position had been most elaborately consolidated and fortified.

Our men called these great bombs—which could be seen in their flight through the air—'coal-boxes,' or 'portmanteaux.' The French called them 'marmites' (cooking pots).

The 12th Division was the second of the divisions of Kitchener's Army to come under my orders. Like the 9th, it was composed of that great mass of material which is fortunately not rare in the British Isles—men active in body, keen, eager in mind, and with a moral backing supplied by a sense of duty, national pride, and a love of order and discipline. These qualities make of British manhood the finest soldiers in the world in war, in spite of our being the most unmilitary of modern states in times of peace. The men of this division came from Norfolk, Suffolk and the Home Counties.

### III

When Haig became Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in France we were organised in three armies, and Sir Charles Monro succeeded Haig in command of the First Army—though this was commanded temporarily by Rawlinson until Monro returned from Gallipoli, where he had been sent on a special mission to report. This First Army was composed, from right to left, of the IV Corps, I Corps (which I then commanded), XI Corps and III Corps.

On assuming the chief command, Haig set himself to study the grave problems of driving the Germans out of Belgium, of winning the War and of maintaining (as at times he said himself) 'the honour of the British arms'; this latter inspiration, in fact, was never far away from his mind.

His first idea of the employment of the British Army was to *Plans* recapture the Messines and Wytschaete Heights. This was an *for 1916*.



indispensable preliminary step towards securing the right flank of the Army for a further offensive movement to clear the Belgian coast and to secure the harbours of Zeebrugge and Ostend. At this early date, therefore, he gave orders to General Plumer commanding the Second Army to prepare the attack on Messines and Wytschaete. This attack, however, did not take place till nearly eighteen months later, for before it could be carried out a serious threat had developed on the French round Verdun, and urgent appeals for assistance were made by them to Haig. At the request of General Joffre, who was desirous of securing a combined operation of the French and British forces at their junction, there was commenced at once the study of a plan of attack which afterwards became known to history as the Battle of the Somme. Joffre also demanded that we should take over more of the front and fill the space between the Third and First Armies, then held by the Tenth French Army.

This attack was to be made by General Rawlinson. He was promoted to the command of the Fourth Army, which was now formed, and took over the extreme right of the British line. Behind this Army Haig was contemplating the formation of a Fifth Army to carry on the pursuit, after the successes which he hoped might ensue from this attack.

Early in April I was ordered to hand over the command of the I Corps to Sir Charles Kavanagh, and to help to organise for these events. During April and May I was instructed to supervise the training of the whole Cavalry Corps, and a good deal of my time during those two months was occupied in conducting Staff Rides and tactical exercises with the cavalry.

However, the whole of my time was not occupied by tactical training, for there were many conferences with Sir Douglas Haig, and many sheets of memoranda dealing with the organisations and objects of his projected operations had to be studied. I soon became aware that I was designated to play an important part in the coming offensive.

23 May  
1916.  
*The  
Reserve  
Army.* On the 23rd May the Reserve Army came into being and I was appointed to its command. This date may be said to be the birthday of the Fifth Army, although it did not become officially known as such until the 30th October 1916.

The early name of Reserve Army not only stamped the rôle it was called upon to play in the operations now being contemplated, but it almost seems as if it characterised its employment

during the whole tenure of my command till April 1918. For, instead of remaining stationary and assuming responsibility for a fixed section of the line, we were constantly moved by the Commander-in-Chief from one part of the front to another to take part in all the more serious operations on which he embarked.

Born first of all among the Staff at its Headquarters, a strong *esprit de corps* soon grew up and eventually permeated the whole of the Reserve and later the Fifth Army, and this in spite of the fact that divisions and even corps were frequently changed. It seems that wide extremes of opinion on the subject of this much-fought Army were to be found in the hearts of those who at various times were themselves incorporated in it. The reasons are fairly obvious, and result entirely from the consideration I have mentioned above—that the Fifth Army was used almost continuously by Sir Douglas Haig as a striking force. Thus, certain types of men seem to have hated coming into the Fifth Army, whilst there were many others—a large proportion of the British Army—the bold, the energetic, the resolute—who in spite of all the heavy tasks we were set to do, the desperate fighting which these often entailed, and the losses consequent thereon, made it a proud boast that they belonged to and fought in the Fifth Army. This feeling exists very strongly even to this day, more than 12 years after its last battle.

The Fifth Army bears a proud name, but it was often misunderstood, and sometimes misrepresented. It was constantly directed to undertake the most arduous tasks in order to free its neighbours for other operations. These arduous tasks always entailed severe fighting, which inevitably brought in its train heavy losses. Given our orders and our mission, these were unavoidable. But nothing which could minimise these losses was neglected. No subordinate was ordered to attack before he was ready, if the report of his unreadiness reached Army Headquarters. On the contrary, many attacks by subordinates were prevented or postponed by the Army because the preparations were not complete, the front too narrow, or the numbers engaged inadequate.

The life of the Fifth Army commenced with the Battle of the Somme; its first task was no enviable one—the reorganisation of the defeated and shattered left wing of the Fourth Army. Nevertheless, before that battle closed it had gained some

*Characteristics of the Fifth Army, and its Employment.*

notable victories, and captured more prisoners at less cost than its neighbour. But a large part of the history of the Fifth Army is a story of sacrifice, of assistance freely given to neighbours or Allies in distress.

The struggle round Bullecourt, for example, was carried on solely to assist the Third Army, which was unfortunately unable to take advantage of our efforts. The Battle of Passchendaele may have started as a purely British operation, but it was continued only to help the French and keep from them the pressure of any German offensive.

In the Battle of March 1918—sometimes called the Battle of St. Quentin—the Fifth Army was once more called upon to sacrifice itself for the cause of the Allies on the Western Front. In this case, however, its sacrifices were not in vain.

Months after the War was over, one of the officers of the Fifth Army, who was then a master in a school, wrote :

If one could get the ' spirit of the Fifth Army ' into any school then that school would do well and its boys would be heard of. When we broke up, the Head presented the Rugger cup to the winning house. He spoke specially to the unsuccessful houses and said it was almost better to learn to lose well than to win well. My thoughts immediately went back to the old Fifth Army and I thought surely that Army had fought the finest losing battle that ever was fought, a losing battle which in the end turned out to be a winning battle.

I hope that my boys will feel towards me that confidence and loyalty which I, along with many more, feel towards you and will continue to feel no matter what happens.

13th April 1919.

*The  
Staff—  
Fifth  
Army.*

Except for Maurice Arbuthnot, who was my A.D.C., the Army Staff had to be formed *ab initio*. Neill Malcolm was brought back from Egypt to become Chief of the Staff. General R. P. Lee, who had been my Chief Engineer in the 7th Division, and afterwards in the I Corps, came with me as Chief Engineer to the Army. General Sargent became the head of my Administrative Services, and General Uniacke took over the command of the artillery. Uniacke—tall, strong of body and mind—energetic, cheerful, always unshakable and unappalled, was a great gunner and in moments of crisis a tower of strength. Malcolm was assisted on the operations side by MacMullen (who is now on the Headquarters Staff in India) and Edward Bedington, who also followed me from the I Corps. Neill Malcolm and I had known each other from boyhood ; his sound, cool,

measured judgment and military capacity were of the greatest value to the Army. In order to work always in the closest way with my General Staff, Neill Malcolm usually accompanied me when I visited the various corps and divisions. This was done so that he should always know what passed in my interviews with the commanders. But, looking back with the light of past experience, I now think it was a mistake for us to have made a habit of going out together. It prevented subordinates pouring out to him all their troubles, which they often concealed from me, but which they would not have hidden from him if he had been alone.

Thus the Fifth Army was born. At first merely a small group of Staff Officers, it became eventually a fighting force of half a million men. Throughout its career it followed a stormy fate, used with confidence by the Commander-in-Chief as one of his principal striking forces. I can claim that its career was an honoured one, and its achievements will pass into history with a rank equal to the highest in the long and challenging story of British arms.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME <sup>1</sup>

*Plans for the Battle—1st July 1916—The Reserve Army—Ouvillers and Pozzières—The Fall of Thiepval—The Reserve Army becomes the Fifth Army—The Battle of Beaumont-Hamel—Results of the Operations.*

#### I

THE Fifth Army Staff was at first billeted behind Rawlinson's H.Q. : on the 22nd June, a week before the attack, I was placed at his disposal. At the same time the three cavalry divisions were placed under my orders, and on the 29th June the 19th and 49th Divisions were also placed under my command in case of a 'break-through.' This, however, never materialised and these two divisions were early thrown into the struggle by the Fourth Army.

The intention and the hope behind these dispositions was that the attack of the Fourth Army would be successful along its whole front, so as to enable my force to push rapidly through the centre, on both sides of Albert, seize Bapaume, drive off the enemy's counter-attacks, and cover the Fourth Army from the east. The latter was then to reorganise its attack and carry it forward due north, rolling up the enemy's lines towards Arras.

The orders I received were to the effect that in the event of a decided success by the Fourth Army and a break of the German front I was to raid Bapaume, to prevent the arrival of reinforcements and the escape of the retreating enemy, to secure the high ground south of Bapaume, and to cover the deployment of the Fourth Army for an attack northwards on Arras. I was to be reinforced as early as possible by such divisions as might be available.

When the very comprehensive task which was set me in these orders is considered, in conjunction with the fact that I had only three cavalry and two infantry divisions with which to carry it out, I certainly think that I should have required early reinforcements ! However, as events turned out, we were never

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 12, p. 158.



JULY 1<sup>st</sup> 1916.

SKETCH MAP II.



in a position to deal with these problems, and a very different task was laid on my shoulders.

The operation now being dealt with by the Fourth Army was considerably the most important attack we had organised so far in the War. As our strength had been growing, so the burden of carrying on the War fell more and more on British shoulders, and our attacks had been increasing in magnitude almost in arithmetical progression.

The attack of the Fourth Army was aimed at a large German salient, facing south from Montauban to Fricourt, and facing westwards from that point as far north as Thiepval, Serre and Hébuterne. *The Battle of the Somme.*

The order of battle of the Fourth Army was—from right to left—the XIII Corps under Congreve, XV Corps under Horne, III Corps under Pulteney, X Corps under Morland, and the VIII Corps under Hunter-Weston. Beyond was the VII Corps under Snow of the Third Army, which was to make an attack, designed to draw the enemy reserves away from the main assault.

At 7.30 a.m. on the 1st July the great attack was launched. During the day the reports coming into Fourth Army Headquarters were as usual illustrative of the excesses and fluctuations of elation, hope, anxiety and disappointment which seemed to be the usual experience of a commander in most great battles in this war.

By that evening the right of the attack, under Congreve, had achieved a very marked and notable success. This success was continued, but in a lessening degree, by the XV Corps as far as the left of the III Corps. But the X Corps, after a magnificent effort by the Ulster Division, was eventually thrown back into its own trenches; as were also the VIII and the VII Corps. The result of the day made it apparent that there was no hope of using the Reserve Army, largely composed of cavalry as it was, to advance through the centre and seize Bapaume.

Neill Malcolm and I had spent the day at Rawlinson's Headquarters—trying to keep out of the way as much as possible and not to add to the bustle and hurry attendant to an Army office in the midst of a great battle. But we were handy and on the spot in case we were called upon to deal with any eventuality; we could get all the information as it came in, and we could get as clear a grasp of the situation as was possible. At first this is never very clear, however, as in the first outburst of turmoil



and fighting, information from the front is scrappy, disjointed, often inaccurate, or, more often still, is lacking altogether. Nevertheless, by the evening of 1st July the main lines of the picture could be fairly accurately drawn at Rawlinson's Headquarters. The right of the Fourth Army had been successful, but the left had met with a bloody repulse. This necessitated a complete change of policy to deal with the new situation.

A rapid and active exploitation of a success gained on a wide front was no longer possible. All our studies for the energetic employment of a striking force—composed of all arms, with cavalry predominating—had now to be abandoned.

An entirely new problem was suddenly presented to me on the evening of the 1st July, and I was directed to take command of the two shattered Corps which had formed Rawlinson's left wing (the X and VIII Corps), to reorganise them and continue the attack, while he devoted himself to exploiting the successes on his right. Thus the Reserve Army first stepped on the stage in an active capacity, and its career as a fighting unit now commenced.

On receipt of these orders (if I remember rightly, at about 7 o'clock in the evening) Neill Malcolm and I at once jumped into a motor and went to see the two Corps Commanders; it was dark long before we got to them, and we were stopped on several occasions by the Military Police and ordered to put our lights out, as nobody was allowed to drive with lights along the roads. However, we were in a hurry, and the risks of being wrecked in a ditch were considerably greater than being hit by a bomb, so in spite of orders we drove on with lights up.

We reached Hunter-Weston's VIII Corps Headquarters first, just after dark, and after a talk with him and a full explanation from him of the position of his Corps we drove on, finally arriving about 11 o'clock at night at Morland's X Corps Headquarters; here we were given some hot soup and something to eat, for which we were very grateful. A further talk with Morland made it clear that neither Corps had the men remaining, after all their losses, to renew the attack on the hostile lines next day.

The Fourth Army orders for the renewal of attack had been received, but the two Corps had suffered so severe a repulse that day, had met such tremendous losses, and the consequent confusion was so great, that any immediate renewal of the attack

was quite out of the question. In consequence, my first step in command of my new Army was to cancel these orders and to set to work to reorganise the troops and their positions.

These two Corps had lost, in that morning alone, over 20,000 casualties. For these heavy losses the only gains had been a small salient in the German trenches south of Thiepval and another on the banks of the River Ancre. From the second of those we were driven in the course of a week. But the first, afterwards well known to all who took part in this battle as the Leipzig Salient, we succeeded in retaining and gradually enlarging. It is always a wonder to me how we managed to hang on to this small holding, but we set to work at once to dig good communication trenches back to our lines, and through these 'feeders' we maintained the struggle, kept the garrison well supplied, and could reinforce it or relieve it as required. The Germans made many attacks in their endeavours to turn us out of this point of vantage, but these all failed. It was a mistake on the part of the enemy that he did not organise an overwhelming attack and turn us out, for eventually that small possession became a valuable pivot for our left when the time had arrived for the final assault on Thiepval, though, considered as a mere gain of ground, the salient was poor satisfaction for the huge toll of lives its capture had exacted.

I was now faced with an unenviable task. The change was complete ; in one day my thoughts and ideas had to move from consideration of a victorious pursuit to those of the rehabilitation of the shattered wing of an army.

## II

The general instructions which I now received verbally from Sir Douglas Haig were : that the Reserve Army (at first composed of the shattered X and VIII Corps only) would not carry out any grand operations, but that we were to make every effort to progress by 'sapping,' as he termed it, on the left of the Fourth Army, and gradually enlarge the breach in the enemy's front which had already been created.

My conception of carrying out these orders was to endeavour, first of all, to establish a broad enough front, facing north and on the left of the Fourth Army. From this front I planned to attack always northwards, by which means we could roll up from the flank all the long-prepared and very strong German

system of entrenchments from which the Fourth Army had just been so heavily repulsed, and thus would have to deal with a line which could only be more or less extemporised. This policy, as the reader will see, was followed by my Army practically throughout the whole of the operations for which I was responsible during the Battle of the Somme.

By the 4th July the Reserve Army, subsequently to be known as the Fifth Army, consisted of the following nine divisions :

*X Corps* : 12th, 32nd, 36th, 49th and 25th Divisions.

*VIII Corps* : 4th, 29th, 35th and 48th Divisions.

Of these the 12th, 36th, 32nd, 49th, 29th, and 4th had already been very severely handled on the 1st when under the Fourth Army.

During the first week, although heavy shelling and a considerable number of bombing attacks were carried on by both sides, the Reserve Army adopted a comparatively quiet attitude. By the 4th July, however, we received instructions from G.H.Q. to take over from the Fourth Army the operations against Ovillers. For this purpose we had to extend our right and the 12th Division was placed under my orders.

The first object of the Reserve Army was now the capture of this village of Ovillers. On the 7th July the left of the Fourth Army renewed its attack. The French Sixth Army was not ready on the 7th, but it co-operated on the 8th. We, however, launched an attack on Ovillers, in order to co-operate with the Fourth Army, on the 7th July. This was a converging attack, one brigade advancing due east from our original lines and one brigade advancing due north, because, owing to the operations of the Fourth Army, we had by now obtained a sufficient breadth of front to deploy from the latter direction.

This manœuvre bore the stamp of almost all future operations of the Reserve Army during the Battle of the Somme, in that we consistently aimed at making use of our positions on the flank of the enemy's main lines to attack him, though sometimes we were able to combine an attack from the front as well—as in this instance, and again at Beaumont-Hamel, our final battle of the year.

The attack on Ovillers was fairly successful. The Germans were still fighting desperately and bravely, and inflicted severe losses on the assaulting troops. Heavy rain had begun to fall on the 4th, and continued for the next few weeks, although it was midsummer, and in consequence we found our operations

considerably hampered—not only then, but during the remainder of that summer—by that inveterate enemy, mud.

The 12th Division was now very exhausted. It had, on the 1st July, when under the Fourth Army, and before coming under my command, lost 2700 men, and nevertheless had fought ever since with great gallantry in and around Ovillers. After this attack it was withdrawn, and the 25th Division took over its task. This latter division came from the Midlands, and on one occasion when I inspected it I was shocked at seeing so many men with poor physique, bad teeth and other outward and visible signs of insufficient nourishment and fresh air in their youth. Yet these very men fought as well as any troops in the army—for dash, gallantry and persistency they were not surpassed by any one, and their operations during the next two months, which entailed desperate and continuous fighting, were magnificent.

There is no doubt that the heart of our people is sound, that neither its intelligence nor its capacity for resolute, enduring courage has abated one whit owing to industrialism and town life; nevertheless, the care of health and physique must be given more attention. Surely it is not beyond the wit of our politicians to achieve this?

The efforts of the Reserve Army were now concentrated on its right, the rest of the line being left as quiescent as possible, except for persistent artillery fire, gas, smoke, and other alarms. Twelve batteries of heavy artillery were moved from left to right to support the main operations.

On the 18th July the 24th Division of the Fourth Army made <sup>18 July.</sup> a direct attack on Pozières, which, however, failed. That evening, in order to relieve Rawlinson of the necessity of attending to his left, and to allow him to concentrate all his efforts on pushing forward his right, where his success had been marked, the Commander-in-Chief ordered me to undertake the attack on Pozières as well as on Ovillers. This necessitated taking over still more ground from the Fourth Army, and the 1st Australian Division was sent to me.

It was immediately evident, owing to the successes of the Fourth Army, that we could now deploy on a sufficiently broad front, facing due north, and attack Pozières in flank from the south as we had already done at Ovillers.

The direction of this attack—from the south—had obvious advantages, as it took the enemy's principal defences completely



in flank, but it was not without its risks and drawbacks. Our own right was exposed possibly to machine-gun and rifle fire at close ranges, and certainly to the more distant fire of the hostile artillery. The western edge of the Pozières ridge, however, afforded the attacking troops some protection, as it rose slightly, and the old German line, O.G. 1 and 2, as it was known, was just over the ridge, and their one flank was to some extent protected by the ground from the fire from these trenches.

Before the Australians arrived, I had asked the Fourth Army to prepare the necessary trenches in preparation for launching this attack, which was done.

Ovillers had been finally cleared of the enemy on the 18th, after continuous and bitter fighting, by the 12th and 25th Divisions.

22 July. The 48th Division then took over the line and thus found  
*Pozières.* themselves on the left of the Australians. The 1st Australians had taken over at once from the 34th Division, and on the 22nd July, as the Fourth Army was now engaging in another offensive action north and east of Mametz Wood, we decided to co-operate by assaulting Pozières. The attack was launched just after midnight and successfully carried the village of Pozières with its labyrinth of trenches, as also the trenches stretching eastwards between that village and Ovillers, in spite of a vigorous and desperate resistance by the Germans. The Australians made the main attack, and assaulted the village itself, whilst the 48th pushed forward on their left between Pozières and Ovillers.

The enemy now brought up heavy masses of artillery, and thenceforward from the 23rd for several weeks, all our new captures were exposed to a terrific bombardment which went on day and night. Casualties in consequence were very heavy, and so was the work entailed. Communications and trenches, dumps of ammunition and stores which had been collected were many times blown to pieces; consolidation, moving down the wounded, bringing up fresh stores, ammunition, reinforcements, and a hundred and one other necessary tasks were only carried on in circumstances of great danger and arduous effort. But our troops hung on, repulsed many counter-attacks, and secured and retained this valuable ground round Pozières. It was valuable for two reasons: first, by gaining the high ground round the village we began to overlook the valleys of Martin-

puich and Pys and the enemy's artillery positions on the high ground still further to the east; and secondly, we were now established on a front of nearly two miles, from which we threatened the flank of all the enemy's main fortifications perched round Thiepval and astride the Ancre, which verily formed a formidable fortress.

During the next fortnight this section of the front was the scene of constant and bitter fighting, which was marked by small gains to us, usually won in night fighting, the rest of the Army front remaining fairly quiet. We had so far fulfilled our rôle of holding the enemy to his positions and forcing him to be in constant anticipation of attacks, thus preventing him from withdrawing troops or guns for action against the Fourth Army; at the same time, by counter-battery work, bombardments and digging, we were making all the necessary preparations for our own future operations.

During this time the X and VIII Corps were relieved, their places being taken by the II and V Corps. The II Corps was commanded by Sir Claud Jacob, now a Field Marshal. The energetic and whole-hearted support which he and his Staff always accorded to my Army made our association easy and pleasant.

The personal factor undoubtedly exercises a powerful influence in the conduct of war, as, in fact, it does in our daily life in peace. In war, however, the consequences are more far-reaching, for the human machine into which a little sand of discord may be thrown is not only vast and complex, but is fraught with the fate of men and nations.

It was not always easy during this period to prevent divisions from launching frequent and isolated attacks by small forces such as a company only, or even less, rather than await attacking on a broad front with larger bodies, which necessitated more preparation and organisation and consequently longer intervals between successive attacks. When the attacks had been properly prepared and made on a sufficiently broad front, they were usually successful, and writing to my wife on 16th August in reference to an attack which failed, I said:

It was insufficiently organised and pretty nearly hopeless in the rain and mud. I stopped it once, but both the Corps and Divisional Commanders put up such a strong plea to carry out the attack that I reluctantly consented. One must, after all, allow the G.O.C. of a division some discretion and give him credit for

some judgment. Now we are going to prepare more thoroughly, and I expect next time we will do the trick.

Which we did.

## III

*August.* By the end of August, after much bitter fighting and heavy losses, we had carried the line as far north as Mouquet Farm, though this strong point still held out; thence the front ran in one continuous though somewhat irregular line to the left, where we now joined hands with the little garrison which had been holding the Leipzig Salient south of Thiepval, captured in the original attack by the Fourth Army on 1st July. We had also pushed our line by constant fighting considerably east of Pozières, in conjunction with the Fourth Army on our right. We were now in a position to attack eastwards and north-eastwards alongside the latter on a broad front, against Martinpuich and Courcellette. Our operations northwards were aimed at the isolation of the fortress of Thiepval. By a series of minor operations we succeeded in securing ground to facilitate the further advance, which would eventually permit of its encirclement. Bad weather had considerably interfered with operations. It was supposed to be summer in 'La Belle France,' but the amount of rain which fell would have shamed the Green Isle. It caused the postponement of any attacks on a large scale.

During these weeks when the struggle was most bitter we, however, continued to take prisoners at a rate of about 200-400 a week, and our casualties varied along the whole Reserve Army front from 1000 to 6000 a week—according to the magnitude of our operations, the frequency of the German counter-attacks and the violence of their artillery fire. The Germans, nevertheless, were suffering casualties to the same extent, and this steady pressure was undoubtedly lowering their *morale*. As the weeks went on their resistance became weaker and our successes more pronounced.

*3 Sept.* On the 3rd September a general attack was made in order to co-operate with the French and the Fourth Army on our right. With the exception of the 4th Australian Division, which partially attained its object round Mouquet Farm, the rest of our attacking troops eventually fell back to the trenches from which they had started. This was the first repulse the Reserve Army had met on any large scale, but it was soon avenged.

The Australians had now been in the line fighting continuously since the 20th July; their casualties had been heavy, though not as severe as those of our Home battalions. These latter showed a patient fortitude and enduring courage, together with a marvellous capacity for quick recovery after any rest, and a cheery confidence and readiness to 'go in' again, which I do not think was equalled by any troops in Europe, Allied or enemy. I think that these great qualities of the race, still found so firmly planted in the Home Land, have never been sufficiently recognised.

The Australian officers and men had shown a fine spirit, not only in attack, but in the steady courage which is required to stand up to constant shelling day and night and to repel frequent counter-attacks. Their commander, General Birdwood, was always easy to work with. Their Chief Staff Officer, Brudenell White, was most capable, highly trained, and possessing withal great tact and sound judgment which made him one of the best Staff Officers we had in the Army. Talbot Hobbs and Herbert Cox, commanding two of their divisions, were especially fine Divisional Commanders, being resolute and calm of judgment. But it was time they had a rest, and they were now replaced by the Canadians under General Byng.

Although no attacks on a grand scale were made between the 3rd and 15th September, constant fighting took place, principally due to German counter-attacks, but also to the necessity of straightening our line, of getting rid of the enemy's 'strong points' and his salients which penetrated into our position. Of such minor attacks, the two principal were carried out by the 11th Division, which had now come in to relieve the 25th. It carried out two successful assaults which closed in a little further our encircling grip on the doomed fortress of Thiepval, taking at the same time about 120 prisoners. These attacks were carried out at 6.30 p.m. and 9 p.m. respectively.

During all these operations the hour of attack was constantly changed, and we never made a habit of attacking at dawn as became the custom later on; by this means the enemy was more liable to be surprised. We were only able to adopt this plan because in the chalky soil of the Somme battlefield the trenches had been made so broad and deep that troops moving up into them were always completely concealed.

On the 15th September an attack on a large scale was carried 15 *Sept.* out by the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions, with the Fourth



Army in close co-operation on our immediate right. I went over to see Rawlinson to arrange details and ensure a thorough co-operation between the two Armies. During all the period of the Battle of the Somme our liaison with the Fourth Army was close and friendly. Haig also had frequent conferences with us and constantly visited us, going into the details of our plans.

Before this attack of the 15th I held a conference with my Corps Commanders and explained to them that our operations were dependent on those of the Fourth Army, and that by advancing eastwards we enlarged its front, but at the same time we broadened our own to the north, and while still leaving Thiepval severely alone, we were getting into a favourable position to encircle and cut it off. We were gradually gaining a situation which would menace all the German garrisons in the Ancre valley between Beaumont-Hamel and Miraumont, and eventually we would threaten Serre, another very formidable position north of the Ancre.

For this attack the direction of our advance was now altered, and instead of being generally northward against Mouquet Farm and Thiepval, we attacked eastward and north-eastward against Courcellette, with our right on the Albert-Bapaume road. The Fourth Army extended the attack south of this road, thus including the village of Martinpuich in the sphere of its operations.

This attack, to use a colloquialism much in vogue at the time, was 'a howling success.' The net result of the combined action by the two Armies was the driving of a deeper wound into the heart of the German position, while at the same time the Reserve Army extended by some 2000 yards that part of its front facing north and outflanking the enemy round Thiepval, Beaumont-Hamel and Serre.

As far as the Reserve Army was concerned, the attack on Courcellette on the 15th September was the first occasion on which Tanks were employed—six Tanks co-operating with the Canadians.

The appearance of this formidable adjunct to our battle weapons was in great part the result of Swinton's ideas which he had outlined to me over a year previously, when I was commanding the 7th Division.

About fifty Tanks were now available, and the majority of these were employed under the Fourth Army, seven only being allotted to the Reserve Army. Of these numbers, a total of

seventeen Tanks never reached their starting points, but six went on with the Canadians—starting half an hour after the infantry. Many were ditched or knocked out by shell fire, but those that were able to reach the German points of resistance (such as the Sugar Factory near Courcellette) had an immediate and decisive effect on the enemy, who in most cases ran away. They fully proved their value and effectiveness in assisting the infantry, though, being a new weapon, it was only natural that many defects were revealed. Their co-operation in battle, under favourable circumstances, can be decisive. But perhaps it was a pity to use them on the 15th September—when decisive results were not possible and were not being sought. Coming as a complete surprise and employed on a much broader front, in far greater numbers, they might have materially assisted in bringing about a great decision. On the other hand, without experiment and experience in actual battle, any commander might well have hesitated to base his plans on an unknown quantity. The same problem had been presented to the Germans in the first use of gas, and their solution of it was the same—to see what its effect would be on a comparatively small scale before committing the fate of whole armies to it.

## IV

Preparations were now made for a final assault on Thiepval, on the high ground to the north-east (including the Schwaben Redoubt) and as far eastward as the north of Courcellette. Several preliminary steps, however, had first been taken.

The 18th Division came in and took over the line immediately south of Thiepval, with a view to co-operating in the next day's attack. This division, trained and commanded by Sir Ivor Maxse, had already made a brilliant debut by capturing Montauban on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, in the XIII Corps of the Fourth Army. Although it was a new division, no division in the Army was more efficiently trained, from its commander, through its Staff, down to the regimental officers and men. Maxse had an immense capacity for grasping the important points in training and the new military operations which this modern form of warfare was forcing upon us. Quick and energetic, with a great capacity for work, he did not suffer fools gladly, but at the same time he never failed to encourage initiative among his subordinates; he drove them

hard, but one and all, long before they had finished their experiences of fighting the Germans under his command, realised the soundness and the value of his training, and thanked him for it.

This division from now onwards had perhaps a longer unbroken record of success than any other division in the Army. It was due, I am sure, to its thorough training, its elaborate care in the organisation, the preparation and carrying out of all attacks, and the fine spirit inspired by its commander.

26 Sept.  
*Thiep-  
val.*

At 12.35 p.m. on the 26th September the great and final attack on Thiepval was delivered and carried to a successful conclusion. The operation involved four divisions on a front of about 5000 yards. From right to left, or from east to west, these were the 2nd and 1st Canadian Divisions, the 11th and 18th British Divisions.

The Reserve Army had not so far been in a position to attack on so broad a front or to deploy so many divisions. The front of attack was well supported by artillery, and from many positions south-west and west of Thiepval we swept the defenders in enfilade and exposed them to a heavy cross fire.

The attack was entirely successful; the great fortress of Thiepval, which had repulsed us on the 1st July with such a bloody loss, fell at last after nearly three months of desperate, bitter, hard fighting. We had fought slowly northwards against its flank, threatening the rear of the defenders, and maintaining all the time a grinding pressure on them. In spite of the magnificent courage and steadfastness with which the Germans fought, and which deserves all praise, we had gradually worn down their capacity for resistance and established a respect, and even a fear, of the British Army which influenced all the future plans and dispositions of the German Command.

The final assault made on this broad front was more successful and less costly than many of the preliminary and minor operations had been.

27 and  
28 Sept.

On this day and the two following days, the 27th and 28th, Thiepval fell, most of Schwaben Redoubt fell, and we carried the Stuff Redoubt and Mouquet Farm. This farm, which had repulsed the Australians for many weeks, held out till 6 p.m. on the 26th owing to the deep cellars in which its garrison was securely sheltered until our barrage lifted. Its fall was finally due to a working party of the 6th East Yorkshire Pioneers, which took it on its own initiative, capturing one German

officer and fifty-five men, the last remnants of its brave garrison.

We were now established on the highest ground in the neighbourhood; we dominated the valley of the Ancres as far to the east as Miraumont, and we overlooked all the high ground almost as far east as Bapaume. Furthermore, in addition to the heavy casualties in dead and wounded which were inflicted on the enemy, we captured in this final attack 2329 prisoners, not far short of the total prisoners captured during the Battle of Loos in three weeks' heavy fighting.

During all the three months of fighting, the Air Service had been increasingly active and efficient. Fighting was not confined to operations on the ground and in the muddy trenches. Much went on in the air. Gradually and surely our Air Service established a moral and material superiority over the enemy, though at the cost of many gallant young lives. But the work done was invaluable—especially in the direction of 'blanketing' the enemy's observation of his artillery fire, while they assisted, guided and directed ours most helpfully. No one of the complicated miscellany of services which comprise a modern army so commanded the respect and admiration of the infantry as did our Air Service. There was reason in this judgment, for the tasks undertaken involved technical efficiency, a great degree of initiative, unparalleled nerve-control and intrepid courage. In spite of the high casualties among the young officers involved, it is a matter for race pride that we continued to find young men in more than adequate numbers eager to take the path which offered what was perhaps the greatest individual sphere of adventure in the whole of the War.

Under General Sir H. Trenchard's energetic leadership and inspiration, no system of 'star-turns' was encouraged; every pilot had to carry out his job, his duty, when his turn came. Thus we maintained a very high level of excellence and a resolute courageous spirit throughout the whole Air Service. The adoption of a system of 'star-turns,' of 'aces' in the air, or of 'storm troops' on the ground, may lead to some brilliant exploits, but it is a wrong system, only to be adopted by those realising their average failing strength, and it does not maintain a high average sense of duty and efficiency. Though both the French and the Germans adopted the system of 'star-turns' and 'storm troops' we steadily refused to follow down this path, and I am sure that we were right.



Plans for the further continuance of the offensive on a grand scale had been contemplated by G.H.Q. in which, besides the Reserve Army, the Fourth Army on our right and the Third Army on our left were to take part. These plans aimed at seizing all the high ground in front of Bapaume, and entailed an advance of five miles or more into the heart of the enemy's position. Orders were issued for this attack to take place on the 12th October. A large number of Tanks were to be employed for the first time on this occasion with the Reserve Army, though, as stated before, we had had six placed at our disposal to help the Canadian attack on Courcellette. By the 4th October, however, the heavy rain which was still coming down upon us, and the general weariness of all the troops of both the Fourth and Reserve Armies which had been engaged in this great battle, caused the abandonment of the plan, and instead it was decided that the Fourth Army would now devote its attention to consolidating its positions for the winter.

For the Reserve Army, however, another operation was still possible—the clearance of the valley of the Ancre, where we had forced our adversaries into a very uncomfortable situation.

8 Oct.

The final attack by the left of the Fourth Army was made on the 8th October and was successful, but the 1st and 3rd Canadian Divisions, who co-operated on their left, were repulsed with heavy loss after a most gallant effort. They had now been fighting continuously since the first week of September, constantly exposed to a terrific bombardment of the enemy's concentrated artillery, and the three divisions which had so far borne the brunt of the struggle were requiring a rest.

Meanwhile, the Germans, realising that the possession of the high ground north and east of Thiepval threatened and dominated their positions, were making constant counter-attacks to retake it. But our men (the 39th, 18th and 25th Divisions) resisted with such energy that in a large number of these counter-attacks the enemy left from 50 to 350 prisoners in our hands—a sure sign of their failing energy. These counter-attacks were nearly always made with the assistance of flammenwerfer. We never made a general practice of this form of warfare, though it was used once in Delville Wood by the Fourth Army. It can be very effective at close quarters,

and it has always amazed me that our men so successfully resisted these assaults.

On the 17th October the Canadians were at last withdrawn 17 Oct. for a well-earned rest, leaving, however, their 4th Division to fight under the orders of the II Corps, and to take a glorious part in the final victory of the Somme in the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel, which took place on the 13th November. This was the last occasion on which the Canadians fought under my command. My first experience of them had been as early as May 1915, when a brigade under General Turner, V.C., came to support the 7th Division at the close of the Battle of Festubert. They were then desperately keen, wanting to renew the attack, which had by that time arrived at the usual position of stalemate, and I had some difficulty in preventing them rushing in too early. By September 1916, although their resolution, courage and initiative remained as strongly marked as ever, their judgment had matured, they understood war as it was being fought in France, and in consequence they were something more than gallant soldiers—they were now experienced veterans. Of their Divisional Generals, Currie—tall, big, calm and self-reliant—afterwards commanded the Corps very successfully. Lipsett, who was a Regular soldier and had been one of my students when I had been a Professor at the Staff College, was simple, cheerful, not easily rattled, as well as a highly trained officer.

The Army was now organised as follows: the II, V and XIII Corps in the line, while the IV Corps under General Henry Wilson, which now came under my command, was in reserve. At this time, Walter Congreve commanded the XIII Corps. Very spare and lightly built, a frame giving evidence of the frailty of his constitution, a firm and very English countenance, with an indomitable and courageous will, a character which could remain outwardly unmoved at times of great personal sorrow or of immense responsibility and danger, an energy which made him active of body in spite of ill-health, there were few generals in the British Army who surpassed him as a commander.

On one occasion I went to see him when he was suffering from bronchitis and asthma; I found him huddled up in bed and wrapped up in woollen shawls, a small, thin, frail body, but with his eyes shining eagerly he said, 'Hubert, don't have me replaced; I shall be all right and going about in a week.' As I

looked at that frail frame it was very hard to believe that even his great spirit could carry it so far as to enable him to be tramping in the trenches and carrying out his duties as a Corps Commander within one week, but it was so. And indeed I am glad, and the Empire may be glad, that he remained to carry the responsibilities and provide the very necessary leadership till at least after the Battle of St. Quentin in March 1918.

About this time the 63rd Naval Division came under my orders, and its commander, General Paris, was wounded by a shell within the first few days of being in the trenches. The men of this division, although soldiers—in fact among the finest of our troops—loved to think and act as if they were sailors, adopting all the nomenclature and ceremonies which belonged to the sister service. They always flew a white ensign at their Headquarters. They always talked of the lorries taking men away on leave as 'The Liberty Boat.' They always saluted with their hand the reversed way to the Army. These idiosyncrasies sometimes inspired a puzzled irritation in the officers under whose command they came, and I am not sure that I myself at first always looked upon them with entire approval. I very soon, however, appreciated their real worth, and I know that few things are more conducive to self-respect and therefore to efficiency, or deserve more encouragement and sympathy, than the desire of men to establish a spirit of individuality, or what is also called *esprit de corps*. Any idiosyncrasies which tend to bind military units together in bonds of self-respect can quite safely be looked on with very tolerant eyes, even though they may not be in strict accordance with military regulations.

The operation now under consideration by the Reserve Army aimed at making a converging attack northwards from the II Corps front, and an attack due eastwards from the V Corps front. We originally aimed at the capture of Miraumont and Grandcourt, but as the rain continued to pour steadily down, and winter came on, our objectives became more and more restricted. There were parts of the shot-torn line opposite Beaumont-Hamel where the men sank up to their knees in mud. The pace of the artillery barrage for the contemplated attack was now reduced to a lift of 100 yards every five minutes, so that the men need not advance faster than 20 yards in one minute in order to keep up with it. Such were the difficulties

of ground and weather with which we had to contend! The attack, which was originally intended to take place about the middle of the month, was again postponed to the 24th October owing to the rain; but meanwhile our artillery bombardments and steady wire-cutting continued.

We had on the Reserve Army Staff at this time Lieutenant Livens organising and supervising the use of gas. He had a genius for improvising new devilments, and he worked out a method of throwing into the enemy's trenches gas cylinders which emitted an enormous quantity of gas as compared with the small amount of material on our part which it involved. Livens was one of those enthusiastic scientists who devote their minds and energies entirely to their work, regardless of the outside world, and on one occasion when Malcolm and I walked across to see how he was getting on with his experiments near our Headquarters at Toutencourt, we found the atmosphere reeking with some of his gas. We thought it was so dangerous that we asked him if it was safe or wise to fill the surrounding area with quite so much gas. He assured us it was quite all right and would injure no one. As this needed some explanation, I asked him what was the reason for his confidence—upon which he said with the calmest air, 'Oh, I put some over that football ground [which happened to be alongside his experimental station] while they were playing football, and they did not mind!' We took advantage of his inventions to add to the pressure that we were bringing upon the enemy at this period, and under his supervision we threw over 2300 lbs. of gas on the night of the 28th October into the enemy's position near Beaumont-Hamel. These cylinders were makeshift things at the best and were shot out of extemporised mortars which could only throw a short distance, but on bursting, the cylinders emitted a high concentration of gas, and thus caught the Germans before they had time to put on their gas masks. The mortars had therefore to be installed in the front line trenches, and getting them, and the cylinders, up and into position called for very considerable courage and determination on the part of Livens and his men.

On the 14th October some small operations for the final clearance of the northern half of the Schwaben Redoubt were carried out, and one company of the 8th Loyal North Lancashire Regiment (25th Division) captured 100 prisoners—which must have been more than the number of our men actually



attacking—while another two and a half battalions of the 39th Division captured nearly 300 the same night.

21 Oct.

On the 21st October an attack was delivered by the II Corps with the 4th Canadian, the 18th, 25th and 39th Divisions on a front of nearly 5000 yards; this attack was not aimed at gaining ground to any great depth, the object, however, being to straighten our front for a final attack and clear the enemy off all vantage points. This attack was highly successful and succeeded in taking over 1000 prisoners. Immediately after this, the 25th Division was withdrawn from the front line; and with reference to the remarks I have before made about this division, it is interesting to quote from the weekly report which was sent in to G.H.Q.: 'This division has been constantly engaged in the offensive on the Reserve Army front since the 3rd July with only one period of rest in a back area; except for one occasion it has been invariably successful; it has fought splendidly and its spirit is excellent.'

30 Oct.  
*The  
Fifth  
Army.*

On 30th October the title of the Reserve Army was officially altered to the better known Fifth Army. Our birthday may therefore be said to have been the 23rd May, when our future rôle was envisaged by the title of Reserve Army, but 30th October was the day of our christening. There was no time available for celebrations, however, and our intensive preparations were continued without interruption. Actually, of course, the change at this date was but one of name.

3 Nov.

On the 3rd November the date of the attack was again postponed indefinitely owing to the continuous rain. All these postponements were very trying to the troops detailed to take part in the attack, and put their characters and steadfastness to a further severe test. The situation on the II Corps front was particularly arduous, for here the enemy had continually concentrated the main weight of his artillery bombardment during the last three or four months. The troops of this Corps stood also on newly-conquered ground, extending to a depth of nearly 5000 yards, with no tramlines, no roads, no paths leading over a morass of water-logged shell-holes and churned-up mud. Over all this area everything had to be carried up by hand—food, wire and ammunition for thousands of men. The state of the roads in the back areas was also terrible. These had never been metalled, but served their purpose for the French inhabitants in times of peace. But now that the crowded and enormous heavy traffic of a great war and a long continuous

battle was thrown on to them, they would have completely collapsed but for the strenuous, almost desperate, efforts of our engineers, our administrative staff, our working parties and even the lorry-drivers themselves. The difficulty of getting lorries forward was immense—every road had to be metalled, and thousands of tons of material for this purpose had to be brought up from railhead.

About the 8th November the rain ceased, although the weather remained cold and foggy. However, it did give the ground a chance of drying up to some extent. The date of the attack was now fixed for the 13th November.

On the afternoon of the 8th, General Kiggell, Haig's Chief of Staff, came to see me and discuss the general political and military situation in view of the projected attack.

A conference of Allied Commanders, he said, was to be held in Paris on the 15th. Kiggell pointed out that the heavy losses entailed by the fighting on the Somme and elsewhere were making their effects felt at home, and sorrow, suffering and anxiety were undoubtedly weakening the resolution of some people. Murmurs were heard in the country. Mr. Lloyd George, always sensitive to the breath of public opinion, was already feeling a lack of confidence in Haig and was no longer giving him his whole-hearted support; in fact, it is not too much to say that he was already intriguing against him. Talk of the responsibility of finding another Chief was in the air, and suggestions were seriously made that we should fight our main battles in some theatre of operations other than against the principal and, in fact, the only enemy which counted—namely the Germans.

A change in the strategy which had so far guided the British and Allied Councils might have far-reaching and disastrous consequences, but if the power of the British Army could be demonstrated, and it were possible for the Fifth Army to win some success before the date of the conference, the Chief's position in maintaining the right policy would be materially strengthened, and an atmosphere of greater confidence created. On the other hand, a failure would have the opposite effect.

I received a second visit from General Kiggell at 10 o'clock on 10th November, and the situation was again discussed at length. He was now doubtful of success, and the possible effect of mud on the movement and on the spirits of the troops

depressed him. The decision to attack or not was left in my hands. It was a very fateful one, for at stake were not only the lives of my officers and men and the reputation of Britain's arms, but very far-reaching repercussions on the general political and military situation. I stated my opinion that the time had now come for us to decide between two perfectly definite alternatives: either attack on Monday the 13th as arranged, or definitely and finally abandon all idea of further attack that winter.

Further postponements would have a bad effect on the officers and men before whom loomed this great task, and to keep them longer in doubt would be most unfair. It seemed to me that the responsibility placed on my shoulders was a very heavy one. I can remember our sitting at a small deal table in my poorly furnished room that I used as a bed-sitting room. My Headquarters were in a farm at one end of the village of Toutencourt, and as Kiggell gravely elaborated the great issues at stake, and my mind turned over the tactical situation of my troops and that of the enemy, I gazed out of the poky little window looking on the dull and dirty courtyard, and considered what my decision should be.

I decided in favour of making the attack. On the one hand we were faced with the handicaps due to wet, to tired troops, to the delays and postponements which had already taken place, and the risks of another collapse of the weather. On the other hand were the great tactical advantages of our position, the elaborate preparations, and the vastly superior *morale* existing among our troops at that time. I came to the conclusion that the latter considerations outweighed the former and justified the delivery of the attack.

As a result, I held a conference with my Corps Commanders and the final plans and objectives were decided upon. Provided there was no more rain, we were to attack on Monday, the 13th November, at 5.45 a.m.

At 4 p.m. on the Sunday afternoon Haig came to see me, and we discussed the final plans.

At 9.30 that evening I had my final conference with the two Corps Commanders, Generals Jacob and Fanshawe, to discuss what might ensue if the attack was very successful. If events proved extremely favourable, the capture of Pys, Miraumont and Grandcourt would be attained, but nothing could be definitely decided; we were to await the issue.

At 5.45 a.m., in a dense white fog, the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel opened. 13 Nov.  
Battle of  
Beau-  
mont-  
Hamel.

On the right, south of the Ancre, the II Corps attacked with the 19th and 39th Divisions. North of the Ancre the V Corps attacked, from south to north with the 63rd (Naval), 51st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions, and on the extreme left the 31st Division under the command of the XIII Corps.

Since our capture of Thiepval and all the high ground about it at the end of September, we had been able from these vantage points to pour a heavy and well-directed bombardment on the German flanks, not only in the valley of the Ancre, but north of it, round and behind Serre and Beaumont-Hamel—thus aiding the operation of the V Corps considerably.

By 8.50 a.m. the II Corps had gained all its objectives and captured over 1000 prisoners. North of the Ancre, the Naval Division and the 51st Division carried all before them. The 2nd Division and the 31st Division were also successful, and it was a particularly fine performance on the part of the 31st, as it carried all its objectives, although owing to the failure on its right it was eventually left isolated in the captured German trenches. The 3rd Division, however, which was faced with a veritable quagmire in its front, was repulsed, but only because the men were unable to keep close to the barrage—this in spite of the fact that they were only required to advance at the rate of 20 yards a minute. Mud was on this occasion, as on so many others, our greatest difficulty, our most unconquerable enemy.

In the 3rd Division individuals and small bodies, however, did reach as far as the fourth German line, where, exhausted by the labour of getting through the very sticky clay, their rifles caked with mud and useless, they were unable to maintain their position when counter-attacked in very considerable force, and eventually fell back to their original lines.

Further south, however, where the going was not so heavy, the attack made great progress. The 2nd Division carried their first objectives. The Highlanders of the 51st Division captured Beaumont-Hamel, killed many of the enemy, and took a great number of prisoners. The 63rd Division on the right pushed right through the front system of the enemy's trenches, though pockets of the Germans still gallantly held out. By 10.30 the men of the 63rd Division had reached their second objectives and posted themselves just west of the village of Beaucourt.



Here the division was completely isolated, and it remained so for nearly twenty-four hours. The tenacity of the troops was of the utmost value and exerted a great effect on the operations, the success of which was largely due to their efforts.

During the afternoon the enemy's artillery fire became very severe on the captured positions. Throughout the day there had been a heavy mist, and all aerial observation was rendered impossible, so that it was often very difficult to locate the position of our own troops. Everywhere the ground was very muddy, and the German trenches were found to be even worse in this respect than our own. In some places in the German lines our men sank so far into the mud that they had to be  
14 Nov. pulled out. At 6 o'clock next morning the 63rd, 51st and 2nd Divisions renewed the attack, captured Beaucourt and established the line east and north of that village.

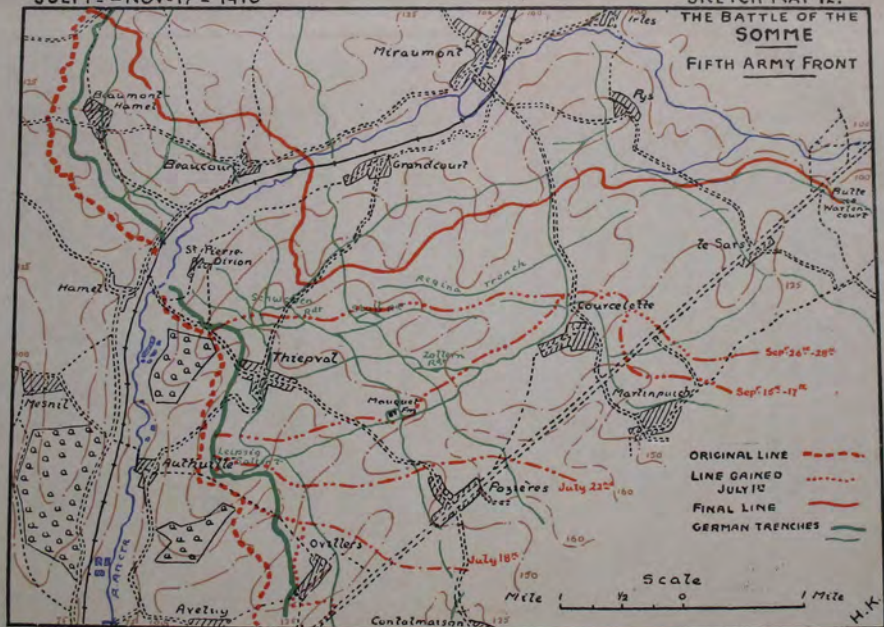
After that, little further progress was made, and eventually the battle died down, but like all battles it was followed by a period of heavy shelling and much bitter fighting on small fronts, owing to counter-attacks on the part of the enemy, or to endeavours on our part to straighten and adjust our line.

During the evening of the 14th I went up to see how our centre was getting on in the direction of Beaucourt. It was nearly dark as I passed the village of Beaumont-Hamel and found that we were already remaking the road. It was a sea of mud, and the Blues and the Life Guards were hard at it working on the repair, taking old and broken bricks from the ruins alongside and stamping them into the road. I pulled up and had a talk to my cousin Robbie Hamilton Stubber, who was in command of the party. I chaffed him about the work I found him engaged on—very different from doing a Royal escort or Guard in London, but at the moment a good deal more useful. From him I found the location of the nearest Brigade Headquarters. They were established in a very well-built German dugout in a steep embankment near the roadside about a mile to the front. I walked in and climbed down a good many steps in the dark to find the Brigadier, Reggie Barnes, and his Staff sitting round an extemporised table, studying their reports and their problems in an ill-lighted and damp sort of cabin. Very surprised to see me, I found them all quite cheerful in spite of being faced with innumerable difficulties inherent to heavy shelling, a stout defence, tired troops, mud and confusion.



JULY 1<sup>st</sup> - NOV 17<sup>th</sup> 1916

SKETCH MAP 12.  
THE BATTLE OF THE  
SOMME  
FIFTH ARMY FRONT



It was during this battle that Bernard Freyberg, commanding a battalion in the Naval Division, gained the V.C., for his courageous leadership and for the immense energy he displayed in reorganising the disordered troops and carrying them forward in a further advance.

The total number of prisoners taken amounted to more than 6300, with about another 1000 during the ensuing week, which, added to the 1000 which had been captured on 21st October, were part of the fruits of a remarkable victory, and gave some indication of the staggering blow the enemy had received at our hands.

The Fifth Army received a telegram from the Commander-in-Chief congratulating us on the great results obtained:— 'Under such difficulties of ground, the achievement is all the greater, the accuracy and rapidity of the artillery fire and the full advantage taken of it by the infantry were admirable.'

Remembering Kiggell's words, I knew that Sir Douglas Haig's message was no formal courtesy, but a deeply-felt congratulation. For my part, I was glad to know that the result of the battle was not confined to the very severe defeat we had inflicted on the enemy.

## VI

By the 19th November the orders were issued for winter 19 *Nov.* quarters and training, and for the organisation of a strong defensive line behind our newly-won positions. By the end of the month the front was thinly held, and as many troops as possible withdrawn to the rear; all plans for a further offensive were abandoned and arrangements were made for the comfort and training of the troops during the winter.

The II Corps was withdrawn into reserve and its place was taken by the IV Corps.

In the share of the Battle of the Somme which fell to the Fifth Army a large part of the burden was carried by the II Corps. It continuously carried on operations involving heavy fighting, from the middle of July till winter finally overtook us. This called for an immense amount of mental and bodily energy, facing great anxieties, and overcoming an infinity of difficulties and worries, and all the time carrying heavy responsibilities. That Sir Claud Jacob and his Staff had



met all this with such marked success proved their aptitude for war.

The Battle of the Somme and its attendant operations may now be said to have closed. It had undoubtedly shaken the German Army very severely, and it had done a great deal to relieve the French from the pressure round Verdun.

The figures of the prisoners captured and casualties suffered by the two Armies principally engaged were as follows :

	<i>Casualties.</i>	<i>Prisoners Taken.</i>
Fourth Army . . .	227,194	15,630
Fifth Army . . .	125,531	17,723

These figures do not include the losses of the Fourth Army or the prisoners taken on the 1st July, nor those of the Third Army, which made a subsidiary attack at Gommecourt before the Fifth Army had become an entity.

The figures for the 1st July are :

	<i>Casualties.</i>	<i>Prisoners Taken.</i>
Fourth Army . . .	51,021	5,260
Third Army . . .	9,674	Nil

Thiepval was reckoned by the Germans themselves as one of the most formidable points on the whole of the Western Front, and it was strongly held by a garrison of picked and determined men. Its capture, and the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel, may be said to have crowned the operations of the Battle of the Somme.

Superficially, the results of this battle may appear disappointing when compared to the high aspirations which preceded the first attack. But the measurement of success by the capture of so many square miles of ground is often a false standard in war. The real matter for consideration is to be found in the facts that the German Army had received the most severe defeat of its career, that its most strongly fortified positions had been captured, that large numbers of prisoners had been taken and far larger numbers killed and wounded, while the strategical object of taking pressure off the French had been achieved. What is just as important, the spirit of the German troops was greatly affected by our continual advance, a consideration the importance of which can hardly be exaggerated. We have it on the authority of the German High Command itself that the German troops were so shaken by the

merciless hammering they received on the Somme that by the end of 1916 their *morale* was lower than at any time during the War except in the closing months. Ludendorff, in fact, has stated that the Battle of the Somme brought the German Armies, for the first time, to the verge of collapse, and is grateful to the autumn rains for extricating him from a precarious position. Furthermore, the worth of the British citizen-army had been proved beyond all possible doubt; our troops gained enormously in experience, battle-value, and confidence, and by the end of the battle were convinced that they could beat the much-vaunted German Army in the field.

The Battle of the Somme was thus one of the foundation stones on which the advance to victory in 1918 was built. The Fifth Army had cause to be proud of the part it had played in the battle; against immense difficulties it had never relaxed its courageous endeavour, and in tackling most difficult problems its officers and men had shown rare degrees of gallantry and initiative. Born amid the stress of battle, the Fifth Army had already proved itself a lusty child, and its reputation was solidly established. In attacking through a sea of mud along the Ancre it had accomplished what Ludendorff had described as 'Impossible.' Its casualties were not high compared with those of attacking forces throughout the whole of the War, and its Staff work and general organisation reached high levels. Not only had the men of the Fifth Army exhibited the highest degrees of personal courage, but their value as soldiers was greatly enhanced. The raw levies of Britain had become veteran troops, their initiative tempered with a just caution, a dour determination replacing reckless bravery. This battle experience and the confidence inculcated by victory, coupled with the corresponding decline in the German *morale* caused by continuous defeat, led to revolutionary changes in casualty figures before the end of the battle. The men of the Fourth Army, attacking on 1st July with utmost gallantry, suffered over 50,000 casualties in capturing 5260 prisoners. On 13th November the 39th Division alone of the Fifth Army took over 1000 prisoners at a cost of less than 700 casualties!

Battle experience is often ignored in the calculations of military critics. Even Staff Officers sometimes fail to give it the consideration it deserves. It is perhaps not too much to say that this essential experience gained in the titanic combat of the Somme was the basis of our future victories. Had the

British troops not been taught by bitter experience to have confidence in themselves and in their leaders, then subsequent history would have been vastly different. But from 1916 British commanders knew exactly what could be expected of their men. Confusion owing to the employment of raw troops—as at Loos—was a thing of the past. The British Army had now a large and constant nucleus of seasoned veterans.

## CHAPTER VII

### SPRING 1917

*Distinguished Visitors—The General Situation at the End of 1916—  
The Calais Conference—The Hindenburg Line—Plans for 1917—  
The German Retirement—The Battle of Arras—Subsidiary Operations  
by the Fifth Army—Nivelle's Failure—The British Burden.*

#### I

THE capture of Thiepval had aroused the keenest interest in Allied quarters, and established a very high reputation for the Fifth Army. One of the outward signs of this was to be found in the succession of distinguished visitors who came to see me at my Army Headquarters. Among the first was Monsieur Clemenceau, who paid me a visit about the middle of October, and remained as my guest for several days. Old man as he was, he tramped up the steep climbs and over the muddy shell-holes of Thiepval and the neighbouring battlefield accompanied by one of my Staff. He looked like a sturdy old farmer, wearing a rusty dark suit, a coloured muffler round his neck, a soft hat, and using a thick stick. A big flat nose and very grizzled hair were his outstanding features; he never became animated like many Frenchmen, nor was he a great talker as one might have expected, but we had many interesting talks in the evenings after dinner—for we seldom met during the day, both of us going our respective ways.

After his departure he sent me the following letter, written in an execrable hand:

PARIS, 19<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1916.

MON CHER GÉNÉRAL,—A ma retour à Paris, je ne puis résister au désir de vous exprimer tous mes remerciements pour le cordial accueil que j'ai reçu des officiers placés sous vos ordres, comme de vous dire toute mon admiration des magnifiques troupes que vous commandez. J'ai vu sur le plateau de Thiepval ce que vous en pouviez faire.

Croyez moi, mon cher général,—Tout à vous,

E. CLEMENCEAU.



I was also awarded the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour by M. Poincaré, who was then President of the French Republic and who came up from Paris to the Chief's H.Q. to give it to me.

Poincaré was a small man, dressed in a short blue tunic with a stand-up military collar hooked up round his neck instead of an ordinary collar and tie, dark blue breeches and black gaiters. He looked something between a chauffeur and a photographer. Nevertheless, their appearance did not give the true measure of either Clemenceau or Poincaré. Their strength of character has left its impress on the policy and destinies of France. They may have carried through policies which may not be to her eventual prosperity and happiness, but France and her interests were their sole aim, and those interests they safeguarded according to their lights, in the teeth of all opposition.

The King of the Belgians also came to visit the Fifth Army and to view the battlefields of Thiepval and Beaumont-Hamel. I took him up in my car as far as the Ancre, but from there we walked up the steep hillside of Thiepval. A rolling sea of wet muddy shell-holes, with a few bricks peeping out of the mud here and there, and three or four gaunt stumps of trees were all that was to be seen of the village. From there we walked on to the Schwaben Redoubt, where we could overlook both battlefields—seeing as far as Serre and Achiet to the north and away to the east the crest of the great plateau on which stood Bapaume, while in the valley below us lay Grandcourt, Miraumont, Pys—or rather the heaps of broken bricks which represented them. He was most interested in the description of our operations, and with the eye of a true soldier he could appreciate the ground and the influence it had exerted in all our struggles.

It was shortly after this that Sir Douglas Haig called me up and told me that Lord Northcliffe wished to pay me a visit at my H.Q. and asked if I would receive him. I made some polite excuses, for I was aware that there was a vast amount of intrigue being carried on in London against Sir Douglas Haig. I knew that such intrigue weakened his position and added enormously to his burdens, already immense, at a time when he, as Commander-in-Chief, should have looked for and received the support of his Government, and of the people of Britain. Moreover, just at this time I became aware that, as one result of the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel, my name was occasionally

to be heard in the whispering galleries of Paris and London as a possible successor to Haig. I felt very strongly that any change would only weaken the Empire in its struggle and that if we were to win the War we could not afford to change the Chief. I knew that to do so would have been little short of suicidal, for no other soldier could claim the qualifications, the great resolution, energy and solid military knowledge possessed by Haig. No one else could have commanded the confidence of the Army to anything like the same degree. I feared, perhaps on insufficient grounds, that Northcliffe was a party to these intrigues, and I did not wish to have any part or parcel in them, and I knew that if he came to stay with me as my guest for several days it would be very difficult to avoid this. I thought it best, therefore, to refuse his request. But now, looking back, I think I was wrong, for it is essential in the conduct of great wars that the superior commanders should exchange views with those Ministers and civilians who influence or are responsible for policy. War is now too vast an affair to be dealt with only by the soldier, and equally it is so complex and the results are so dire that the responsibility of civilians for understanding something of the soldier's problems is far greater in our days than was the case a century or more ago. Each should thoroughly understand the other's point of view and listen to their frank opinions. The politician, the soldier and the civilian should be firm friends, working together in complete confidence in the atmosphere of a happy family. They are all working for the one cause, they all come from the same stock. It is only when such an atmosphere exists that the best results can be hoped for. Anyhow, I now feel that if I had agreed to Northcliffe's visit I could at least have endeavoured to do something to clear his mind of the impressions which he often gathered from very irresponsible and sometimes self-interested individuals. An atmosphere of greater understanding and confidence between soldiers and civilians might have resulted, which would have had a beneficial influence on the conduct of our general operations. If I failed to do something to achieve this essential object, I can now confess that I am sorry.

Colonel Repington also made an effort to pay me a visit at this time, but I looked on him, I fear, as too much of an intriguer, and quite firmly intimated that I was too busy, which was true, and so that visit also did not materialise.

## II

*General  
Survey,  
End of  
1916.*

It is convenient here to attempt a brief survey of the general situation which faced the country and the Allies at the close of 1916. We had now been at war for two years and five months. During this period almost the whole of the countries of Europe had gradually been drawn into the struggle, in most cases placing all their manhood under arms. The British Army had made an immense increase in its strength, a great and noble effort of the British people. Untrained as a large proportion of our men had been, there existed a nucleus of experienced officers and N.C.O.'s all over the Empire who were able to undertake the training of the new levies. The natural characteristics of the British race, its love of adventure, its courage, its capacity to endure, and its inherent respect for discipline and law—all these had made it far easier to train its sons to be efficient soldiers in a shorter time than any one could have thought possible.

By far the largest portion of the financial burden had been accepted by Great Britain from the commencement of the War, and by 1916 the principal share of the military burden also was to fall on to her shoulders.

We have seen that the Battle of the Somme shook the German Army to its foundations. It shattered the legend of its invincibility, it gave a startling and shining proof of the fierce courage, stern endurance, and military training of the British troops.

Abundant proofs of this in the minds of the enemy were constantly received. By the end of 1916 we had in our possession an enormous number of German letters which displayed their discouragement. From a mass of these I have taken a few extracts at random :

'From morning till evening very heavy artillery fire. We can thank God if we come through this.'

'Apparently as soon as the English get a fresh wagon-load of ammunition they fire it off at us. The enemy's captive balloons look straight into our trenches, aviators are busy and guide the enemy's artillery fire.'

'For almost a week this most awful heavy artillery has been bombarding, one is prostrated by the most terrible suspense, waiting for the awful fire to cease ; in this way one becomes a nervous wreck.'

'We are now near Thiepval, it will soon be unbearable ; sooner or later, *morale* will be done for.'

'Our regiment was suddenly taken from Flanders and flung into the Somme district. Ten days I endured that hell and then came to the end of my strength.'

'I was on the Somme. Such a slaughter of men as there was there I have not yet experienced, for in two days our division was wiped out.'

And from the Fatherland the following gives some indication of the cry of distress which was wrung from the German people:

'How long is this horrible murder to go on, and always no prospect of peace coming soon ?'

'I see from your letter that you have gone with your regiment to the Somme, I firmly trust that Heaven will protect you.'

'There at Thiepval and Pozières the English want to break through on the road to Bapaume. Everywhere it is quite frightful. If only their superiority does not become too great.'

'You wouldn't believe how things are at present, hundreds of people stand in front of the butchers', cheesemongers' and egg shops. Each person gets one egg a week, sometimes none at all. We don't get sugar any longer. It is high time the war ended.'

'There is really nothing, not even when one has the money to get anything. No sugar, no fat, not an egg, no milk, no meat, nothing at all.'

Taken as a whole, the factors of the problem as 1917 dawned were favourable to the Allies, and the prospects of an early victory were by no means unpromising.

The Russian armies were still strong and better equipped than previously. They could apparently be counted on to play a great part and to occupy the attention of a good proportion of the Armies of the Central Powers in spite of the great defeats they had suffered in 1915. Although the shadow of the Revolution was hanging over Russia, it was not as yet clearly evident.

The French armies, however, were nearly exhausted. Joffre realised this fact, and in preparing the Allied plans he looked to the British Army to play the principal part. The offensive was to commence in February.

Two months before the projected date, however, new complications arose, completely altering all previous ideas and arrangements. The French Government removed Joffre from command: this was indeed a great mistake ; he was replaced by General Nivelle, who confidently asserted that he possessed



the secret of victory, and that the French troops were capable of gaining it. In order to permit of the necessary preparations for Nivelle's operations, the date of the offensive which Joffre had planned to commence in February was postponed till the middle of April, thus giving the Germans two more months to prepare their defences, and of this delay they took full advantage.

The opening months of 1917 brought in their train two other events which changed the face of affairs much to the advantage of the Germans.

The Russian revolution broke out, and on the 15th March the Czar abdicated. These happenings immediately weakened the Russian Army, and though it did not entirely collapse at once, the Germans were able to discount it to a large extent and to hurry divisions across to the Western Front.

The Russian revolution was a tremendous stroke of luck for the Germans, but the second advantage was of their own making. They had prepared a line which cut off their big salient towards Noyon, thus considerably shortening their front, and by retiring to this in February and March they were able to economise further divisions to meet the Allied offensive.

By March, therefore, the situation was not so bright as it had appeared some months previously. Though we were not aware of it at the time, Hindenburg and Ludendorff succeeded during 1917 in raising the *morale* and the fighting spirit of the German Army to something approaching its old high standard. They found it at the end of 1916 depressed and dispirited—almost a beaten army. Their influence succeeded in restoring courage, resolution and hope among their troops. It was undoubtedly a very great personal triumph, and preserved to Germany for at least another year its chances of winning the War. The release of divisions from Russia had temporarily solved the question of man-power which the Battle of the Somme had forced on the German Command: the contraction of its front, too, enabled it to increase its reserve force. In spite of these acquisitions of strength to the enemy, Nivelle persisted in his claim that he held '*la recette de la victoire*,' in the attack on a grand scale which would make a clean break through the German lines and lead to open warfare within forty-eight hours at the most. Far-seeing commanders like Pétain and Haig were not to be swept off their feet by such talk of immediate victory. They knew their own strength, but they did not undervalue

that of the enemy, whose worth they had learned by bitter experience. Nevertheless, as was his invariable custom, Haig prepared to co-operate with his new colleague to the utmost of his resources.

Immediately on his appointment, Nivelle began to work out plans for a decisive offensive on the Western Front. The French were to play the main rôle by attacking northwards on a forty-mile front between Rheims and Soissons, while the British were to make a secondary attack from the neighbourhood of Arras a few days previous to the French and thus, it was hoped, draw off German reserves and eventually join hands with the hoped-for French advance in the vicinity of Cambrai-Laon.

This was a far-reaching scheme, and to Nivelle must be given the credit of being among the first to realise that an attack on a scale hitherto unknown was essential to the achievement of decisive success. No one could quarrel with his ideas, but serious misgivings could legitimately be entertained as to his ability and the power of the French Army to carry out the plan. In French political circles, however, great hopes were nourished of Nivelle's capacity to end the War by a sudden and comprehensive stroke. Military opinion was divided; some of his subordinate generals were enthusiastic over the plan, some lukewarm, and others—including experienced commanders like Pétain—openly incredulous.

It was in the first flood of French enthusiasm for the new scheme that Mr. Lloyd George came into contact with Nivelle. The newly-appointed British Prime Minister had openly expressed his contempt of our military leaders for their 'lack of imagination,' which, he thought, only led to a war of attrition: he did not realise at that time that even victories inevitably entail casualties. He was openly nervous of the opinion that the War could only be won by prolonged fighting. And now, there suddenly appeared a great military genius, who promised to defeat the Germans with one stroke, and to end the War with a minimum of fighting. Furthermore, Nivelle had an invaluable asset in the eyes of Lloyd George. He was a fluent talker. He expressed his opinions and explained his plans clearly and with confidence. Lloyd George loved a fluent talker, and he was impressed by explanations and arguments delivered in high-sounding phrases which had an air of profundity and astuteness, even though he was unable to weigh their real worth, and he

preferred to have them stated with conviction, though that conviction might have no more profound foundation than the deep tones of the voice delivering the judgment. Haig did not fulfil these requirements; he was not a fluent conversationalist or debater; his judgment was usually far superior to his spoken justification of it: Robertson was little better. In fact, of the British Staff only Henry Wilson had a fluent tongue, to which he owed the confidence which Lloyd George placed in him. On the French side, the phlegmatic Joffre had refused to argue with politicians at all! But Nivelle made up for all. He had a succession of high-sounding paragraph headings—the use of '*violence, de brutalité, et de rapidité*'—the brusque rupture and the clockwork-timed advance—and these he could expound in easy periods and resounding phrases. He had one other great advantage: the son of an English mother, he spoke English fluently. Thus, for the first time, Lloyd George was able to discuss military affairs with a foreign commander without the restrictive aid of an interpreter.

I do not wish to be unfair to Nivelle. He had fought well and successfully at Verdun, and his plan in its broad outlines, though in part a replica of Joffre's of the previous year, was sound enough. But the soundness of his conception was completely nullified by the lack of secrecy. All Paris talked of the coming offensive—its details, its locality, its date, were discussed, and when Paris talked it was not long before Berlin heard. Lloyd George now came to the conclusion that the safety and honour of British arms would be in better keeping in the hands of the French than in those of Haig, and in Nivelle he saw his opportunity of placing the British Army under a French Command.

In the plot that followed, Lloyd George showed the worst aspect of his many-sided character. I use the word 'plot' advisedly, and I am sure that the reader of the following pages will agree that no other description is possible.

On the 26th February a conference was called at Calais, which was attended by Mr. Lloyd George and the French Prime Minister, as well as the military chiefs of the two countries; Robertson (as Chief of the Imperial General Staff) was also present. The ostensible object of the conference was to discuss the unsatisfactory working by the French of the Chemin de Fer du Nord, and to try to increase its efficiency for the purpose of the British Army. Haig had therefore brought Sir Eric

Geddes, then the newly-appointed head of our Transportation Services.

Very little discussion took place on this particular subject, however, and Lloyd George relegated it as rapidly as possible to the consideration of a small committee. A discussion of future plans then arose, and Lloyd George pressed Nivelle, who seemed reluctant to say much, to go further into this matter; eventually Nivelle said something about the command in France and the importance of 'unity,' although he qualified this by saying that he never had had any difficulties in getting on with Haig. It was now getting late, and Lloyd George broke up the meeting by asking the French to retire and formulate their proposals in an hour. On the return of every one to the conference room, the French produced a typewritten document setting forth their proposals (see Appendix I.).

These proposals, briefly summarised, were, that the command of the British Army should be handed over entirely to the French, and that our Army should be represented only by a Chief Staff Officer (who would presumably have been Sir Henry Wilson) and the Quarter-Master-General on Nivelle's Staff. Through these intermediaries Nivelle's orders would be transmitted to British Generals.

The British General Staff Officer on Nivelle's Staff would refer all questions to the War Council at home, and the British Generals in the field would have no direct communication with the Cabinet. Everything would pass through the channel of the British Staff attached to and under the orders of Nivelle.

It is amazing to think that neither Haig nor Robertson was given the slightest warning that these revolutionary proposals were to be laid before them. Haig told me that both Nivelle and Lyautey (who as Minister of War was also present) strongly affirmed to him after the conference that the idea had not originated with them and that it emanated from Lloyd George. Thus a minor conference to consider the reorganisation of a French railway was diverted at a moment's notice to the improvisation of decisions which were of vital importance and which, had they been actually adopted, might have lost the War!

All this, of course, was a close secret at the time, and the French statement printed in the Appendix has not, to my knowledge, been published before in England. Thinking people will study it seriously, and will immediately understand its tre-



mendous implications. This was a very different affair to the power of general control that was accorded later on to Foch. Nivelle was to be given, in effect, complete command of the British troops. The martial spirit of the French nation is beyond dispute, but consider for a moment the situation as it would have presented itself to the eyes of a French commander, especially after the losses and destruction of the French troops due to the disastrous failures of Nivelle's attacks. It would have appeared essential that the brunt of the fighting during the rest of the year must fall to the lot of the British Army, and it might well have been thought absolutely necessary to distribute British units all along the French front. In such a case the British Army as a whole would have ceased to exist.

We may ask, what would have been the attitude of the Dominions Governments and soldiers in such an eventuality? And what of the responsibility of the Cabinet for the British Army? Moreover, political considerations always enter largely into all French plans, and their politicians look far ahead at any situation which may affect French interests. In some circles in France there was undoubtedly a fear that a powerful British Army established in the North of France and sitting on the Channel Ports might tempt the British Government to retain them in the final settlement. Such ideas seem ludicrous to Englishmen—and indeed they were absurd—but nevertheless they existed in France and thus they must be taken into account.

There is little doubt that this astounding document was prepared before the conference met, and that Lloyd George had at least full cognisance of it. It scarcely seems possible that it could have been discussed and drawn up *ab initio* during the hour for which the French retired. The scheme is too complete and comprehensive, and betrays the signs of careful preparation rather than those of hurried improvisation.

It was an outrageous proposal. The generalship, the Staff work, and the tactical efficiency of the French did not, at any period of the War, compare favourably with the British, though it was fashionable in the Government circles of the day to believe that it did and to declare its superiority.

The French doctrine had proved fallacious, and they had met with reverses and repulses more costly than the British had suffered. There was no valid reason whatever for believing them to be superior, and certainly no one believes it now.

Even as early as 1915, the interests and the losses of the British had been more or less immaterial to the French. But now, and still more so later on, after the disastrous failure of Nivelle's attack, such matters would have received little or no consideration. The French Army had to be spared and protected, and the British would have been employed unsparingly to attain this end. As it happened, these very considerations largely influenced Haig's plans and operations in 1917. We need not grumble, we can indeed be proud that we had the strength and the fortitude to undertake the task; it was necessary to the winning of the War, and that was the first consideration. But if the British Armies in 1917 had been under French command, instead of that of Haig and our own Staff, the losses would in all probability have been considerably greater.

British interests as regards the Channel Ports, our home communications and the war at sea would have received scanty consideration. The safety of Paris would always have been of far more importance in French eyes than the security of Calais and Boulogne.

Finally, where would our national prestige have stood, and where would have been the power of the British Empire to influence the peace settlement, as was not only her right, but her duty? It is impossible to find any justifiable explanation of this pro-French and anti-English bias which Lloyd George displayed, but perhaps he has lived long enough to realise, at least in part, his error.

It is fortunate for the Empire that this unseemly proposal was laid before two men of such solid character as were Haig and Robertson. The firmness of their protests was such that Lloyd George became frightened of the consequences, and the project, most fortunately for this country, was dropped. In its place was substituted an infinitely milder scheme, whereby Haig was to place himself under the general direction of Nivelle for the period of the coming offensive: this was a vastly different proposition, and was the forerunner of that on which Foch's later authority was based.

It is not surprising that the events of this Calais Conference irretrievably shattered Haig's faith and confidence in Lloyd George; this mutual mistrust naturally increased the difficulties of conducting our military operations very seriously, bringing us at times perilously near to disaster, as the Fifth Army and myself were to learn to our cost.

It was indeed a disaster in itself that the two principal leaders of the British, Mr. Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, and Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief, did not understand each other better and had not more confidence in each other. For this unhappy state of affairs Mr. Lloyd George must be held primarily responsible. With all his great gifts and political courage, he did not possess the gift of getting on with his military commanders, or of inspiring them with confidence in himself. He was never sufficiently frank with Haig to inspire confidence, and in addition to the shock Haig received at the Calais Conference, Lloyd George's ill-concealed admiration and preference for French generals and French soldiers naturally added to Haig's doubts.

On one occasion in the early spring of 1917 when I happened to go to G.H.Q. to see Haig, I noticed for the first time in my experience of him that he showed signs of being worried and anxious. He said to me, 'Of course if they [the Government] don't approve of me, they had better appoint some one else'—and then glancing at me, rather suspiciously it seemed, he added—'Is it going to be you?' He then went on to say that Mr. Asquith had been most unjustly and unfairly blamed for his conduct of the War. 'I can tell you, my dear Hubert, speaking as Commander-in-Chief, that there is no question as to which was the better Prime Minister to serve under, Asquith or Lloyd George. In Asquith I always found a loyal supporter, and there was no suggestion which I made for the benefit of the Army or for the more efficient conduct of our operations that he did not do his best to carry out; but with Lloyd George I can feel no confidence, and far from meeting my wishes and supplying my wants, he places every obstacle in my way, and in fact he hampers the conduct of the War.

'The efforts of Asquith were always directed to the support of Britain and the British Army. He was proud of the Empire and he trusted Britain and British soldiers. But Lloyd George has more confidence in the French and is far more apt to rely on the advice of their generals than he is on me, and it is therefore very difficult to maintain British interests in the military field and to safeguard the security, the honour and the prestige of the British Army, when I can find little or no support in the Prime Minister.'

I need hardly say that before I left Haig that day I was at pains to convince him that I had played no part whatsoever in

the chatter which was suggesting my name as a possible successor to him, and I let him know that in my opinion his removal from the command would be a disaster of the first magnitude. Before we parted, any tiny seeds of suspicion which he may have inadvertently harboured had completely disappeared, and we continued in our normal relations of complete confidence and frankness.

Lloyd George's mistrust of Haig was in great part due to the heavy losses which we had met with during the Somme and the battles of 1915. It does not seem that he was aware of the still greater losses the French had suffered in the various operations they had undertaken, nor indeed what the War, even at this date, had cost the Germans. He thought there was an easy and cheap way to victory. But once a people accept the challenge of a numerous, an efficient and a courageous enemy, ably led, victory can only be won at the cost of heavy fighting and giving proof of superior efficiency, endurance and courage. It is a vital truth—though an unpalatable one. It is indeed impossible to win great victories over a powerful enemy without corresponding losses. The sooner this is universally realised and thoroughly comprehended, the greater the incentive to Peace.

It has been suggested that if all the losses which we suffered during our many battles in the early years of this War had been avoided, we would have been in a much stronger position towards the end of the War to obtain a great and final victory. But would we? This argument overlooks the fact that if we had not fought these battles, our Allies would have fought alone and the Germans would have been saved the terrible losses that we inflicted on them. Their troops also would have been in greater numbers, and in an incomparably higher state of *morale*. Is it conceivable that their army, under such leadership as they possessed, with their men fresh, in great heart, and the initiative in their hands, would have remained quiescent, awaiting the hour when it would suit us to attack them? The thought is ridiculous. They would have attacked the Allies in some vital direction with the utmost violence and vigour, and then eventually in defending ourselves we would have suffered the same losses that we endured in our offensives, but would have run incomparably greater risks; furthermore, the moral ascendancy would have passed to the enemy, and the prospects of an Allied victory been long delayed.



III<sup>1</sup>

Although as soon as possible after the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel we went into what may be described as winter quarters, with as many men as possible withdrawn to the back areas, we were still able to harass the enemy considerably during this winter and to make minor improvements in our positions. This was due in great part to the depression which the Battle of the Somme had created among the German troops, and partly also to the fact that they were preparing for their first great retreat since the Battle of the Marne.

*First  
Dis-  
covery  
of the  
Hinden-  
burg  
Line.*

Early in 1917 the Fifth Army air squadrons first discovered that the Germans were constructing a powerfully-fortified and heavily-wired new line which cut off their salient, whose apex extended as far south-west as Noyon. This new system of fortifications lay roughly from the front of Arras to the front of Soissons, and was approximately 70 miles long, and it was eventually known as the Hindenburg Line.

It was evident that it must have called for the employment of a vast amount of labour and much material. It needed no great mental effort on the part of the General Staffs of the Allied Armies to arrive at the conclusion that the Germans had constructed this powerful line with a purpose, and that they were intending to give up the large salient including Noyon and fall back to this new front, which would both considerably shorten and strengthen their position.

During the early months of the year the Germans were more intent on the elaborate preparations which they made for their retreat than on holding their line very strongly. The Fifth Army therefore was able, by keeping a watchful eye on them and pressing them whenever opportunity offered, to capture nearly 2000 prisoners from the enemy by a series of minor operations during the months of January and February.

The beginning of the winter had been 'beastly,' to use a mild colloquialism: rain, sleet and snow, piercing winds, a bitter and penetrating dampness, these were the prevailing conditions. Mud on boots, clothes, hands, rifles and everything one touched was an ever-present and depressing proof of the 'unfriendly' state of the weather.

But in the middle of January we were visited by seven weeks of the hardest frost that I had ever experienced in Europe; the

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 13, p. 180.

thermometer at night once or twice touched zero. How the men in the trenches endured it, is difficult to conceive, but as a matter of fact they preferred dry boots and light and easy walking conditions—quite new to them—to the miserable mud, damp cold and fatigue.

By the middle of February the Australian Corps again came under my orders. It was holding about 6000 yards of line extending south of the Bapaume road in the Fourth Army area, and this line now came into the sphere of the Fifth Army, whose front was thus extended southwards.

During January and February, in pursuance of our aim of clearing the valley of the Ancre, we endeavoured to cut off the Germans who were still holding the two villages of Grandcourt and Miraumont in the bottom of the valley, and we had been pressing steadily forward north and south of the river. By the 8th February the Germans evacuated Grandcourt. On the 17th an attack was made by the II Corps, whose Staff was once again in harness, in which three divisions took part, and this was successful, capturing most of Miraumont with a total of 773 prisoners. 17 Feb.

On the 24th February the first definite signs of the Germans' retirement came to our notice. Patrols found the front trenches deserted all along the front. Orders were issued immediately from the Army for strong patrols, backed up by advanced guards, to be pushed forward as far as possible. 24 Feb.

By the 25th we had advanced 2000 yards, and the villages of Warlencourt, Pys, Ires, Miraumont and Serre fell into our hands. 25 Feb.

By the end of February the Australians were within 2000 yards of the outskirts of Bapaume and the large villages of Puisieux and Gommecourt had been occupied.

The enemy's rear-guards, however, now stood firm for some time. There were two powerfully-constructed and quite undamaged hostile lines of entrenchments facing us, the first, known as the Gréville line, stretching roughly from the village of Bucquoy on the north by Achiet-le-petit, Loupart Wood and the village of Thillois; the other line, from 2000 to 3000 yards behind it, stretched across by the villages of Ablainzeville, Bihucourt, and the western outskirts of Bapaume.

Here the German rear-guards held us till the 10th March. 10 Mar.

On the 14th March the V Corps was repulsed from Bucquoy—an attack which was not sufficiently prepared. I had reconnoitred the front the previous morning and had thought 14 Mar.

that the defences of this village still appeared in too good a state to warrant an assault, and I suggested to the Corps that the attack should be delayed for further preparation, but the commander was confident of success, and as I always allowed a reasonable latitude to my subordinates, the attack was carried out.

18 Mar. By the 18th the Australians occupied Bapaume. All the  
Ba- villages—until now uninjured—between us and the Hindenburg  
paume. Line were in flames.

The advance of the main body of the Army was now stayed for a while, to allow the roads, railways and bridges—which had been thoroughly destroyed by the enemy—to be repaired and reconstructed to serve as our communications.

There was a space of 8 to 10 miles between us and the Hindenburg Line—open and clear of trenches, though many of the villages were held by the enemy and strongly wired and defended.

Now that we were entering again on a phase of open warfare, although it was only for a short distance and a brief period, it was not my intention to allow the Army to move forward in one weak, straggling line without adequate artillery support and supplies: a sudden counter-attack might easily have overwhelmed such a formation: the advance was to be carried out by each corps under cover of properly organised advanced guards, the rest of the corps following in their wake. A cavalry brigade was also ordered forward by the 16th March, to reconnoitre in front of the corps advanced guards.

Every available man not actually with the advanced guards was set to work on the repair and construction of roads and railways, and improving communications. Bringing forward guns and ammunition was a particularly heavy task, and taxed the troops to the utmost, as roads in the shelled area had practically ceased to exist. In many cases field guns and even 60-pounders had to be taken to pieces and pushed by hand over trench tramways, which were laid more quickly than the roads could be constructed. Practically every round of field artillery ammunition had to be carried up by pack-horses; as much as 80,000 rounds of 18-pounder and 20,000 rounds of 4.5" howitzer ammunition, representing a gross weight of 1500 tons, was actually carried up and fired within 7 days. Good progress was made, however, and roads, railways and tramways were soon in a workable condition.

Among other attempts to delay our advance, to harass us, and to inflict losses on us, the Germans had laid many mines, some of considerable magnitude, in places where they were likely to catch us. Many of these were exploded by special delay-action fuses—several days after the German retreat. In other places they were more in the nature of booby-traps. A new shovel would be left lying among a lot of old ones, and some of our men who were keen would be sure to pull the new one out of the bundle; or a duckboard was evidently out of place and an enthusiast for order would pick it up in order to put it straight. Immediately a small mine would explode and two or three of our men might be killed or injured. The Germans showed a great ingenuity in the improvisation of these mines all over the evacuated area. In their thorough and methodical way, they also cut down every tree, not only those along roads, which might be helpful to us to range on with our guns, but also every fruit tree and even every garden shrub.

These steps did not really delay us or help the Germans much as regards the military operations, but they kept alive in our breasts a cordial hatred of our enemy—which was not a very desirable result for the German army to aim at.

The Town Hall at Bapaume was blown sky-high by a delay-action mine several days after we had occupied the town, and several men were killed, notably the *Député* for Bapaume, who had remained at his parliamentary post during the War up to this time, but who was so excited at the recapture of his native town that he rushed up from Paris to inspect the scene of battle. His heroic pose was soon changed into practical martyrdom, for he slept in the Town Hall, and was blown with it into the heavens.

This unfortunate incident seemed to afford some amusement to the officers of the French Mission attached to the Fifth Army, and they were quick to appreciate the irony of fate by which the *Député* was pursued, for after keeping safely in the background during so long a period he was, so to speak, hoisted with his own petard. For days the Chief of the Mission, Major Renondeau, came round to our Staff and, with an air of earnest inquiry, asked if the *Député* had been found.

It may be interesting to give some description of Renondeau here, as he was so well known a figure on the Staff of the Fifth Army, and a very general favourite. Very tall, rather angular and gaunt, dark, with a large bristling moustache, he was of a most kindly disposition; he was much loved—and in conse-



quence, after the British fashion, much chaffed, which never upset his quiet suavity. He was a thoroughly trained officer, with an understanding character, which made him most helpful to us all. He understood the British and their ways, he trusted us and was a most loyal and affectionate friend to Britain.

The main columns of the Army were now again halted for a day or two on the line of Bapaume to enable supplies to be brought up, and communications organised, but advanced guards pushed forward.

*20 Mar.* By the 20th March we had driven the German rear-guards back to a line of big villages, heavily defended, immediately in front of the Hindenburg Line. These formed a very strong outpost position for their main line, and on this date we were repulsed from the village of Croisilles on our extreme left, but on the 24th the Australians captured the village of Beaumetz.

We had again outmarched our supplies of ammunition, and a further attack on these outpost villages was postponed until more artillery support was available. The Germans, however, were by no means passive and constantly attacked us in various places with considerable vigour, but they were always repulsed with heavy loss in killed and wounded, and left a considerable number of prisoners in our hands.

*26 Mar.* On the 26th March the Australians captured the important village of Lagnicourt, with nearly 50 prisoners. On 2nd April an organised attack by the 4th Australian Division and the 7th Division carried six of the villages in front of the Hindenburg Line, the Germans leaving 700 dead and 240 prisoners in our hands, while our casualties only amounted to 1000 all told. We were then able to push forward our advance posts within assaulting distance of the Hindenburg Line.

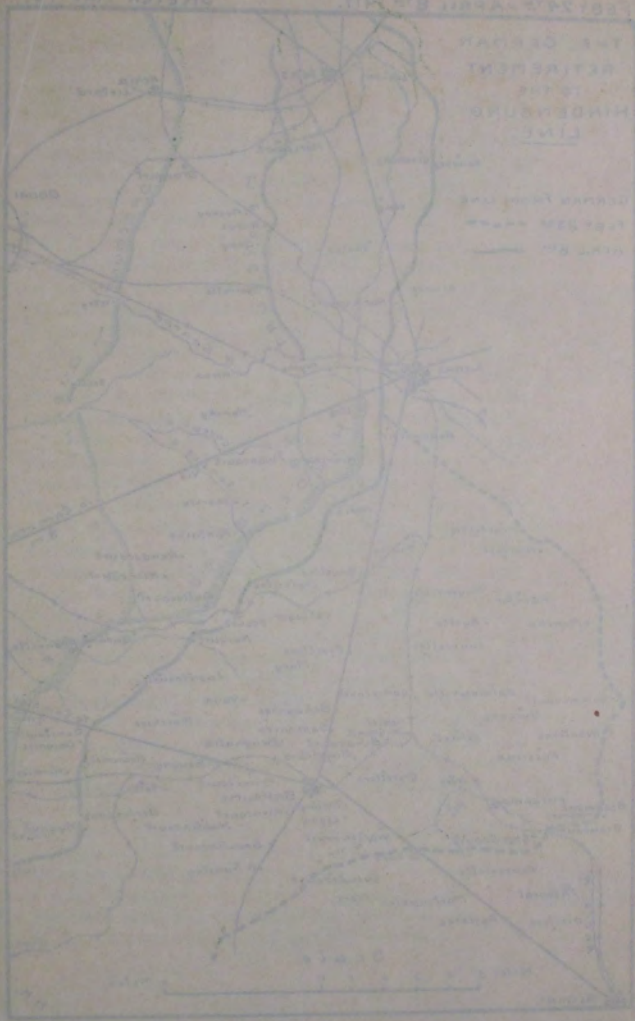
#### IV

The action and functions of the Fifth Army at this period cannot be appreciated without considering the plans of the French, the British Third and First Armies, the orders received from G.H.Q. and the forces at its disposal.

The British Army as a whole was to take an important but nevertheless a subsidiary part in Nivelle's great plan, which aimed at a decisive victory, at driving the Germans out of France, and possibly at Peace in 1917.

The main blow was to be struck (for the last time) by the

THE GERMAN  
RETREAT  
TO THE  
HINDENBURG  
LINE



FEBY 24<sup>TH</sup> - APRIL 8<sup>TH</sup> 1917.

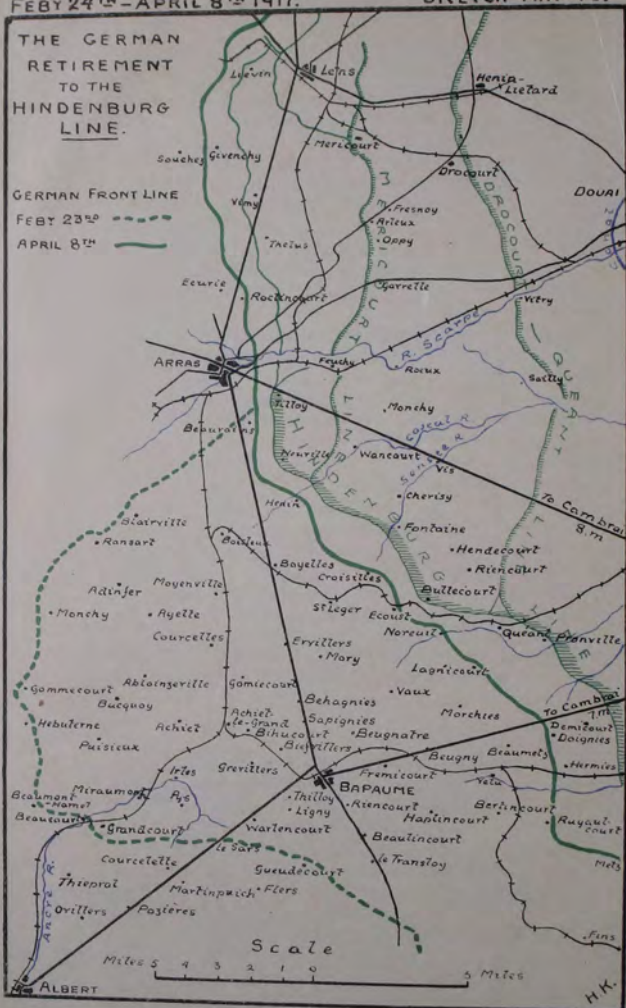
SKETCH MAP 13.

# THE GERMAN RETIREMENT TO THE HINDENBURG LINE.

GERMAN FRONT LINE

FEBY 23<sup>RD</sup> - - - - -

APRIL 8<sup>TH</sup> ———



French under Nivelle. He was to drive northwards from Rheims on a 40-mile front, while the First and Third Armies, on a front of about 14 miles, would advance eastwards between Cambrai and Douai.

This, if successful, would threaten to cut off all the German forces holding the front of about 70 miles between these two attacks. It was in its main outlines a replica of Joffre's plans in 1915, but the Germans were no longer in the big salient pushed down as far as Noyon.

While these preparations were being discussed and worked out, General Nivelle paid a visit to the Fifth Army and inspected some of the troops who were resting and training; he was accompanied by General Lyautey, who was then the French Minister of War.

Nivelle was a man of medium size; the main features which struck me about him were his small, almost slit eyes, and a composed manner which appeared to me a carefully studied pose, and gave me the impression of a somewhat conceited man.

Lyautey was a far more frank, open, outspoken nature, morally fearless, and I am sure equally so physically. A man I could, and did, instinctively trust. He drove out to the inspection with me, and interested me by describing his difficulties with the French politicians, whom he cordially distrusted and disliked. It irritated him to find existing in the Chamber of Deputies the worship of words, phrases and vague sentiments, in opposition to common sense, plain realities or hard facts. He told me that he could, however, address the Senate and find grave, serious and practical listeners, but in the Chamber of Deputies there was so much party feeling, such a desire to catch votes and to strike a popular attitude, and the air was so charged with electricity, that an uproar would arise on the slightest provocation, and that it was very difficult to reach sound decisions or to tell unpalatable truths, however necessary. Very shortly after this he resigned from the Ministry of War and returned to Morocco, where by his able administration he consolidated his already great reputation.

With a view to preparation for the British share in the proposed offensive, all troops and material which could be spared were rightly concentrated with our First and Third Armies, which were entrusted with the main British blow. The Fifth Army was therefore called on to part with some of the divisions, artillery and auxiliary services, and at the



same time its front was extended, thus considerably further reducing the numbers available for active operations. Yet the Commander-in-Chief rightly called upon us to play some part in the scheme—to make ourselves felt, and to compel the German Command to take us into consideration in any plans it would make to defeat the Third Army.

On the 5th February General Kiggell, the Chief of the Staff, wrote from G.H.Q. to Neill Malcolm, saying that the 'Fifth Army was to act vigorously and strike as heavy a blow as possible' in the operations under consideration. To play our part in assisting the Third Army called for some sacrifices. The main problem was to defeat the German Armies, and the mission of the Fifth Army was merely to assist the Third as far as its limited means would admit. Its position enabled it to threaten the flank and rear of the Germans opposing the Third Army, if sufficient resources could be concentrated to make the threat a real one. Just as the attack of the Third Army was subsidiary to that of the French, so the Fifth Army was to operate in support of the Third. If successful, such an attack might be a great embarrassment to the German defence, and in any case it would draw troops from the front of the Third Army. How was this task to be carried out?

By thinning the line and holding a large part of it extremely lightly, some troops could be concentrated for such a blow. This was done, and the front was lightly held—dangerously so, as was eventually proved by the success which the Germans almost gained on 15th April against the 1st Australian Division. When the German attack fell on it, this division was strung out to its extreme limit.

Even with all possible economy in this respect, it was only possible to concentrate sufficient troops to attack this formidable line of entrenchments on a very narrow front, and an attack on a narrow front always leads to difficulties. But in this case, if the Third Army troops had advanced they would very soon have joined hands with ours.

If the attack was delivered in small force (as was dictated by the circumstances) at any distance from the Third Army it became an isolated operation, and the Germans could have ignored it. We therefore decided on Bullecourt<sup>1</sup> as the scene of the attack—the lie of the ground and the short distance from the Third Army making us discard other points.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 13, p. 180.

APRIL 1917

SKETCH MAP 14.

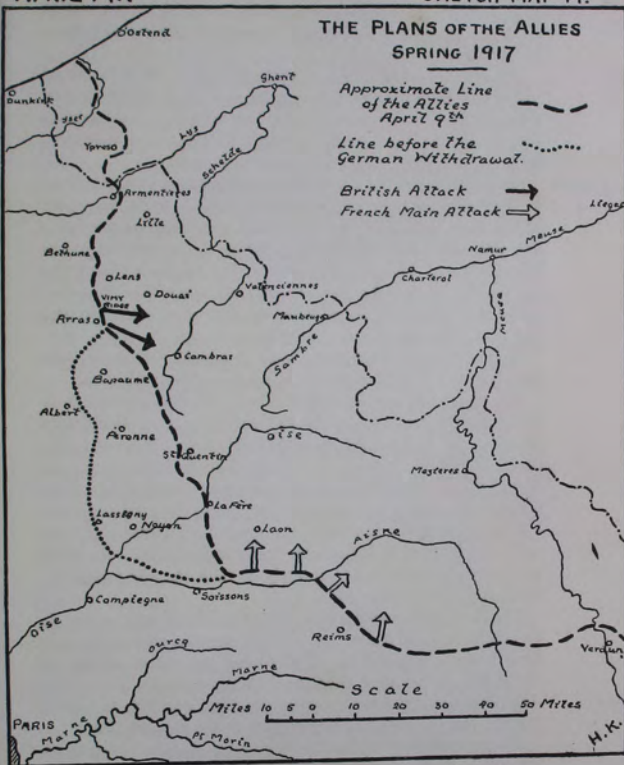
# THE PLANS OF THE ALLIES SPRING 1917

Approximate Line  
of the Allies  
April 9<sup>th</sup>

Line before the  
German Withdrawal.

British Attack

French Main Attack



Such was the solution of the problem set the Fifth Army. Not an attractive proposition, certainly, but the object in war is primarily to assist the main plan—to adopt that course which helps most surely to achieve eventual success. A tactical defeat would be justified if it helped to secure the strategical success of the Higher Command.

The attack cost the Fifth Army a good deal, but if the Third Army had been able to advance its right and centre beyond Fontaine-les-Croisilles and Monchy-le-Preux, then the sacrifices would not have been made in vain. This essential condition, however, the Third Army was not able to fulfil.

9 April. On the 9th April the Australians captured three more villages on their extreme right with over 200 prisoners, while the attack of the First and Third Armies which was launched the same day was extremely successful, so far as the operations of the first day went. They were, however, still a long way from being in a position to turn the Hindenburg Line, and in fact they were never able to push their advance much further after the first day, and thus this line was never threatened.

In accordance with the general plan, the 4th Australian Division attacked east of Bullecourt at 4.30 a.m. on the 11th April.

The energies of our artillery had been directed for some days to cutting the broad heavy lines of wire in front of the enemy's trenches, and bombarding them in front of the village of Bullecourt, and all the guns we could concentrate had been employed on this task. The attack was supported by eleven Tanks, from which great results were hoped. But during the previous night a light fall of snow had made the ground all white, and their dark and lumbering forms were easily seen against this background, and they failed completely to fulfil the great expectations that we had cherished.

The Staff arrangements to drown the noise of their approach by continuous and heavy machine-gun fire also seemed to have been faulty. Six of these Tanks were put out of action by direct hits before they even reached the enemy's wire. The Australians suffered heavy casualties from gun fire, in consequence, but succeeded in penetrating to the support line.

By desperate fighting and heavy counter-attacks the Germans eventually drove them out of the position which they had so gallantly won by a display of courage worthy of all praise.

In spite of this repulse, in view of our co-operation with the Third Army, preparations were continued for the renewal of the

assault on Bullecourt and breaking the Hindenburg Line. If Nivelle's attack had succeeded in gaining all he aimed at, the situation on our front must have altered greatly to the advantage of the Third Army and ourselves, and it was necessary to be prepared for such an eventuality. But for the next week we limited ourselves to bombarding the enemy's trenches and wire cutting. Meanwhile two new lines of defence 1000 yards and 4500 yards respectively behind our own front line were organised and completed.

On the 15th April the enemy made a very strong counter-15 April attack with 16 battalions on the front held by the 1st Australian Division, in front of Lagnicourt. At one time the Germans had advanced so far as to have several of the Australian batteries in their possession, but owing to the sturdy fighting of the advanced troops and the resolute, quick and skilful initiative of those bodies which were in support, eventually by 1 p.m. this attack was completely repulsed, leaving approximately 1700 dead and over 360 prisoners in the hands of the Australians.

Meanwhile Nivelle's attack, from which so much had been expected, had failed miserably (there is no other word), and it was only too obvious that the Germans, having disposed of all danger from that direction, were far from reducing their forces in front of the Third Army, and were now moving up plenty of troops to oppose it, and they had no intention of yielding any further ground.

The conception of a great attack on a broad front was sound—it is the only way to obtain decisive results in such battles where the nations are arrayed against each other, but it failed because of the delay of two months, of the leakage of news, which gave the Germans time to prepare, and also owing to the condition of the French troops. It is doubtful whether they were able to carry through such an attack, although I believe General Maud'huy had said of his men: 'They mean to go—they mean to win—they want to end the War, but I know them—and I tell you if this attack fails they will never fight again.' Joffre, on the other hand, had told the French Government that the French army was '*épuisée*,' and this unpalatable truth was one of the reasons for his dismissal.

The effect of this defeat was disastrous on the *morale* of the French troops. Mutinies of a very serious nature broke out: they were widespread, and the situation was alarming—in fact, General Gouraud is said to have asserted that the situation at



this period was more dangerous for the Allied cause than at any time during the War, before or after. There were, so we are now beginning to learn, about 200,000 troops who mutinied. The French Government was naturally thoroughly alarmed. One of its first steps was the dismissal of Nivelle. His grand stroke had failed, and he became the victim of his over-elaborate promises. I wonder what were the thoughts of Mr. Lloyd George when he heard of the failure and fall of the military genius to whom he had endeavoured to hand over the British Army? But this disillusionment did not, unfortunately, induce Lloyd George to place more confidence in Haig or to work more loyally with him; nor had he the courage on the other hand to dismiss him. Nivelle was replaced by Pétain, who realised the critical situation to the full, and concentrated all his energies on restoring and rebuilding *morale* among his officers and men. But there was no hope of doing this if the French were called upon to defend themselves against any violent and sustained attack. The French Army must have a complete rest, for it was in a desperately demoralised state. After all, during the two and a half years in which we had been creating a great army the French had borne the brunt of the War and had suffered heavy casualties.

Whatever happened, the Germans must be prevented from attacking the French; they must not be allowed to do as they wished, to exercise the initiative. There was only one means of achieving this object—there was only one weapon at that time available to carry out the plans of the Allies, and that was the British Army. By now it was very formidable, it had increased enormously in numbers, in artillery, in experience, and from now on to the end of the War it faced the Germans as, in their eyes, the principal enemy.

Pétain appealed to Haig, in this desperate situation, to pin the Germans down by constant and heavy attacks, and to prevent them launching any serious offensive against the French. The latter must be shielded till the arrival of the American masses should make victory certain—for America had declared war on the 6th April, and had thus thrown her great shadow across the stage. Her intervention influenced the strategy of the combatants in different ways. It encouraged the French to adopt a passive attitude, an attitude which in any case was forced on them at this time by the state of moral depression to which they had been reduced. They hoped now

to have the time to lick their wounds, to rebuild their spirit, while holding the line as quietly as possible.

The effect on the Germans was to make them realise that now, more than ever, it was necessary to win the War within a year. The effect of the War on the economic condition of their people was a pressing reason for bringing the War to an early conclusion, but the threatened arrival of the American armies put a very definite limit to the time available. The Czar had abdicated on the 15th March, and the collapse of Russia which was now imminent freed many of the German divisions, and thus offered them an opportunity. They were not the people to throw it aside.

Under her resolute military leadership it was certain that Germany would endeavour to deliver crushing and decisive blows against some part of the Western Front at an early date. Merely standing on the defensive would not save the French from disaster should the attack fall on them.

The only hope was to oblige the Germans to concentrate against the British. Pétain came up to see Haig at frequent intervals during the ensuing months to impress on him the serious position created by the French mutinies, and he pressed Haig unremittingly throughout these visits to attack and to continue attacking, so as to contain the German Army throughout the summer and autumn of 1917. Haig agreed to do so—a wise and courageous decision. He has been criticised for his action. It can be asked very pertinently of his critics, what would have been the result if he had not done so? An irretrievable disaster would have followed. The War would have been won by Germany before a single American soldier put foot on French soil.

At least, if we could not win the War, we could save it from being lost before the arrival of the Americans. Thus the full weight of this great burden and heavy responsibility fell on the army and the people of the British Empire. Though the Empire suffered terribly, and is still suffering to-day from the losses it met in accepting this burden, we may indeed be proud that we showed the capacity and the enduring steadfastness to carry this weight successfully to the end.

Sir John Davidson, writing in the *Nineteenth Century* of February 1921, says :

This [the attack on Passchendaele] was the bitterest campaign of the whole war, the one in which the British single-handed

shouldered the whole burden and of which the British nation may justly feel proud; the one in which the British held the German Army in its grip, closed with it and fixed it to its ground, thus preventing the enemy from taking the initiative in such a manner as to gain the decision elsewhere.

Haig's conception, however, was not limited merely to drawing the weight of the German attacks off the French until the Americans could arrive. He recognised that the main struggle now lay between the British and the Germans, but he saw, and steadfastly adhered to the opinion, that by the delivery of heavy blows it was possible for the British Army to defeat the Germans at an early date, that such a policy obviated the grave risks of a purely passive attitude, with the initiative for many months left entirely in the enemy's hands, and that an early end of the War would in the long run be far more economical of human lives and national expenditure.

3 May. The Arras battle was therefore continued, and the Third Army planned another attack to take place on the 3rd May. In order to co-operate with this, the 2nd Australian Division and the 62nd Division again attacked the Bullecourt position. The 2nd Australians succeeded on the right, but on the left the 62nd Division failed. It was one of the last divisions to come out from England, and although its men were as stout of heart as any, they lacked experience and training, and their attacking bodies lost direction.

The 7th Division relieved them and renewed the attack, and was partially successful, but next day its units were driven out of the village. Resolute efforts on our part and a desperate resistance on the part of the enemy continued for another week for possession of the village.

It was evident that the Germans placed considerable importance on the maintenance of their position here, but we gradually extended our hold, in spite of a fierce resistance—a continuous ebb and flow of attack and counter-attack. During all this fighting the Australians and the other British divisions were splendid.

17 May. Finally the capture of the village was completed on 17th May by the 58th and 62nd Divisions, which had now relieved the 7th.

This assault, except for an unsuccessful attack by the Third Army on 20th May, was the last incident in the Battle of Arras. Very soon the scene of action was to be transferred to another and vital sector of the British front.

## v

On the 30th April the Commander-in-Chief had held a conference with his Army Commanders. He then informed us that the French plans were now uncertain and there was a tendency on their part to adopt the defensive.

On the 7th May Sir Douglas Haig held another conference with his Army Commanders at Doullens. The Commander-in-Chief now told us something further of his conferences in Paris with the Allied leaders. He said the original plan which had been drawn up by Nivelle was now no longer possible owing to the severe repulse suffered by the French. He also told us the French losses had been very heavy and they could not undertake any offensive movements on a large scale again, that there were possibilities of a change in command and a new policy, which would be defensive in its nature, avoiding losses as far as possible, and merely waiting for the arrival of the American armies.

He did not enter at any great length on the state of the French armies beyond referring to their adoption of a defensive attitude, and then he finally came to his decisions. He had decided, he said, to deliver a blow from the neighbourhood of Ypres with the object of securing the Belgian coast. The French undertook 'in principle to maintain the battle' by methodical attacks; the Italians also 'hoped' to hold the enemy by offensive action; the Russian Provisional Government 'promised' to press forward. In consequence of all this our main effort was to be transferred to the north.

As a matter of fact—although the weakness of the French was the principal factor influencing Haig's decision to continue the offensive—another grave reason vitally affected his choice of its locality. The submarine war had become very acute. The Admiralty doubted whether they could then successfully combat it. Haig was informed by the Admiralty that if the Army could not capture the German submarine bases on the Belgian coast, the Navy could not safeguard the seas.

The Cabinet at home must have known of this. If it did not, for this reason alone, press the Flanders attack on Haig, it must at least have consented to it. It is difficult to see on what grounds the whole responsibility and odium of this attack was placed on Haig—and incidentally, by many people, on me!

For the development of Haig's new plan the first step was to



clear the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge, a task he allotted to the Second Army and for which it had been preparing since early in 1916, in accordance with almost the first instructions issued by him on assuming the chief command.

The object of this was to secure the flank of the 'northern operations,' which were to be undertaken later.

Haig went on to say that it was 'essential to mislead the enemy and to wear him out, therefore the present attacks on our front must continue, but they must be strictly limited, as only tired troops were available. In consequence, artillery fire was to be employed to the utmost, while every economy should be exercised in the employment of the infantry.' (He did not tell us—he dared not make it public at the time—that another potent reason for continuing these attacks was because the French mutinies made it a vital necessity to keep the German Army engaged.)

'A general impression was to be created as far as possible that the Arras front still remained the main battleground.'

Although Haig had made it clear at this conference that operations were shortly to be transferred to the north, the First and Third Armies for these reasons were still actively engaged, and my Fifth Army—weak as it was in comparison to the other two—continued to do what it could to assist.

On the 8th May a letter was addressed to G.H.Q. from my Staff pointing out that

the object of our operations round Bullecourt was to help the First and Third Armies. It was possible that the enemy might concentrate considerable forces on the Fifth Army and drive us out of our precarious hold of the trenches round Bullecourt; but he would not be able to do so without using a great many troops—this would absorb his reserves and would help the general plan and facilitate the advance of the Third Army.

That imperious call for close and unselfish co-operation can be read in this letter. It was a call that at one time or another affected great and small alike; it was a call made on whole nations, on armies, on corps, divisions, and even on individuals, for team work of the most loyal and wholehearted kind, to gain the great and ultimate object, a victory for the country and for the Cause, rather than the safety or success of the individual. The games of our youth made this same demand on us, but in war the call is sterner and more insistent.

For this reason perhaps there is more foundation than is often

admitted for the saying attributed to the Duke of Wellington :  
' The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.'

There was no hope after the first few days of the Arras battle that the Third Army could break through, and perhaps our attacks on Bullecourt therefore had not sufficient grounds for their continuation. The necessities of the French situation were the only justification. I thought at the time that the General Staff at G.H.Q. should have been more active in visiting Army Commanders and learning at first hand their opinions and their general situation. They could then have done more to co-ordinate more closely the operations of adjacent armies. In the Fifth Army the General Staff, represented by myself or by the M.G.G.S., and often both, visited corps frequently during battle periods. A similar activity from G.H.Q. would have been of great assistance. During the battle in March 1918—when their presence with me would have been a great help—no representatives came to see me at all in the course of those eight days, with the exception of Haig himself on one occasion.

The General Staff at G.H.Q. had undoubtedly more to deal with than its organisation contemplated under the circumstances in which this Great War was fought.

The Chief of the General Staff was corresponding with London and the Cabinet, and this added enormously to his work, in view of the friction and misunderstandings which existed. Naval questions also had to be considered frequently. The correspondence and discussions with the French on questions of strategy and the general operations were other heavy calls on his time.

There still remained the very important questions of the operations of the different armies, their proper co-ordination and the necessity of a thorough and intimate knowledge of personalities, and of local conditions. In the circumstances which existed in France, it would perhaps have been productive of better results if a Senior Officer had been appointed as Sub-Chief to deal with each of these three great questions, under the supervision of the Chief of the Staff. Frequent visits to the Army Commanders would then have been possible, which would undoubtedly have been of the greatest value in co-ordinating the operations of the several armies and obtaining a correct and clear understanding of the situation.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BATTLES OF YPRES, 1917<sup>1</sup>

*The Plan of the Operations—Success of the First Attack—Rain and Mud!—The Battle of Langemarck—The Second Army extends the Front of Attack—Subsidiary Operations—The Close of the Battles—Their Results.*

#### I

13 May. ON the 13th May I received orders from Sir Douglas Haig to carry out the northern operations.

The directions I received for my new task were as follows :

The operations were 'for the capture of the Passchendaele-Staden Ridge and the railway Roulers-Thourout.

The object of these operations will be to facilitate a landing between the Yser River and Ostend and, in combination with a force so landed, to gain possession of the Belgian coast.

The front of your attack will extend from Observatory Ridge to (probably) Noordschoote.

The right of your attack should move on the high ground through Gheluvelt, Becelaere, Broodseinde, and Moorslede. As your advance progresses this high ground will be taken over from you by the Second Army, which will then be charged with safeguarding your right flank and rear against attack from the south.

Your left flank should be directed to the south of Houthulst Forest.

In combination with your advance it is intended to arrange for an offensive along the coast from Nieuport, if possible by British troops. It is also hoped that the Belgians may carry out an offensive from Dixmude.

It is unlikely that either the Dixmude or the Nieuport offensive would commence before your advance has made considerable progress.

The Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief wishes you to study the various artillery and other problems connected with these northern operations, and it is open to you to consult with Sir Herbert Plumer and his Staff and to visit the area of the operations.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 15, p. 214.

Orders have been issued for the work on railways and roads to be pressed on, and the railway preparations are already well advanced.

The final allotment of resources is dependent on the operations of the Second Army, on those in the south, and on other uncertain factors. You may, however, rely on receiving an adequate allotment of artillery and on having placed at your disposal the following Corps Headquarters and Divisions:

Five Corps each comprising four divisions, and two Corps each of one division, making a total of seven Corps Headquarters and 22 divisions.

In addition there will probably be one Corps of four divisions in G.H.Q. Reserve in your area.'

Thus the Fifth Army was called on again to undertake the conduct of a great battle, and on 1st June we moved up to La Lovie Chateau, a couple of miles north of Poperinghe. 1 June.

La Lovie Chateau, still quite intact, was a large, pretentious, ugly square building, with a lake in front of it, which must have made it an easy mark for hostile aeroplanes or long-range guns. A Belgian Count and his family were still in residence. He was a soft-looking, unfit little gentleman, and his wife was a gentle and kind little lady. There were sinister stories of their secret influence with the Germans, which was supposed to account for the chateau having been spared from all bombardments when every building in its vicinity had been pretty well knocked about; I do not believe there was a word of truth in these stories, though it remained a mystery to me why and how the chateau escaped destruction.

Within a day or two of our arrival Plumer carried out his very successful attack on the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge, and that afternoon I walked over some of the battlefield close to the village of Wytschaete, which ground I had not trod since the winter's evening of 30th October 1914, when the 2nd Cavalry Division, overwhelmed by superior numbers, was driven out of this position.

On the 6th and 7th June I held conferences with my new Corps Commanders. They were General Jacob of the II Corps, General Watts, XIX Corps, General Maxse, XVIII Corps, and Lord Cavan, XIV Corps. The details of the operations which lay before us were considered, and a slight change in the plan was made; it was proposed to pivot on the left flank with the French, while the right flank advanced along the Passchendaele 6 and 7 June.



Ridge. This would eventually bring our general direction northwards to clear the Houthulst Forest, and Roulers would thus cease to be an objective of the Fifth Army. This plan had some similarity to the operations carried out in the Battle of the Somme, when we first captured Pozières and then pushed northwards against Thiepval. But this similarity would only exist if we were able to carry our right well forward to Passchendaele, as we had done in the Battle of the Somme to Pozières and Courcellette.

As events turned out, our positions became exactly the reverse of that in 1916, for owing to our front on the ridge being too restricted and narrow in the original attack, we were unable to gain sufficient ground there. The more our left pushed forward, the deeper it became buried in a salient, and the enemy could bring a converging and enfilade fire to bear on us from the high ground opposite our right, instead of we on them as in 1916. Even the Air Force felt the disadvantage of this weak tactical position, which was not of our seeking. It was not long after our arrival to undertake the conduct of these operations that Neill Malcolm and I pointed out that the front along the high ridge on our right was not broad enough, and on 4th July our right was extended south of Observatory Ridge down to Klein Zillebeke, an extension of about 1200 yards. But even this was not sufficient to prevent most of the German heavy artillery concentrating on us on the ridge. The operations of the Second Army were not of sufficient importance to force the Germans to distribute this fire, and eventually I had again to point out to G.H.Q. that no progress could be made unless the Second Army pushed on as well. But I am anticipating events.

General principles for the conduct of the troops in the battle were elaborated, and a very clear distinction was made between the necessity and importance of quickness and initiative by subordinate commanders in seizing unoccupied tactical points or those which were only lightly held, and the totally different situation which arises when the enemy is holding his ground strongly. Here impetuous and disordered action was to be avoided and every step forward was to be the result of thorough preparation and organisation, which might require intervals of from three to seven days.

It was also pointed out that the reserves should move up behind the attacking troops, automatically and continuously from the commencement, so as to ensure that they were up in

time to carry out their tasks, and to meet counter-attacks, and also to save the men from being exhausted by hurried movement over long distances.

It was generally agreed that the day of attack should be as early as possible in order to allow the minimum of time to the Germans for preparation. The French stated they would be ready to attack on the 21st July, but my Corps Commanders did not think they themselves would be ready until the 25th July, the deciding factor being the supply of ammunition for the guns. When dealing with the question of Tanks, as these had to work in the closest co-operation with their infantry comrades, I asked the Corps Commanders to encourage the officers and N.C.O.'s of both to get to know each other personally, by visiting their respective messes.

Previous to these conferences I had asked the Second Army to dig the trenches necessary to make our front line as straight as possible and to cover the assembly of the troops, and G.H.Q. had sent up three or four pioneer battalions to do this.

On the 16th June the Commander-in-Chief held a conference *16 June.* at Lillers. At this our Intelligence Department announced that the Germans had 157 divisions on the Western Front, and that 105 of these had been employed and severely handled in the period since the 1st April, covering the French attack under General Nivelle, the Arras battle, and the Battle of Messines. Sir Douglas again impressed on the Second Army that all its resources would be required to protect the right of the Fifth Army.

The original plan had been for me to capture the high ground on my right, as a separate preliminary operation. At this conference, however, I told the Commander-in-Chief that I would prefer to make this attack part and parcel of the major operations, as a partial attack, even if successful, would only throw the troops employed into a very pronounced salient, and expose them to the concentrated fury of all the German artillery, and to this change the Commander-in-Chief agreed.

On the 18th June General Anthoine called on me to discuss *18 June.* the operations of his First French Army on my left. This Army consisted of two corps of picked divisions from the north of France. I liked Anthoine from the first; he was a big, fair-haired man, very cheerful, frank and free in his manners, never suspicious, no 'poseur,' and always willing and anxious to help in every way. He could not be called a typical Frenchman, although he certainly was a very good one. Neither of us

referred to the curious fact that there we were, a British and a French General, discussing the closest and most friendly co-operation in a battle on the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo and within seventy miles of that battlefield.

The French troops arrived late on our front ; they could not get their guns or ammunition supplies into position in time to attack on the 25th July, and to suit them the attack was postponed till the 31st.

This delay of six days turned out to be fatal to our hopes. They were moderately fine days, but on the 31st the weather broke, and for many days the rain came down in torrents, turning the ground into a quagmire.

The operations on the coast were to be under the direction of General Rawlinson and the Fourth Army. The plans included the embarkation of a division in a large number of flat-bottomed boats and a landing near Ostend, with Tanks to assist in the assault on the high concrete embankment which runs along a great part of the Belgian seashore. All these naval arrangements had been worked out by Admiral Bacon. From a mechanical point of view they were distinctly original, but from what I saw after the War of the German defences along that coast, protected as it was by masses of barbed-wire entanglement and carefully-concealed machine guns, it was fortunate for us that this plan was eventually abandoned. One division, however, was sent up to the north specially to train for it, and so great was the secrecy that the whole division was enclosed within a barbed-wire fence, outside of which officers or men were not allowed to pass. In order that the training could be carried out in secrecy but without arousing suspicion, it was given out that the whole division was in strict quarantine owing to a violent outbreak of infectious disease !

The plans for the Battle of Passchendaele (as it was sometimes called) were most thoroughly studied. A memorandum drawn up by Major General J. H. Davidson at G.H.Q. dealt with our operations and was submitted to me. It recognised the fact that a properly-organised attack on such a front as we could operate on could penetrate an enemy's position to the depth of a mile or so, but that after that the attack would be completely held up. Further advance could only be gained by a second deliberate and organised attack, to be followed by others of the same nature. I agreed in the main with these conclusions, and we all realised that, given such a front as that on which we were

attacking, a deep penetration of the enemy's position could only be achieved by a succession of organised attacks, and that we must recognise that several days must elapse between each of these.

Sir William Robertson visited me about this time and I told him that I did not look for 'a break-through' nor for a rapid and spectacular success, but I envisaged a series of carefully organised and prepared attacks, only gaining ground step by step, and that it would be a month (given fine weather), or perhaps two, before we were masters of the Passchendaele-Staden Ridge. At the time he saw the soundness of this forecast.

It soon began to appear that the Germans were strengthening their front in Belgium in order to offer effective opposition. Their artillery fire increased in intensity, and their Air Service was so largely reinforced that it outnumbered ours and for many weeks enemy aeroplanes ventured over our lines and bombed our camps and hospitals in rear, and generally adopted bolder and more offensive tactics than we had previously experienced.

It was perhaps unfortunate that the Second Army's attack on Messines was not delayed and made simultaneously with ours on 31st July, but necessity was our master. Haig had not enough guns, divisions or ammunition to carry out these attacks at the same moment. As it was, therefore, the Battle of Messines served to attract the attention of the Germans to the northern section of the front, and brought a considerable concentration of German troops against the Fifth Army.

A German official account says:

The Supreme Command was long aware of the British plans. A Fourth Army Order of the 9th June impressed on all the imminence of a full-dress British attack on the Ypres front between Boesinghe and in-the-meantime-lost Messines Ridge.

New German divisions were pushed into the front from the 10th June onwards, and fresh counter-attack divisions placed ready. Four fighting groups were organised under the Fourth Army (Sixt von Arnim):

North Group.	Marine Corps, on the coast.
Dixmude Group.	XIV Corps (4 divisions and 1½ counter-attack divisions).
Ypres Group.	III Bavarian Corps (3 divisions and 2 counter-attack divisions).
Wytschaete Group.	IV Corps (5 divisions and 3 counter-attack divisions).



A considerable increase of German strength therefore took place on our front, which was in accordance with Haig's strategical idea of compelling the Germans to concentrate against the British, rather than to attack the weakened and temporarily demoralised French Army.

## II

The plan of attack was settled and the 31st July finally decided upon as the date. The first day's attack was organised in three stages, which were marked on the map by a blue, a black and a green line. The average distance of the first stage, to the blue line, was 1000 yards; the second stage, to the black line, averaged another 1000 yards; and the third stage, to the green line, was about 1500 yards in the centre and on our right, and 1000 yards on our left.

At a conference some weeks before the battle, Haig and his Chief of Staff—Kiggell—met Plumer and myself. We discussed the question of the objective for the first day's attack—in fact, whether we should try to go through, or confine ourselves to a more regular and systematic series of attacks, each with a limited objective. Plumer was of opinion that after so much preparation we should be allowed to go 'all out,' but I was firmly of the opinion that the methodical advance and the limited objective was the sound policy. Haig eventually supported Plumer, and it was decided in consequence that we were to aim at the green line. I think that the more cautious policy would have paid us better; this took into consideration the great strain on the troops, and we should have been better advised had we been content with gaining and establishing ourselves on the black line only. This opinion is abundantly supported by Ludendorff's own account of these battles when he remarks of our later attacks, the depth of which I strictly circumscribed:

The depth of penetration was limited so as to secure immunity from our counter-attacks, and the latter were then broken up by the massed fire of the artillery.

It was hoped, however, to carry the green line, a total depth of 3500 yards or 2 miles. The front of the attack was 14,080 yards or just under 8 miles.

Nine divisions of the Fifth Army were employed in the original

attack and they operated under the Corps as follows—counting from right to left :

II Corps . . .	24th Division.
	30th    "
	8th     "
XIX Corps . . .	15th Division.
	55th    "
XVIII Corps . . .	39th Division.
	51st     "
XIV Corps . . .	38th Division.
	Guards   "

The divisions on our right had been there for a considerable time under the Second Army and knew the ground. The Guards were put on the left, as the first obstacle that the attack would have to surmount was the Canal—the German line being actually along its banks : this would have been a very difficult operation, demanding great skill, and therefore the Guards Division was specially selected for it ; the enemy, however, evacuated the Canal line before the attack and drew back, so the Guards were able to cross the Canal prior to the attack, and naturally this facilitated their operations very considerably.

The French Army under Anthoine extended our left, and attacked with two divisions. The results obtained by their artillery co-operation were very great, and General Anthoine specially supervised this employment. The Second Army, on our right, attacked with one division.

The Fifth Army attacked at ten minutes to four in the morning. The II Corps, although it was attacking along the high ridge, encountered very muddy going which seriously impeded its men. It is curious to find such a situation, but most of us can recall many hilltops which, owing to layers of clay, are more boggy and marshy than the valleys.

This was the case here, and throughout the whole battle the troops on the extreme right met with more difficulties from the mud than those on the left, great as they were over there. The II Corps was never able to use Tanks, which were very often usefully employed by the other corps further to the left, although they were operating in the bottoms of the valleys. Moreover, the German Command had the tactical ability to recognise the vital importance of holding the high ground, and

31 July.  
*Battle of  
Pilkem  
Ridge.*

had in consequence strengthened its troops there very considerably and concentrated a terrific artillery fire on this part of the battlefield.

The first objective—the blue line—was, however, captured by the II Corps with the exception of about 400 yards on the extreme right, but the 24th and 30th Divisions were held up by many strong points and the bad ground, and did not succeed in capturing the second objective. The 8th Division captured both the first and second objectives in accordance with the scheduled time, and started to attack the green line also at the hour laid down; but its right flank being now entirely in the air, it made little headway except on its left.

The XIX Corps on the left of the II Corps captured the two first objectives according to plan and advanced to capture the third objective—the green line—at the proper hour, but the Germans launched heavy counter-attacks which were supported by low-flying aeroplanes. This was one of the first occasions on which they made use of the aeroplane to any organised extent in close support of their infantry attacks. The right of the XIX Corps being exposed, it was eventually driven back to the second objective, in line with the II Corps on its right.

The left division of the XIX Corps, the 55th, which later covered itself with glory in 1918, got on better and not only captured the green line but went considerably beyond it and seized a strongly-defended farm with one officer and 51 prisoners, well in advance of this objective.

The XVIII Corps captured its first two objectives according to the time-table. The right division crossed the valley of the Steenbeck stream, and in some places the leading troops not only captured the third objective, but in their ardour carried forward for over 1000 yards beyond it. The Germans, however, were quick to launch some heavy counter-attacks on these divisions, and eventually the right division was driven back behind the third objective, but the left division remained firmly established upon it. The opposition as we passed from right to left of our line became gradually less, and in consequence the XIV Corps and the French were completely successful in capturing all their objectives.

Quite early in the day about thirty batteries of field artillery were moved forward to more advanced positions, as also a considerable number of heavy batteries. Considering the ground which they had to cross, and the heavy fire to which

they were exposed, this was a very fine feat on the part of our gunners, and gave proof of their energy, their courage, and their anxiety for close co-operation with their infantry comrades.

On the evening of the first day of the battle heavy rain began to fall, and in a few hours it was evident that further operations on any large scale could not take place until the ground had dried up, at least to some extent.

As things turned out, this was particularly galling, for the first day's attack had been decidedly successful; 5626 prisoners and a great many machine guns and minenwerfer had been captured, and our troops had advanced against powerful entrenchments and a prepared enemy to the greater part of their objectives. Before the coming of the rain, the prospect of the offensive had been propitious, but the rain soon destroyed all hopes of success; it fell more or less heavily for the next fourteen days, and the first fortnight of August provided a heavier rainfall than that of the normal wettest month of the year, namely, November. Even then it did not clear up. The latter part of the month was nearly as wet as the beginning. The continuous rain, with its inevitable attendant—mud—was a powerful reinforcement for the enemy. Although it could hardly have been foreseen at the time, the six-day delay due to the unreadiness of the French was to prove fatal to our hopes of immediate success. Actually, the part played by the French in the battle was a minor one, and if an all-British attack had been carried out on the arranged date, 25th July, followed by a second stroke three or four days later, it might have led to a series of successful operations, bearing little likeness to the actual course of events.

### III

In the evening of the 31st July, at 8.45, I had a conference with my four Corps Commanders and we sat down to consider the position. It was eventually decided that we must make several adjustments before we could be in a position to attack with the whole Army again.

It was settled that on the 2nd August the II Corps was to complete the capture of the black line, parts of which were still in the possession of the enemy. On the 4th, the II, XIX and the right of the XVIII Corps were to complete the capture



of the third objective (the green line). The XIV Corps would push forward and capture Langemarck.

We arranged to make preparations to carry out the attacks on these dates, but it was recognised that bad weather might cause a postponement.

Meanwhile the enemy, during the night of the 31st, and all through the following day, made constant counter-attacks against the right and centre with the object of regaining some of his lost possessions. Sometimes these counter-attacks succeeded in driving us back, but our men recountered almost immediately in all cases, and usually succeeded in regaining any ground lost.

1 Aug. The II Corps captured a very strong post known as Lone Star Post early next morning, and this enabled it to make its line continuous from north to south.

2 Aug. On the 2nd August, in spite of the rain, the enemy made two counter-attacks against the left brigade of the XVIII Corps on the Steenbeck, but were repulsed with loss. Another attack was made on the XIX Corps about 1 p.m., and met the same fate. The enemy's trenches were found to have been completely demolished and the wire on his front line was blown practically to pieces, but we were now to encounter a different system of defence, impelled by the terribly wet and muddy ground, and one far more difficult to deal with. It was not possible for the enemy—or in fact for ourselves—to maintain long and continuous lines of heavily-wired entrenchments. The defence now took the form of small machine-gun posts in the most defensible localities and in the driest places, supporting each other. The Germans during the course of the previous two years had also built small but very powerful concrete shelters. These were covered with mud and scattered throughout the desert of wet shell-holes which stretched in every direction. They were impossible to locate from a distance, and in any case were safe against anything but the very heaviest shells.

The farms, most of them surrounded by very broad wet ditches, or moats, had also been heavily concreted within their shattered walls; every one of these was a fort in itself.

The Germans were the first to make such use of concrete in field defences. They were indeed thorough and efficient enemies. Nevertheless, valuable as it was in defence, it could not give them final victory. The offensive was the only means of attaining that end.

In view of the persistent rain, orders were issued late at night on the 1st August modifying all our future plans, and again on the 3rd August our orders had to be cancelled and the dates of future attacks postponed.

The right of the Army not being so far advanced as the left, orders were issued aiming at bringing the II Corps forward to the black line, and for some adjustment on the fronts of the two centre corps, so as to get the whole Army into a favourable position for a further organised advance, which was now postponed till the 16th August.

It was particularly necessary to get the II Corps forward because it stood on the high ground. To swing our left forward and pivot on our right would have been unsound, if not impracticable, with the German observation and artillery overlooking and enfilading our line.

Such were the orders issued in view of the unprecedented wet weather, and the Army as a whole was to make its second attack, not within three or four days as originally anticipated, but only after waiting sixteen days. Meanwhile all our counter-battery work and the bombardment of strong points was also made most difficult, if not impracticable, by our being largely deprived of the use of our eyes owing to the bad weather interfering with flying and the capacity of the Air Service for observation.

On account of the rain and the awful mud the II Corps did not attack again on the 6th, but on the 10th August, when, after heavy fighting, it cleared the numerous defended houses and strong points along a ridge on its immediate front, known as Westhoek.

The enemy command was determined to hold the high ground on this front, and for that purpose had reinforced its garrison considerably. The Germans realised that merely passive defence was not sufficient. They therefore threw their troops forward to constant counter-attacks immediately we had gained any new position. These cost them extremely heavy losses but they delayed and hampered us—nor did we escape our share of casualties in all the fierce fighting entailed by their energetic and resolute action.

On the afternoon of the 10th August they launched no less than five counter-attacks against the front of the II Corps, all of which were repulsed except the last, which forced our line back out of a wood known as Glencorse. The II Corps had now

gained, however, some very important ground, for it obtained excellent observation on the German positions and at the same time it deprived the enemy of the last direct observation over Ypres.

Except for an occasional break, the rain continued to come down steadily till the middle of the month, but before the 16th a few dry days enabled the Army to renew its advance along the whole front.

During the interval, in addition to their other operations mentioned before, the weather, bad as it had been, had not prevented both sides making attacks on small localities and fortified farms, and endeavouring to improve their positions.

*Battle of  
Langemarck,  
16 Aug.*

The attack on the 16th was successful along most of the front, but the II Corps, which had to meet not only greater difficulties of ground, but a more concentrated artillery fire than that which the XIV and XVIII Corps on the left were encountering, was not able to gain all it had intended, strong counter-attacks driving back parts of its line and holding up others. During this day the Germans again made no less than six determined counter-attacks upon the II Corps. They were opposing our advance with resolution and vigour along the main ridge. On the left of the II Corps, the XIX Corps also met with a vigorous opposition, and did not gain everything which it had anticipated.

The XVIII Corps still further to our left was successful, but only after some heavy fighting round strongly-defended farms; before the day was done, however, these were captured. It had been especially difficult to carry two farms named Bulow and Mon du Hibou, and their eventual capture was a magnificent feat on the part of the troops engaged.

The XIV Corps was completely successful; the village of Langemarck was captured in its entirety and the line pushed a little distance beyond it, the enemy's front being driven in on a breadth of 3000 yards and to the depth of over a mile. The French also carried all their objectives.

The state of the ground had deprived our infantry of all support from the Tanks, and in these attacks they were left to rely on their own courage and skill, and on artillery support, for all their successes.

The total number of prisoners captured this day was 2087, with 8 guns.

The attack was not made on nearly so grand a scale as that of the 31st July, and it aimed at much more limited objectives,

but considering the appalling state of the ground, the captures from the enemy reflected immense credit on the great spirit of the troops engaged.

## IV

The state of the ground was by this time frightful. The labour of bringing up supplies and ammunition, of moving or firing the guns, which had often sunk up to their axles, was a fearful strain on the officers and men, even during the daily task of maintaining the battle front. When it came to the advance of infantry for an attack, across the water-logged shell-holes, movement was so slow and so fatiguing that only the shortest advances could be contemplated. In consequence I informed the Commander-in-Chief that tactical success was not possible, or would be too costly, under such conditions, and advised that the attack should now be abandoned.

I had many talks with Haig during these days and repeated this opinion frequently, but he told me that the attack must be continued. His reasons were valid. He was looking at the broad picture of the whole theatre of war. He saw the possibilities of a German victory, a defeat of the whole Allied cause. There was only one Army in the field in a position to prevent this disaster, and that was the British Army in France. On it fell this heavy burden.

A comprehensive view of the general strategical situation showed that the French Army was in no position at that time to withstand a powerful German offensive; at any moment, if the Germans sent some divisions to the Italian front, our Allies there would be driven back in rout—a danger the Battle of Caporetto in October was shortly to bring vividly home to the Allies; it was also important to prevent the Germans administering the final knock-out blow to the Russians, if such were possible.

For about ten days after the 14th August the weather improved, but in the last week of August the rain came down again as hard as ever. The enemy continued to maintain an active defence, constantly counter-attacking with supports and reserves. Nevertheless, we on our side were continuously eating into the enemy's position by the capture of the many isolated and defended farms on his front.

On the 19th August General Maxse with the XVIII Corps 19 Aug. carried out a very successful little operation by making use of



a heavy smoke-barrage and the assistance of some Tanks. On this occasion he captured four defended farms with very slight losses.

22 Aug. On the 22nd August another general attack was made by the three corps on the right—the II, XIX and XVIII. The objectives in this attack had been reduced to those within a short distance of our line, as it was impossible for the men to go forward over any long distance; my object was to spare the troops to the utmost possible degree, while at the same time complying with my orders from G.H.Q. to the effect that the battle must be continued.

The II Corps as usual met with a violent opposition, and counter-attacks were launched against its 14th Division which continued during the 23rd and 24th August, and involved very heavy fighting.

Generally speaking, however, the enemy's front was driven back to a depth of 500 yards.

The Germans now for the first time in the War deliberately bombed several of our casualty clearing hospitals and inflicted casualties among our doctors and wounded. It was during one of these raids that a nurse belonging to the American Army was wounded by a piece of an aerial bomb. It was a curious coincidence that the first casualty of the American Army should have been a woman. Her presence here was accounted for by the fact that the American Staff had very wisely sent on, in advance of its armies, 'teams' of doctors and nurses to gain experience in our hospitals, and this young lady was a member of one of these teams. I am glad to say she was not seriously wounded.

In another hospital a bomb dropped into a tent which was filled with German wounded, and inflicted quite a considerable number of casualties. I confess that I heard of this Nemesis with comparative equanimity.

v

It was now evident that if we were to clear the ridge and get possession of all the high ground, it was essential to extend considerably the front of the II Corps. It was too narrow to hope for a successful advance, taking into consideration the concentration of German guns against it.

It was essential that the Second Army on the right should

push forward and so draw off a considerable proportion of the enemy's artillery fire. I put these conclusions to G.H.Q., and in consequence General Kiggell, the Chief of the Staff, came over to Cassel, and there a small conference was held with myself and Plumer and our senior Staff Officers to discuss the proposition.

Plumer at first did not like the suggestion and demurred, saying that he had been in the salient for two years and 'he had no intention of pushing himself into another.' Kiggell, although a profound military student, did not possess the personality which was necessary to overcome the scruples and objections of Army Commanders, and the matter had to be referred to Sir Douglas Haig, who had been called away.

The latter saw the cogency of the arguments I had put forward, and it was decided that the Second Army should now play a more active rôle. Orders were issued extending the front of battle as far as Zandvoorde, involving an increase of front of about 3000 yards, and including Gheluvelt and Zandvoorde as objects of the attack; the Australian Corps was to come in and take over the front of the II Corps, and the whole attack along the high ground was to be under the orders of the Second Army.

The necessary preparations for this attack took time, and the Second Army could not be ready before the middle of September. Meanwhile the Commander-in-Chief wished the Fifth Army to continue the advance, pushing our left up towards Poelcappelle, and instructed me that the Army must continue to be active and to press the enemy. Before we could undertake any operations, however, we had to get forward artillery positions in the valley of the small but extremely boggy Steenbeck. Until we could get a sufficient number of guns forward I was not prepared to authorise any further attack on a grand scale.

It was about this time that Louis Botha's son, who had been serving with his father, came to France. I wired a special application to have him appointed to my Staff, as I retained a somewhat affectionate recollection of the Boers. I had on one occasion even been Louis Botha's prisoner, but had escaped on my second attempt, after being in his hands a few hours.

The first night young Botha arrived at my Headquarters he sat next to me at dinner, and after dinner, over a cup of coffee, we got hold of a sheet of paper and made a rough sketch of that fight, which we elaborated between us, and it turned out that young Botha, then a boy of only 13, was with his father at the time of my capture.

It was a little curious that we should meet again under such circumstances. Here we were, young Botha serving on the Staff of his one-time prisoner of 17 years ago, and both absorbed in the relation of that incident. Young Botha worked for some time with the Fifth Army Staff—now no longer among enemies, but all serving the interests of the British Empire against a common foe.

## VI

Early in September the front held by the II Corps was taken over by the Second Army in view of the impending attack along the ridge, and about the same time the V Corps relieved the XIX Corps on the Fifth Army front. Haig now instructed me to do nothing till the combined attack could be launched. By mid-September the weather began to improve, and we at last had a spell of fine weather, but it did not last very long, and during October it continued to rain heavily, making conditions more and more horrible for the troops engaged on both sides.

20 Sept.  
*Battle of  
Menin  
Road  
Ridge.*

However, by the 20th September, when the combined attack was launched, the ground had dried up somewhat, though of course it rained heavily during the whole of the previous night. The attack of the two Armies was highly successful; the Second Army attacked with two corps, the X and the Anzacs—and the Fifth Army with the V and XVIII Corps and one division from Cavan's Corps.

The enemy, from his pill-boxes and ruined farms fortified by concrete, made a stout and gallant defence. Some of these were not captured till after many hours of bitter fighting. Furthermore, as usual in this battle, the Germans counter-attacked fiercely. On the V Corps front they launched no less than six counter-attacks. These were either beaten off, or our supporting troops immediately counter-attacked in their turn and once more drove the Germans out. Their losses were very heavy and we captured over 1300 prisoners. By the end of the day we had captured all our objectives with the exception of two farms—an average penetration of 1000 yards along the front of attack. The Second Army on our right had been equally successful.

In this attack our aeroplanes co-operated most usefully by flying low and firing on the German infantry. This new form of close co-operation of all arms was now becoming an established practice in all armies, German as well as our own.

Preparations were now made by the Second Army for a second attack in six days' time, with which we were to co-operate by swinging up the right of the Fifth Army. The V Corps was the only corps therefore to be engaged in this attack. But in the evening of the 23rd the Germans made an attack on <sup>23 Sept.</sup> the whole of our XVIII Corps front, about 3000 yards, but met with a complete and heavy repulse.

Early in the morning of the 26th, before 4 a.m., this second <sup>26 Sept.</sup> attack was launched and was again highly successful, both <sup>Battle of Polygon Wood.</sup> Armies gaining nearly all their objectives; as usual, several strong counter-attacks were launched on us and repulsed. We advanced an average depth of 1500 yards, captured Zonnebeke and over 800 prisoners.

Of these operations, Ludendorff writes :

After a period of profound quiet in the West which led some to hope that the Battle of Flanders was over, another terrific assault was made on our lines on the 20th. . . .

Another English attack on the 21st was repulsed, but the 26th proved a day of heavy fighting, accompanied by every circumstance that could cause us loss. We might be able to stand the loss of ground, but the reduction of our fighting strength was again all the heavier. . . . The actions of the Third Battle of Flanders had presented the same set-piece characteristics. . . . The depth of penetration was limited so as to secure immunity from our counter-attacks, and the latter were then broken up by the massed fire of the artillery.

As the right of the Second Army had swung up considerably, and as the plan now was to clear the Passchendaele Ridge while the left (the Fifth and French Armies) stood comparatively stationary, a further portion of our front was taken over by the Second Army after the battle of the 26th, and the ground held by the V Corps came into its sphere of operations.

Another attack, to take place on the 4th October, was decided on, and several conferences were held before that date.

It was about this time that General Pershing came to visit me in order to study the Staff organisation and work connected with the conduct of a great battle from the point of view of an Army Staff. He was accompanied by several of his Staff and they spent the whole day with us, going into all our different offices and entering, as closely as the available time admitted, into the details of everything. Pershing and I walked out to see a model of the front and the German positions, trenches, etc., such as was prepared by every corps and even by divisions.



These models enabled the leaders of the attacking troops to know the ground over which they were to advance, to recognise where they were, and the objectives they were to seize. They were made of earth, and compiled from air photographs strictly to scale. Any features still standing, as well as the trenches, were accurately copied. We found this method of showing the leaders what they might expect to see and what they had to do was very helpful, and it interested Pershing a good deal. He was very impressed with the thoroughness of the preparations necessary for an attack if it were to be successful, and all his Staff took ample notes. They were evidently out to learn. I liked Pershing—a strongly-built healthy man, with a quiet, thoughtful manner. Talking the same language undoubtedly made it easier to get on with him than with most of the French officers, but we also possessed a similar outlook on life, and that made for a quicker sense of sympathy and a more real understanding between us.

Later on he wrote me a letter giving me his opinion of the effect of the general strategical position of the Allies, due to the action of the Fifth Army in March 1918.

It is perhaps out of place here, but it is an interesting view, and as I am now relating my meeting with Pershing, I reproduce it :

AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES,  
OFFICE OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF,  
FRANCE, *September 22, 1918.*

General H. P. Gough,  
Seaborough House,  
Southbourne, Hants,  
England.

DEAR GENERAL,—Many thanks for your cordial letter of September 15th, which I appreciated.

I am much interested in your diagnosis of the situation, which seems to me to be sound. These days are brighter and more promising, thank God, than those in March when you were taking the brunt of the German attack. But how you made them pay for their success! They failed to get the decision they hoped for, and to the price the Fifth Army exacted is largely due the opportunities which we have seized in the months of July, August and September. It was a terrible task you had, and came to you before we were in a position to begin to exert our military strength. This thought must cheer you a bit when you think of these more hopeful days, and that the German is now thrown on the defensive all along the line.

Thanking you again for your letter, and with best wishes to you, I am, sincerely yours,

JOHN J. PERSHING.

Three of the American Divisional Commanders also came to study the conduct of a battle and stayed about ten days with us. They were Generals Morrison, Liggett and O'Ryan. They stayed with me for a night or two living in my mess, and while at Army Headquarters they attended one or two of the Army conferences with the Corps Commanders.

During dinner one evening they told me how disappointed they were at the way they were treated by the French, who were not missing any opportunity of making them pay a good deal extra for everything they had to buy. The price charged for charcoal for use in the trenches for the men's cooking was the item which seemed to have created most soreness! One of them said they had come over, 'brimming over with the milk of human kindness for the French, and thinking gratefully of Lafayette' who had fought for them in the days of Washington, but 'the price of charcoal was rapidly drying up the supply.'

They were all very anxious to see things for themselves, so they did not stay long at my Headquarters, and I arranged for them to go up to the battle Headquarters of three divisions and see exactly what a Divisional General and his Staff had to do during active operations.

Two other visitors came to my Headquarters during these days, the first being His Majesty the King, who was making one of his periodical visits to the Army in the field, and who was always very gracious to every one he met.

The second visitor was Mr. Lloyd George: one day, while I was sitting in my office, I saw him through my window in La Lovie Chateau walking past the door with General Charteris, who was head of the Intelligence Service at G.H.Q. I was considerably surprised to see him as I had received no intimation that he was coming down into my Army area, much less to my own Headquarters. I asked one of my A.D.C.'s to find out what he was doing, and discovered that he was visiting some camps of German prisoners to see the deterioration in their physique—which I must say was not particularly apparent to me. I was struck by the discourtesy of the Prime Minister in actually visiting the Headquarters of one of his Army Commanders and not coming in to him, and I therefore let him pass on. It was

an amazing attitude for a man in his position and with his responsibilities. He had never met me, and it would have been an opportunity of at least seeing for himself what manner of man I was, and of exchanging some ideas on the general position in which we stood. It was in fact his duty to do so. I have since understood that he blamed me for this Ypres battle and for its long continuation. But it is difficult to believe that a man in his position could be so ignorant of the system of command in an Army. Neither the inception of this battle nor its continuation was any more my responsibility than that of one of my Corps or Divisional Commanders. I merely received my orders from the Field Marshal. That he was probably right in fighting this battle, and was taking a broad view and a courageous and wise decision, has already been stated in these pages, but even so, the responsibility was not entirely his—the Cabinet must certainly have known the situation also and consented to these operations.

After the battle of the 26th I wrote a memorandum to G.H.Q. pointing out that if the left of the attack now remained stationary, I could withdraw a corps and several divisions and send them to Plumer to extend his right. To clear the main ridge was the real and decisive object, and another corps on the right would enable the attack to move forward with greater ease. In fact an attack could thus be made almost due northwards, taking the main German defences in flank, with its own outer flank well covered and protected by the corps I suggested sending to Plumer. This proposal, however, never materialised.

On the 28th Haig held a conference, at which he expressed somewhat optimistic views, and gave the opinion that our repeated blows were using up the enemy's reserves and that we might soon be able to push on with no definite and limited objectives as heretofore. He thought that it might be possible that Tanks and even cavalry could get forward. The Germans were undoubtedly feeling the strain very seriously, and from the strategical point of view the Commander-in-Chief's operations were fully achieving their object; from a tactical outlook, however, his hopeful opinion was not justified when one considered the ground, the weariness of our own men, and the stout hearts which, in spite of all, were still beating under the German tunics.

A letter from Plumer to G.H.Q. two days later threw some cold water on these hopes, and on the 1st October I wrote to

G.H.Q. saying I could not hope to get on fast and must still proceed by organised attacks, at intervals.

On 4th October another attack was launched on the Germans —the Fifth Army playing a minor rôle and merely covering the left of the Second Army; we attacked with part of two corps —the XVIII and the XIV— $3\frac{1}{2}$  divisions—and carried practically all our objectives; on this occasion the enemy did not make many counter-attacks on our successful troops, who were now in occupation of part of Poelcappelle. 4 Oct.  
Battle of  
Brood-  
seinde.

On the 9th we attacked again, with the Second Army on the right and the French on the left. As usual, the rain poured down during the previous night, but it did not prevent our forming up and being generally successful, capturing Poelcappelle and taking about 1800 prisoners. On the 12th the Second Army attacked again and we covered its left with five divisions. It poured with rain the previous afternoon, and in the evening I telephoned to Plumer to say that I thought the attack should be postponed. He said he would consult his Corps Commanders, and shortly after 8 o'clock he called me up to say that they considered it best for the attack to be carried out. The only course for the Fifth Army was to follow suit, but the attack was not a success. In places we got on, notably on our extreme left, but our right and the left of the Second Army made practically no progress. 9 Oct.  
Battle of  
Poel-  
cappelle.  
  
12 Oct.  
First  
Battle of  
Passch-  
endaele.

No attacks were now contemplated for 10 days, and we pulled as many men back from the front line as possible and left it as thin as we dared. This gave some of our mud-bedraggled and weary infantry and gunners a few days' rest.

The Second Army attacked on 22nd October and we and the French covered its left. The Fifth Army attacked with three divisions, Poelcappelle and the Brewery east of the village being finally cleared and, generally speaking, all objectives gained; several counter-attacks were repulsed with heavy loss to the enemy, though in one the Germans did succeed in recapturing some farms. Next day they made three further counter-attacks against the Fifth Army, all of which were defeated. 22 Oct.

On the 26th all three Armies attacked again, but it rained heavily during the night and the ground in front of the Fifth Army was becoming almost impossible, and very little progress was made either by us or by the Second Army. The state of the ground had been frightful since the 1st August, but by now it was getting absolutely impossible. Men of the strongest 26 Oct. to  
6 Nov.  
Second  
Battle of  
Passch-  
endaele.



physique could hardly move forward at all and became easy victims to the enemy's snipers. Stumbling forward as best they could, their rifles also soon became so caked and clogged with mud as to be useless.

30 Oct. The Fifth Army had, however, to take part in one more attack. On the 30th October the Second Army again attacked, and by now it was closing in on Passchendaele itself. We attacked with part of two divisions, but being in the low ground and operating in the valleys of the small streams that run westwards off the ridge, we could not get far forward—an advance of 300 yards or so being the limit of the day's objectives.

This was the last active operation undertaken by the Fifth Army in Flanders in 1917, and the Commander-in-Chief now decided that nothing further was to be gained by continuing the battle. On the 6th November the Second Army carried the village of Passchendaele, and our artillery co-operated by a heavy bombardment, but no advance was asked of our infantry. With the capture of this village, the long and bitter battles of Ypres 1917 came to an end.

## VII

The Battles of Ypres 1917 are, at first sight, the most unsatisfactory of the British major operations in France. It is true that they were not popular among the troops which took part in them. This feeling was not due to the casualties—which, though high, were by no means so grossly excessive as has sometimes been represented—but to the terrible conditions under which the battles were fought. Many pens have tried to describe the ghastly expanse of mud which covered this waterlogged country, but few have been able to paint a picture sufficiently intense. Imagine a fertile countryside, dotted every few hundred yards with peasant farms and an occasional hamlet; water everywhere, for only an intricate system of small drainage canals relieved the land from the ever-present danger of flooding; a clay soil which the slightest dampness turned into clinging mud, and which after rain resembled a huge bog. Then imagine this same countryside battered, beaten, and torn by a torrent of shell and explosive—a torrent which had lasted without intermission for nearly three years. And then, following this merciless scouring, this same earth was blasted by a storm of steel such as no land in the world had yet witnessed—



# THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES. 1917.

SKETCH MAP 15.



the soil shaken and reshaken, fields tossed into new and fantastic shapes, roads blotted out from the landscape, houses and hamlets pounded into dust so thoroughly that no man could point to where they had stood, and the intensive and essential drainage system utterly and irretrievably destroyed. This alone presents a battle-ground of tremendous difficulty. But then came the incessant rain. The broken earth became a fluid clay; the little brooks and tiny canals became formidable obstacles, and every shell-hole a dismal pond; hills and valleys alike were but waves and troughs of a gigantic sea of mud. Still the guns churned this treacherous slime. Every day conditions grew worse. What had once been difficult now became impossible. The surplus water poured into the trenches as its natural outlet, and they became impassable for troops: nor was it possible to walk over the open field—men staggered warily over duckboard tracks. Wounded men falling headlong into the shell holes were in danger of drowning. Mules slipped from the tracks and were often drowned in the giant shell holes alongside. Guns sank till they became useless; rifles caked and would not fire: even food was tainted with the inevitable mud. No battle in history was ever fought under such conditions as that of Passchendaele.

Was it worth it? It is still too early to say. We, as contemporaries, can only pass opinions. It must be left to posterity to pronounce judgment. It was a temptation for the unfortunate actors to take a superficial view in those days, and even now critics can still follow that easy path. Three months' bitter fighting resulted in the capture of a few square miles of mud and some trifling ridges of no great tactical value, and these at the cost of over 200,000 casualties. Was Haig right, therefore, in fighting this battle?

It is of the greatest importance that the British people should cast aside this purely superficial outlook when viewing such important events as these. Haig's strategy in this attack was sound. The disadvantage of the lateness of the season could not have been avoided, but nevertheless he was entitled to expect normal weather for the rest of the 'summer.' Had he got it, both conditions and results would have been vastly different. Weather is becoming increasingly important in warfare. With the continuous development of scientific devices for use in war, with the complexity and delicacy of the mechanisms which are essential to a battle, good weather becomes the



best friend a general can have. This tendency will probably become even more pronounced, and the meteorological expert may soon rank as a Senior Staff Officer of the highest importance.

History, however, will not measure the success of this Battle of Ypres merely by balancing captures against casualties. Its results on the War as a whole must give the real extent of its value. Let us briefly recapitulate and examine the results of the battle :

1. These operations achieved Haig's main object in that they did occupy the entire attention and energies of the German Army, and they ensured the French against a hostile offensive. To use a military phrase, Haig kept the initiative and prevented the Germans from exercising it. *A great attack on the French at that time would almost certainly have meant the loss of the War.* This is a fact not sufficiently realised by British people to-day. Told nothing at the time—quite wisely and naturally—they do not comprehend the demoralised state of the French Army after its failure and mutinies of the spring, and they knew little of the great task which Pétain undertook in making a fighting force of it again. These battles, as Ludendorff admits, forced the Germans to concentrate against the British, putting all offensive action against the French entirely out of his mind. For six months the French Army held its line in comparative quiet : by the end of that time Pétain's work was largely accomplished, and he was able to stage two attacks on a small and limited scale as a proof of the improved *morale* of his men.

2. The struggle towards Passchendaele delayed, although it could not prevent, the final military collapse of Russia on the Dvina. Even these few weeks of delay were valuable to the Allied cause on other fronts.

3. It delayed the great attack on Italy, and eventually diverted troops which were intended to take part in that attack. It will be recalled that the presence of stiffening German divisions enabled the Central Powers to drive the Italians back on 24th October across the Piave, with the loss of a quarter of a million prisoners. Government circles in London and Paris were terribly shaken. What would have happened if the Germans had been free to employ more divisions there ? Almost certainly this would have entailed the disappearance of Italy as a fighting force on the Allied side. This would have been a disaster of the first magnitude.

The continuation of the Passchendaele battle into November was influenced by the necessity of engaging the Germans in order to ease the pressure on the Italians, as was the surprise attack with an army of Tanks at Cambrai. Though such action could not achieve anything decisive on the British front, it did check the debacle in Italy.

4. This Battle of Ypres inflicted great losses on the best of the German shock troops, who were purposely gathered in Flanders for defence and counter-attack. No less than 78 German divisions were plunged into the desperate struggle, to be withdrawn, bruised and mauled, for reorganisation and reinforcement after their heavy casualties and shaken *morale*. These losses, together with the declining spirit natural to men who are continually forced out of apparently impregnable positions, interfered in a decisive degree with the plans of the German Command. As it was, the Allied cause in 1917 hung by a thread: had Ludendorff been a free agent it is more than possible, it is probable, that he could have wrenched victory from the hands of the Allies that year.

The considerations mentioned above are grave and vital. Once admitted, they explain and go a very long way to justify Haig's judgment in sustaining the offensive. We need not depend on our own opinion, fortunately, in estimating the weight of these arguments. It has been done for us by the person best qualified in the world—Ludendorff himself. In his *War Memories*, he has written his own considered judgment:

From 31st July till well into September was a period of tremendous anxiety. On the 31st July the English, assisted by a few French divisions on their left, had attacked on a front of thirty-one kilometres. . . . With the assistance of the counter-attack divisions, the Fourth Army succeeded in checking the hostile success and localising its effect. But, besides a loss of from two to four kilometres of ground along the whole front, it caused us very considerable losses in prisoners and stores and a heavy expenditure of reserves.

The costly August battles . . . imposed a heavy strain on the Western troops. In spite of all the concrete protection they seemed more or less powerless under the enormous weight of the enemy's artillery. At some points they no longer displayed that firmness which I, in common with the commanders, had hoped for.

The enemy managed to adapt himself to our method of employing counter-attack divisions. There were no more attacks with unlimited objectives, such as General Nivelle had made in the

Aisne-Champagne battle. He was ready for our counter-attacks and prepared for them by exercising restraint in the exploitation of success. . . .

I myself was put to a terrible strain. *The state of affairs in the West appeared to prevent the execution of our plans elsewhere.*<sup>1</sup> Our wastage had been so high as to cause grave misgivings and had exceeded all expectations. *The attack on the Dvina had to be postponed repeatedly.*<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it became a question whether we could continue to bear the responsibility of retaining these divisions in the East.

Another German description of this battle and its consequences says :

Divisions disappeared by dozens in the turmoil of battle, only to emerge from the witch's cauldron after a short period thinned and exhausted, and often reduced to a miserable remnant, the gaping spaces left by them being filled by fresh divisions.

The constant rain brought intense suffering. Foot and bowel complaints ravaged the troops.

On the 3rd August the 2nd Guard Reserve Division, counting from the 31st July, only had a total of 2208, of whom 600 were sick. Significant signs of tension manifested themselves in other divisions ; the 38th Division requested relief, it had lost two-thirds of its strength. . . .

The shell holes were full to the brim with water. The ground was only passable on the duck walks. Whoever slipped off them sunk in the slush. The British fliers soon spotted them and turned the artillery fire on to them.

*Yet the rain was our Ally*, for it hindered the British in the rapid continuation of their great attack. Their men were drowned in the swollen and marshy Steenbeck. Their mules with rations and ammunition stuck in the mud ; their shells lost their splinter effect in the loose and water-soaked earth.

The wastage in the big actions of the Fourth Battle of Flanders was extraordinarily high. In the West we began to be short of troops. Two divisions that had been *held in readiness in the East and were already on their way to Italy were diverted to Flanders.*<sup>2</sup>

The Italian operation could not be started before the 22nd, but the weather held it up until the 24th. These days were the culminating point of the crisis.

Thus Ludendorff himself justifies Haig's strategy.

It is easy to be misled by the nearness of events. I have shown that I myself—speaking from the limited sphere of an

<sup>1</sup> The italics are mine.

<sup>2</sup> The italics are mine. This paragraph and the following are from Ludendorff's book.

Army Commander—pressed Haig to break off the battle in the middle of August, but that his outlook over the broad field of strategy caused him to continue the attack. It must be admitted that he was right in shouldering the main part of the Allied military burden. France and Russia had borne it at a terrible cost while we were gathering our strength. We must not grumble at the high price we had to pay in our turn. Let me quote again the words of Sir John Davidson :

The British nation may justifiably be proud, for probably no other nation could have borne so great a strain, or successfully performed so great a task—a task of the first importance, decisive in influence, unselfish in character, and unostentatious in execution.

Controversy over these battles of 1917 will continue for generations, until the passing of time has made possible a clear and unbiased judgment. The course of this story may, however, reveal some new aspects to those critics who have tried to place the 'odium' of Passchendaele on Haig—and for that matter, on me! But these battles were not fought on my initiative, nor was I responsible for their continuance, nor was the Fifth Army the only participant: from the end of August its efforts were only subsidiary to those of the Second Army on its right.

But whatever controversies continue, no question will ever be raised as to the valour of the men engaged—German as well as British. Our private soldiers knew nothing of the grave considerations which influenced Haig's judgment. They only knew that they were asked to fight under unprecedented conditions, with death above, around, and below. At no time in the War was confidence in their leaders so difficult. It was little short of marvellous that men could stand such an intense strain. The Somme was the testing place of the British civilian army: Passchendaele was its sacrificial ground. There it gave itself for the common cause. History will record its deep admiration of the dogged spirit and desperate valour of the British race, and will not wonder that the memories of Ypres are burnt deeply in all our hearts.



## CHAPTER IX

### THE APPROACH OF THE STORM

*The Fifth Army moves South—Signs of the Coming Attack—Preparations for Defence—The Immensity of the Task—The German Concentration—The Days before the Battle.*

#### I<sup>1</sup>

H AIG had now decided to bring the Battles of Ypres to a close. The Fifth Army was once again withdrawn, to be launched into another maelstrom, fiercer and more desperate than any which it had as yet encountered.

By 2nd November we handed the area of the II Corps back to the Second Army. This Army made another attack on Passchendaele on the 6th November, in which we took no part beyond supporting it with our artillery, and on the 14th November our Headquarters in the north closed and we opened at Dury, south of Amiens, where we remained about a month in G.H.Q. Reserve.

During this period of waiting, Byng brought off his successful surprise with Tanks in the direction of Cambrai, capturing about 100 German guns. I was on leave at the time and this success caused immense excitement and rejoicings at home. For the first time in the War bells were rung all over the country. But the enemy command was not long in striking back, and within a few days the Germans attacked Byng at his weakest spot, captured 100 guns from him, and inflicted heavy casualties on his troops.

As a surprise Byng's attack was brilliantly executed. It might indeed have produced even greater results, and Cambrai itself could have been captured. Nevertheless there were not sufficient troops at hand to gain any decisive results, and some critics are inclined to think that it was, in consequence, a wasted effort, but the constant demands of the French for activity on our part cannot be overlooked, and this was but one more incident in the long-drawn British effort.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 16, p. 238.

No definite orders about the future of the Fifth Army were at first given to its Staff, but by the end of November we were able to make a good guess that our destination was the French front on the right of the Third Army. Up to date this had been a quiet sector and was lightly held by two French corps only; but though quiet at the moment, it was a considerable addition to the British front—about 28 miles—to which Haig very naturally objected and against which he strongly protested.

The French argument was that the share of the front to be held by them and the British should be calculated principally on the mileage of the total front. Strategic reasons were not considered; the vital importance of the Channel Ports to Great Britain in general and the British Army in particular was overlooked, and the strength of the German Army opposite the British as compared to its strength on the French front received little or no consideration: nor did the fact that serious fighting was impossible on more than half of the front of the French Army—in the semi-mountainous country of the Vosges, behind which lay the great fortresses.

Our Mission at French G.Q.G., however, strongly espoused the French view, and Lloyd George and his Cabinet having more confidence in the French Command than in Haig, the latter's protests were over-riden and we eventually had to take over the whole of this great increase of front. The results which quickly followed placed the British Army in the greatest peril, at the same time thoroughly shaking the confidence and nerve of the Cabinet at home when it awoke by the end of March to the full consequences of its own decision.

By the 13th December we found ourselves at Villers-Breton-<sup>13 Dec.</sup>neux, and the Fifth Army, instead of taking over at once from the French, was directed to take over the VII Corps and the Cavalry Corps on the right of the Third Army. This gave the Fifth Army a front of about twelve miles to begin with, down to the Omignon River, with the 16th, 21st, and 9th Divisions on the VII Corps front, under General Sir T. Snow on the left, and five cavalry divisions and the 24th Division on the Cavalry Corps front, under Sir Charles Kavanagh on the right.

I found on taking over my new front that the enemy was active in making raids and took a prisoner or two from us regularly, several nights a week, and this was the first sign which came to my notice that our front was likely to be the one selected for attack by the Germans.

The trench system was in a very neglected state. On some parts of the front there was no continuous line, no dugouts or observation posts, and communication trenches were few and provided inadequate cover.

Administratively, especially to the south towards Barisis, the area was very awkward. It had naturally been organised to receive from and to deliver towards Paris. It had now to face towards the British centres of activity, a change which caused much thought and constructive work to those concerned.

During 1917 the policy of the British Army had been entirely offensive, and all its resources in engineers, material, etc., had been devoted to dealing with this side of the operations. Defensive measures, therefore, had been much neglected.

On the first day that I drove out of my Headquarters to go to the front, I saw to my surprise parties of French civilians busy filling in trenches and removing wire along a line which ran about a mile on the east of the village of Villers-Bretonneux. This line was part of the defences of Amiens, which had been elaborately constructed and heavily wired nearly two years previously and were still in an excellent state. The agricultural population, however, was anxious to bring all this land back into cultivation, and its appeals had been yielded to. The choice of the moment for granting this concession was ill-advised, for the collapse of Russia had made the prospect of a great German attack almost a certainty, and it was no time for demolishing good defences. Almost my first act, therefore, on taking over this sector was to stop all further demolition of this line, and to commence its reconstruction. It was well I did so, for it was on this line that 'Carey's Force' stood—the last reserve scraped together by the Fifth Army for the defence of the battle front at the end of March 1918.

By 17th December very full and detailed instructions were issued for the organisation of our line defensively, and for the conduct of the troops in case of attack, and the next day the Army Staff had a conference which dealt with the improvement and increase of trenches, railways, bridges, roads and organisation of the necessary labour. There was a great deal which required attention and work—and with the weak divisions and extended fronts it was very difficult to provide sufficient labour for everything.

Telephone lines on this front had not been buried, and it was estimated that it would now require 500 men working continu-

ously, two or three months, to carry out this important work properly.

The result of a week's inspection and study of our new front was the issue of a considerable number of orders and instructions which covered a wide field in the matter of defence. The general policy which I laid down for the Army was to reduce the front to quiet and, as far as possible, to withdraw some of the men and guns for rest and training, and to concentrate all our energies on improving our very poor defences.

It was now that Neill Malcolm was taken from me and sent to command a division. His departure was a serious loss to the Fifth Army at such a moment, when we were taking over a new task of the utmost gravity. Malcolm went off to command the 66th Division, composed of men from Manchester, and within a few weeks he returned to the Fifth Army with his new command to carry on in another sphere some splendid work in the struggle which even then was looming before us. This division, though a comparatively new one, was animated by a great spirit of comradeship, cheerfulness, and *esprit de corps* which stood it in good stead in the coming battle, and enabled it to hold together, heroically carrying on the fight, even after a week of that desperate storm which reduced the divisions to mere skeletons.

In place of Malcolm I asked G.H.Q. for Brig. General Samuel Wilson, as I knew him and appreciated his worth. He had not only worked under me at the Staff College prior to the War, but had also been through two great battles with the Fifth Army as B.G.G.S. to General Jacob in the II Corps.

G.H.Q. refused this request and Major General Percy was sent to me, though as a Staff Officer he was an entire stranger to me. However, he responded well to the heavy call which was made on him, though on principle G.H.Q. was, in my view, wrong in not acceding to my request.

At the same time my Deputy Quartermaster General was changed, and Major General Percy Hambro became responsible for the administration of the Army. His work in this important capacity was quite invaluable. No man could have had a more difficult or strenuous task. A vast amount of new organisation covering every form of administration had to be built up prior to the battle. This was not confined to the requirements for fighting on the Army front—a study large enough by itself—but arrangements had also to be made for a possible retreat—getting away hospitals, sick, wounded, stores of all kinds,



prisoners, and the units of the Labour Corps. Hambro held a weekly conference with the Staff Officers of the four Corps concerned in these matters, kept in close touch with them, went into all their difficulties with them, and eventually when the testing time came, he was able to get away most of our 'impedimenta' without undue hitches. There can be few examples in history of the administration services so successfully carrying out their job in the course of a retreat of such magnitude and under such desperate conditions. Hambro's ability, thoroughness, tact, and above all his calm, placid grin, were invaluable assets to the Fifth Army in March.

14 Jan. By the 14th January we had taken over another Corps front, this time from the French III Corps. The XVIII Corps came in here and thus Maxse also returned to me to help in conducting another great battle. His line stretched to a point just south of St. Quentin—a further extension of twelve miles to the Army front.

30 Jan. By the 30th January we took over yet a further eighteen miles of front: this carried our line beyond the Oise, as far as Barisis, making a total front of forty-two miles.

This portion was occupied by the III Corps under Sir W. Pulteney. On this great front of forty-two miles I had at first only eight divisions, with the equivalent of another in the Cavalry Corps, and with no supports or reserves whatever. A part of this new front was supposed to be defended by the Oise, but we were now having a spell of frost and dry weather, with an occasional snow-storm, and already the marshes and the river showed signs of drying up to an extent which considerably lessened the value of the river as either a defence or an obstacle. Even as early as February we were able, on several occasions, to push patrols across to the far bank of the river.

On the new front taken over from the French, the front-line defences were good, but nothing existed in rear beyond a good line of wire; but to defend this neither trenches nor dugouts existed. Urgent orders were issued for units to get on with the work with the few resources at our disposal. A Battle Zone consisting of front line, support and reserve trenches, with the many necessary dugouts, communicating trenches, and 'switches' had to be constructed, and behind that a 'Green Line' or Rear Zone, both lines running along the whole forty-two miles of our front.

9 Feb. On 9th February, in replying to a letter of the 1st February from me (to which I refer later), G.H.Q. ordered me to prepare

the defences of the Péronne bridge-head—a line of about twenty-five miles in extent—and behind that again the line of the Somme and the Tortille, another twenty-five miles. To complete all these defences with support and reserve lines and supporting redoubts entailed digging about 300 miles of actual trenches and erecting the necessary wiring—a stupendous amount of fortification. The amount of labour and material required for the completion of these schemes would have been enormous, but even if it had all been available on the spot—which was far from being the case—time also was required for the work. No amount of labour—nothing short of a fairy wand—could have prepared all those defences in a few weeks; it was a question of months, especially as little had been done in the way of defences during the previous year. Unfortunately the Fifth Army was to be called on to pay the penalty for this neglect by the previous commands before it took over in December 1917—not only in meeting the storm with the inevitable losses, for which it was prepared, but also subsequently in bearing for many years all the criticism and odium for such neglect for which it was in no way responsible.

Correspondence with G.H.Q. eventually produced an army of labour amounting to 68,000 men, but a large proportion of these did not arrive till March and they were not able to do much in the week or two at their disposal before the attack fell upon us.

This Labour Corps was so organised by my Chief Engineer, Major General P. G. Grant, that every man had a day's rest once a week and we could count only on 48,000, or a little more than 1,000 per mile of front, after deductions for men sick or on leave. Its work consisted of making railways, roads, bridges, preparing sidings, platforms and dumps of ammunition, huts, aerodromes, etc., in addition to the defences.

On 30th December the Labour Corps strength was about  
17,400 men.

On 27th January	„	„	„	21,000	„
On 23rd February	„	„	„	37,800	„
On 9th March	„	„	„	48,000	„

Of these, on 9th March, about 7,000 were prisoners of war, who were not permitted to work in the forward areas.

18,000 British (Labour Battalions).

3,000 Indians.

4,000 Chinese.

and 7,500 Italians.

On the 16th March, five days before the battle, the labour in the Army was distributed as follows :—

About 10,000 men were employed on roads,

"	4,500	"	"	railways,
"	7,000	"	"	depots, dumps, etc.,
"	3,500	"	"	hutments,

and after meeting other calls and allowing for sickness, etc., there were less than 9,000 available for defences, the responsibility for which had to be undertaken principally by the few troops available.

In early January there were only 165 men available for work on defences, early in February only 625, and in the middle of that month, 2,400.

My first week or so was occupied in trying to see as much of my wide front as I could, and to get some idea of its features, tactical characteristics, and the general defensive organisation. I then paid a visit to General Humbert of the Third French Army, whom I had just relieved, in order to get his views of the ground and the problem generally, which he knew very well, having held this sector for a long period. He told me that the Germans were certainly preparing an attack in front of us, but he was then not sure whether they would use their central position to attack southwards against the French, or westwards against us. Talking of our forward position on the high ground south of St. Quentin, he said: '*on peut vous donner un vilain coup*'—and pointed out that the Germans could drive us back into and over the Crozat Canal which passed behind our right at a distance of about four to seven miles. This visit was shortly followed by another to General Pétain at French G.Q.G. The French Staff was installed in Compiègne and I spent a night there. General Anthoine was now Chief of the Staff to Pétain: he and I were excellent friends as the result of our acquaintance and co-operation in the battles round Ypres the previous autumn. I spent most of my time at Compiègne in his office, discussing the general situation and the arrangements for French reinforcements to come up behind my right in case of necessity. It should be explained here that Haig had made it a condition of his taking over the extra thirty miles of French front—that though he would hold it with British troops, he could spare no supports to help the battle there, if such became necessary. These must be supplied by the French. The number and proximity of these divisions became therefore a

matter of considerable interest to me and the Fifth Army. The question of command and supply would be difficult and would be bound to be unsatisfactory, but these conditions had to be accepted under the circumstances.

When Mr. Lloyd George forced Haig to take over this extra front, he never considered these difficulties. Yet when the time came their influence, if not decisive, was at the least very adverse to the conduct of the battle, and created some dangerous situations.

I understood at this time that General Humbert of the Third French Army, with six to eight divisions which we had relieved, would remain in the vicinity of Clermont and Compiègne and therefore close and convenient to us. It was part of the bargain with Haig on his agreeing to take over this extension of front from the French that, as soon as these divisions should arrive on the battle front, the French were to reassume responsibility for this part of the line.

As things turned out, the various threats and rumours set on foot by the German High Command so deceived Pétain that notwithstanding his previous understanding with Haig most of these divisions were moved away, some behind Rheims, some behind Verdun, and some even to the extreme right near the Swiss frontier. The result was that the agreed reserves were not able to come into line as expected and only arrived after considerable delays, without proper Staff, transport or artillery, and with inadequate supplies of ammunition—in some cases only 50 rounds per man. It was during this visit that the French Staff gave me a pamphlet it had prepared on the German organisation and preparations for the battles of Riga and Caporetto, and I discussed with them the similarities of the situation which now existed on the Fifth Army's front. I had just learned that Von Hutier had appeared opposite us in command of the German Eighteenth Army. Except for a short period in command of a Guard division in France in 1914, his service had been continuously on the Russian front, where he had been responsible for many large-scale and highly-successful attacks. The fact of his presence now on my front seemed to portend that something of a similar nature to these battles was to be attempted.

This valuable piece of knowledge reached us in a curious way, which is worth relating as an example of the difficulty of maintaining complete secrecy in war.



A young German airman had been shot down and died in our lines and we learnt his name and the location of his aerodrome. A few weeks afterwards there was published in an obscure Baden newspaper a letter signed by Von Hutier, addressed to the mother of this airman, expressing his sorrow at the loss of her gallant boy. This paper came into the hands of our Intelligence Bureau in Switzerland, and thus we became aware that Von Hutier was commanding on this particular part of our front. It was not difficult for us to draw the conclusion that he was there for a purpose.

Our Air Service, from reports and photographs, was also showing us the growth in the number of new hospitals and aerodromes on our front, as well as roads, railways and bridges.

I began at once pointing out to Haig and G.H.Q. that the forces at my disposal were quite inadequate to hold my front against the attack, signs of which were already apparent. With the force originally at my disposal I could not even delay them on the forty-two mile front along which the Fifth Army was extended. Three more divisions were therefore sent to the Army, arriving by the middle of February, bringing the total up to eleven infantry divisions and the Cavalry Corps. But this force was still most inadequate, and three more divisions were eventually sent to me, or moved within reach—the last, the 50th, arriving in March, shortly before the battle opened. These, of course, were not in time to do much in the way of work on defences, etc., and two of them were kept in G.H.Q. Reserve up to the last moment. With these reinforcements the Fifth Army still remained terribly undermanned, even taking into consideration the fact that it was to fight a delaying action and not a decisive battle.

By the 21st March the dispositions of the Fifth Army were as follows :—

On the right stood the III Corps, now under General Butler, who had come from G.H.Q. to take Pulteney's place, after having been on Haig's Staff since 1915: this Corps had the 58th, 18th and 14th Divisions in line. I had moved one cavalry division (the 2nd) behind it, the equivalent of one infantry brigade, which was all I could spare.

On the left of the III Corps was the XVIII Corps under Maxse, energetic and resourceful, with the 36th, 30th and 61st Divisions in line, and the 20th in G.H.Q. Reserve, S.W. of Ham, sixteen miles from the battlefield. Watts with the

XIX Corps held the next place with the 24th and 66th Divisions in line, and no reserves at his disposal, though I still had two cavalry divisions—the 1st and 3rd, of the Cavalry Corps—behind him, and the 50th Division was in G.H.Q. Reserve, round Rosières, over twenty-five miles from the battlefield.

On my extreme left stood the VII Corps, now under the able command of Walter Congreve. General Snow had cracked his pelvis some time previously, which made him very lame, and in January he had to give up and go home.

The VII Corps consisted of the 16th, 21st and 9th Divisions in line, with the 39th in reserve round the village of Nurlu.

Besides the immense amount of new trenches and wiring required to put my front into a sound defensible state, practically no dugouts existed for the protection of the machine gunners during a bombardment. Some idea of the neglected condition of this front and the immense amount of work which required attention can be gathered when it is realised that the administrative requirements to ensure proper movement and supply in battle were, sixteen narrow-gauge lines, at least four new sidings and platforms on the broad-gauge lines, the maintenance and strengthening of forty roads and the building of at least two new bridges—a colossal task in truth, a race against time, with the Fifth Army in the unpleasant position of being left at the post with a very bad start.

Four trains per diem, carrying stone and metal for the roads, and four trains per diem of engineering material were wanted to fulfil our requirements.

Immediately on my return from French G.Q.G. I wrote to G.H.Q. as follows :

Secret.

Fifth Army,

S.G. 675/41.

1st February 1918.

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS.

1. I wish to bring to your notice the general situation on my front.

2. The German Eighteenth Army, under General von Hutier, who was so successful at Riga, has been interpolated opposite my front, additional crossings have been constructed over the St. Quentin-Cambrai Canal, various new hostile aerodromes have been located, a large number of German divisions are in reserve, and good railway facilities to bring them forward rapidly exist. Further, the general situation renders an attack between the Oise and the Scarpe more probable in the immediate future than else-

where on the British front. The Germans naturally wish to obtain an early decision, and it is probable that active operations can take place on the Oise-Scarpe front, owing to the condition of the ground, some two months before they can be undertaken with reasonable prospects of success further north. Consequently, I think it a not unreasonable conclusion that, if the Germans attack the British Army shortly, the Fifth Army is likely to be involved.

3. Of my 40-mile front, owing to the difficult country south of the River Oise and the course of that river itself, the southern 12 miles are not likely to be the scene of a serious hostile attack, but of the remaining 28 miles of front either the whole or part may well be the subject of a heavy hostile offensive. Should this occur, if I was fortunate enough to obtain sufficient notice of the enemy's intention, I should be able to place some 10 divisions in line, of whom 9 would be disposed from Moy northwards (*vide* attached diagram). This would work to roughly 5500 yards of front per division. I should then have in reserve 1 cavalry division in the III Corps area and 1 division in the XVIII Corps area, 2 cavalry divisions in the Cavalry Corps area and 1 division in the Allaines area. Provided tactical trains were forthcoming, some 48 hours would be required to complete these dispositions.

By this time, the infantry of two divisions from G.H.Q. Reserve in other Armies would have arrived, and I should then be able to place two more divisions in line, thus reducing the average front per division north of Moy to 4400 yards. This would be satisfactory but would depend entirely on my receiving the necessary 96 hours' notice.

4. The more recent German attacks (*i.e.* Verdun, February 1916, Riga, and the attack on Italy) have been characterised by a short bombardment up to about 6 hours and the most strenuous efforts to obtain surprise. These efforts I cannot be sure of defeating; consequently in his initial attack the enemy might find me disposed as at present, with the equivalent of 8 divisions in line on a 40-miles front: this would naturally go far towards ensuring him success, especially in view of the state of my defences.

5. Strenuous efforts have been made by all to improve the defences: south of the River Omignon, the old French front, they are better than further north; in a month's time it would be possible to fight a defensive battle between the Oise and the Omignon. Further north the defences are in a backward state, and I cannot expect them to be even satisfactory before the middle of March or in a good state before the end of the month.

6. The very wide area I am responsible for, the condition of the roads, the lack of light railways, the absence of accommodation, the shortage of labour, and the many things (such as Army and Corps R.E. workshops) necessarily lacking in an area recently organised as an Army Area, have all tended to delay progress.

Then follows a statement of my minimum requirements.

8. Provided that the above can be provided, I consider that by the 15th March the whole of the Battle and Rear Zones could be made into a good defended area.

9. I should then like to put all available labour on to preparing a position east of the Somme, from about Ham, via Bussu to the high ground west of Moislains, with a view to ensuring the retention of the crossings over the Somme.

H. P. GOUGH,  
General,  
Commanding Fifth Army.

As fate decreed, we had a long continuance of dry weather, quite exceptional for winter and spring, and by the middle of March the Oise had ceased to be of much value to our defence as a serious obstacle along the twelve miles of its course, nor did sufficient labour arrive in time to enable us thoroughly to complete the Battle Zone, much less the Green Line or Rear Zone, the Péronne bridge-head, and the western bank of the Somme. This letter was written seven weeks before the battle, and on the assumption that there would be enough labour to commence work at once.

On my return from my visit to French G.Q.G. I called a 3 *Feb.* conference of my Corps Commanders on 3rd February, and I then outlined my view of our situation as follows:

The main attack might be expected against the Third and Fifth Armies, with Amiens as its objective, for the following reasons:

(a) No genuine preparations apparently had been made elsewhere.

(b) Von Hutier, who carried out the attack at Riga with the Eighth German Army, had been put in opposite our Fifth Army front in command of the Eighteenth Army. In the Riga attack he relied completely on surprise. All the troops for the attack were kept seventy miles away and only collected in the forward area within five to eight days before the attack. The actual battle was preceded by only six hours' bombardment, no trench mortar or gun emplacements being previously prepared.

(c) Good divisions had been withdrawn from the line, which was now held by divisions of poorer quality. The good divisions whilst undergoing training were being reconstituted in their old corps. With all those various indications it was therefore not safe to think no attack was contemplated because things



were quiet. The enemy had within an eighty-mile radius of St. Quentin 64 divisions in line and 34 divisions in reserve, besides some 50 further away.

(d) It was vitally important to impress on all subordinate commanders that though things were quiet just then, the storm might come at any moment: furthermore, in view of the fact that the Battle of Riga was opened by the enemy forcing the passage of the Dvina, that section of our line guarded by the Oise should not be considered as immune from attack.

In reply to my letter of 1st February G.H.Q. replied firstly by sending a memorandum on 'the Principles of Defence on Fifth Army Front,' dated 4th February, and they followed this up by a letter on the 9th.

In the first they laid down:

*Principles of Defence on Fifth Army Front.*

1. Of the Fifth Army front the southern 12 miles are unlikely to be the scene of a serious hostile attack owing to the difficulty of the country. Of the remaining 28 miles either the whole or any part may become the scene of a serious hostile offensive. On these 28 miles of front there would normally be 7 divisions in front line, giving the average of nearly 8000 yards per division. This would leave 4 divisions and 3 cavalry divisions in reserve.

2. In the devastated state of the Fifth Army area communications are one of the primary difficulties for a determined defence of the Battle and Rear Zones.

We have not the means available to render these communications really efficient south of the line Roisel-Péronne.

3. To meet the situation as regards communications, it is for consideration whether our main resistance in the Fifth Army area should not be made behind the line of the River Somme.

It would appear that the whole question is one of communications. In other words, are the communications through Péronne of such importance as to render it advisable to cover that place and fight east of the Somme? From the transportation point of view these communications are of great importance. The loss of the crossings at Péronne would seriously affect the supply of troops in the centre and northern portions of the Fifth Army area, and this would indirectly affect the maintenance of the positions on the right of the Third Army.

It is considered, therefore, that we should continue at all events to cover Péronne by means of a bridge-head, and that every effort

should be made to improve the communications in this vicinity. South of Péronne it will only be possible to improve and develop roads, and it is hoped that this can be done to some extent.

By falling back to the line of the Somme the situation as regards rear communications would be improved, but considerable construction work would still be necessary before it could be considered satisfactory. The German communications would in such a case naturally be very bad.

On the other hand, by falling back to the line of the Somme and Tortille we should have the devastated area of the Somme battlefields immediately in rear of our defensive positions.

5. Although it is considered that we should make our preparations to fight east of the Somme, we must, however, be prepared to be forced back to the line of the Somme. It is therefore of first importance that an emergency zone should be constructed at once along the line of the Somme and Tortille and connected by a switch to the existing defensive zones north of Péronne, as shown on the attached map. This should include and secure the high ground at Mont St. Quentin.

6. In view of the importance of Péronne it is considered necessary that a bridge-head should be constructed at sufficient distance from that place to cover the crossings there and to protect the railway communications through Brie. This can best be done by the construction of a switch from the present rear zone about Marquaix via Bouvincourt to the emergency zone at about Pargny.

8. The principles on which the defences of the Fifth Army front should be conducted should, it is considered, be similar to those laid down for the other Armies. That is, we should be prepared to fight for the Battle and Rear Zones. It may, however, at any period of the defensive battle become inadvisable to employ large reserves to re-establish either of these zones, in which case a withdrawal to the line Crozat Canal-Somme-Péronne bridge-head—or even to the line Crozat Canal-Somme-Tortille—should be carried out. The possibility of having to execute a withdrawal should receive the careful consideration of the Fifth Army, and detailed plans should be worked out. Each division should be covered by a small rear-guard of all arms. By the skilful handling of these rear-guards, particularly as regards the employment of machine guns in conjunction with wire obstacles, it should be possible to delay considerably the enemy's advance, cause him to expend considerable force and generally dislocate his arrangements.

J. H. DAVIDSON,  
M.G.

4th February 1918.

From this memorandum the policy of the Fifth Army was definitely laid down. In spite of the advantages of a retreat to

the Somme prior to the battle, we were to prepare to fight east of the Somme, though we must also contemplate being forced back to the line of that river, and to meet this contingency the construction of a bridge-head to cover Péronne was ordered.

This bridge-head was to be some twenty-five miles in length, and another line on the western bank of that river and the Tortille was to be undertaken : this also was about twenty-five miles long, making a total of fifty miles of fortifications. When it is remembered that the Hindenburg Line was about seventy miles and the Germans took some six months to construct it, under what might comparatively be called peace conditions and with a vast army of civilian labour, it was not possible for these defences to be in a forward state in the time at our disposal.

In the letter of 9th February my instructions were amplified :

Fifth Army.

Secret.

O.A.D. 761.

In reply to your S.G. 675/41 dated 1st instant.

1. The Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief considers that in the event of a serious attack being made on your Army on a wide front, your policy should be to secure and protect at all costs the important centre of Péronne and the River Somme to the south of that place, while strong counter-attacks should be made both from the direction of Péronne and from the south, possibly assisted by the French Third Army.

2. While the Forward and Battle Zones in the Fifth Army area should be fought generally in accordance with the principles laid down in G.H.Q. No. O.A.D. 291/29, dated 14th December 1917, the provisions of paragraph 6 regarding the reinforcement of the Battle Zone and its re-establishment by counter-attack require some modification. Neither is the ground which these zones immediately protect so important, nor are the communications leading to them so good as to warrant reinforcements being thrown into the fight, counter-attacks on a large scale being launched, or the battle being fought out in the Battle Zone, unless the general situation at the time makes such a course advisable. It may well be desirable to fall back to the rearward defences of Péronne and the Somme while linking up with the Third Army on the north, and preparing for counter-attack.

3. As regards the organisation and preparation of the rearward defences, the main considerations in their relative order of importance will be as follows :—

(a) The protection of the river crossing at Péronne will be secured by a bridge-head. The defences of this bridge-head must be sited with a view to securing our road and rail communications through Brie and Péronne.

The organisation and preparations for the defence of the Péronne bridge-head will be completed in detail as soon as possible, including the provision of adequate communications, *i.e.* roads and light railways, also additional bridges over the Somme.

(b) The retention of the line of the River Somme will be secured by the construction of an emergency defensive zone as a strong retrenchment along the left bank of that river as far north as Péronne and thence northwards by the Tortille River. In connection with this defensive zone small bridge-heads will be constructed as required to secure the immediate crossings over the river.

The organisation of this emergency defensive zone and the construction of the defences will be carried out, concurrently with the work on the Péronne bridge-head, with such labour as may be available after the requirements of the latter have been fully provided for.

H. A. LAWRENCE,

Lt. General,

Chief of the General Staff.

G.H.Q.

9th February 1918.

Copy to Third Army.

These instructions contemplated the construction of still more lines and switches. Meanwhile our front line and Battle Zone had been neglected, and as already stated they were quite incomplete, with very few if any shell-proof dugouts in them for machine-gun detachments, brigade or battalion headquarters, dressing stations, etc. These shelters in themselves were always laborious constructions, requiring much time and skilled engineers and miners to complete them.

This letter from G.H.Q. envisaged also the importance of strong counter-attacks 'from the direction of Péronne and from the south, possibly assisted by the French Third Army'—aimed at the flanks of the possible German attack. Such counter-attacks were in accordance with sound tactical principles, but it was quite unpractical to suggest that the Fifth Army, constituted and situated as it was, could carry them out. By the time that the Fifth Army could be established on the Péronne bridge-head, assuming that it ever had the time to complete this, the Army could be in no position, with the troops at its disposal and after the casualties it must by then have suffered, to do more than hold this extensive line. The counter-attack from Péronne could only be made by the British Third Army. It was to that Army that G.H.Q. should have directed



this part of these instructions, and supervised carefully the necessary plans for carrying it out.

The troops at the disposal of the Third Army and the early reinforcements it received justified the hope that it could hold up a German attack on its front and yet spare sufficient troops for such a counter-stroke. But as things turned out, its front line went the first day, and instead of counter-attacking against the right flank of Von der Marwitz's Army, it was driven back from the line of Péronne to behind Albert—a distance of ten miles in thirty-six hours (March 25-26), thus adding to the difficulties of the Fifth Army on its right, and supporting neither the defence of Péronne nor the line of the Somme.

16 Feb. On the 16th February Sir Douglas Haig held a conference at Doullens and gave us his appreciation of the situation, which, briefly, came to this: he thought it was unlikely that the enemy would attack on a greater front than thirty or forty miles, as the number of his guns would limit him to such a front.

The attack, however, need not be continuous and could be expected anywhere along the whole front from the Oise to Lens. He thought the destruction of the French coal mines near Bethune might tempt the Germans to attack in that part of our line. He was expecting a prolonged struggle, and this made it advisable to economise his reserves and not use up his divisions too fast.

Brig. General E. W. Cox, the new Chief of the Intelligence Section at G.H.Q., estimated that the Germans had 178 divisions in France, of which 110 were in line and 68 in reserve. Of those in line, 50 were on the British front.

They could bring over 23 more divisions by May, but it was not likely they would wait as long as that, and he expected an attack in or before March.

Haig then went on to say that he thought the main effort would be against the French, and that the indications from the British front showed no signs of an imminent attack. G.H.Q., influenced by its Intelligence Staff, undoubtedly expected the main German attack to fall on the Third and First Armies, and only its extreme left wing might possibly engage the Fifth Army.

It is not easy to understand how the Commander-in-Chief arrived at some of these conclusions. G.H.Q. Intelligence should have known that the Germans could dispose of plenty of artillery and ammunition, and that they were by no means

limited by their artillery to a front of ' thirty or forty miles,' and all the indications collected on the Fifth Army front pointed clearly to that front as being the one which was most threatened.

There were no signs of a German attack on Bethune, and the French coal fields did not provide an object of so decisive a character as to ensure victory and peace to the Germans before the American Armies could arrive, and this was almost certainly their aim.

The reports sent in by Lt. Colonel S. S. Butler, the G.S.O. 1, Intelligence, Fifth Army, together with my letters to G.H.Q., should surely have provided, even by this date, sufficient proof of the imminence of an attack on the British front, and also of its locality ; in the first fortnight of February alone, the Fifth Army, besides noting the presence of General von Hutier in command of an army opposite it, reported to G.H.Q. the presence on its front of 5 new German hospitals, 3 new aerodromes, the arrival of an Air Squadron from the Flanders front behind St. Quentin, five days on which new work and extensions of German light railways had been observed, a new bridge which had been built over the canal north of St. Quentin, a new ammunition dump, and a marked increase of movement on railways and on roads. The statements of prisoners also were already pointing to the fact that an attack on the front held by the Fifth Army was contemplated. As the weeks went on these became more definite, until we knew almost for certain, more than a week prior to the attack, that 21st March was '*Der Tag*.'

All the various indications continued to grow apace from now on to the day of the attack, all tending to point increasingly to the Fifth Army front being one of the threatened sectors.

During these days Haig came to visit me on several occasions. Before the battle broke out he came with me to have a look at our rear-defences, and on another occasion I took him down to my right flank south of the Oise, where he came up very close to our front in the wooded country near Barisis. During these visits I had an opportunity of discussing with him the situation, and of pointing out to him the great deficiency of men and the backwardness of our defences, and he explained to me his view of the situation. He now fully realised the imminence of a great attack and that it would entail a prolonged and fierce struggle, but though the indications pointed to the attack falling on my front, he still thought it was possible that the German Command was attempting to deceive him, and intended

to attack unexpectedly elsewhere, evidence of which can be found in his despatch where it is stated that he thought the main attack would fall north of the Bapaume-Cambrai road.

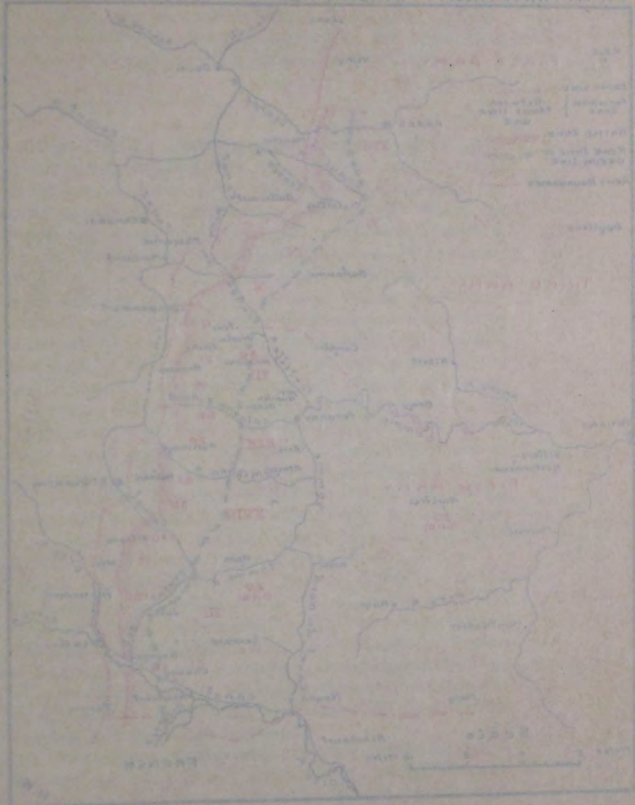
On the British front a defeat in the north was a far graver menace than one in the south. Comparatively close behind the left wing in the north lay the ports of Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne—from twenty to forty miles away. The loss of these ports would have been absolutely fatal to the British Army, and therefore almost certainly decisive of the War.

They must be held at all costs. Haig rightly considered that it was here that he must retain his strength and his reserves until he could see the issue clearly. On the other hand, behind his right a German advance was not by any means so dangerous a threat. The enemy could advance a long way before any vitally serious danger could arise; here we had, in fact, some room to manœuvre.

Haig was, therefore, absolutely sound in his judgment to keep his reserves in the north, and to leave the Fifth Army to do the best it could with its few divisions to hold up and perhaps exhaust the German forces. I understood this conception perfectly, and in my discussions with Haig it was clearly understood by both of us that the rôle I was to play was to retire gradually, and to delay and exhaust the enemy, without exposing my Army to annihilation. It was, of course, a delicate manœuvre and would require great ability, as well as courage, sacrifice and endurance from officers and men of the Army, but it could be done, and, as events turned out, it was done, thanks to the really astounding endurance and courage of the troops.

A point which Haig, however, had to consider was the just balance between supplying his manœuvring wing, the Fifth Army, with enough divisions for its task, without giving it one too many, or on the other hand leaving it so weak that it could not even carry out its rôle of delaying and exhausting the enemy. It may be said that he achieved this result, but nevertheless he 'ran it a bit fine.' It was only the great, the gallant, the steadfast self-sacrifice of the battalions, brigades and divisions which made the result possible and brought this manœuvre so completely to a successful conclusion.

The defences of the Péronne bridge-head were, of course, non-existent, and we were to start on them as soon as G.H.Q. could send us any labour.







If our defences had been better, and if we had had the necessary time to repair the neglect of the previous nine months or so, then our task would have been easier. Time was our greatest need. Every day our problem became more clearly apparent. Every day the time for preparation grew less. We were fighting for Time. But the Germans were fighting *against* Time.

## II

During February I made the acquaintance of the first combatant contingent of the U.S.A. Army, and also of General Smuts. As already related, I had previously had some of the American non-combatant services under me in 'teams' of doctors and nurses who had worked in our casualty clearing hospitals during the Passchendaele operations. I now came in contact for the first time with some of the combatant troops of the American Army. This contingent was composed of the 6th, 12th and 14th Regiments of Engineers, and they were at first engaged on the construction of bridges which were urgently needed on the Fifth Army front. I went over one morning to their billets and inspected them—a fine body of tall, strong, active men—and afterwards I had a talk with their officers, not only about their own work, but on our general situation as well. Their experiences during the time they were with us were as exciting as they were varied, and gave them a vivid insight into war and battle. Their first job was to build a bridge over the Somme, but even as they were completing it they had to prepare it for demolition, and eventually when we fell back to the line of the river they blew up their own bridges.

They were then called upon to fight and formed part of that organisation afterwards known as 'Carey's Force,' when they acted as infantry soldiers holding the trenches in front of Villers-Bretonneux against the German attacks, and when parts of the trenches were lost, counter-attacking to regain them and to re-establish the line. Altogether they did very valuable service with the Fifth Army and established most friendly relations with their British colleagues.

I believe that these regiments of engineers were the first of the American Army to fight in the line, and pitched into their first battle as they were, under strenuous and difficult conditions, with things round them looking none too rosy, they showed themselves brave men and stout soldiers; of course,

the desperate battle against odds took a toll of them, as it did of the rest of us.

General Smuts's visit was occasioned by a somewhat furtive desire on the part of the Cabinet to have an independent opinion as to the steps being taken to meet the coming storm, and also to inquire into the responsibility for the disastrous losses in the Battle of Cambrai during the previous November.

He came over, in fact, in the invidious capacity of an unauthorised and irregular inspecting officer on the Army Commanders in France. In spite of these unpromising auspices, I was very pleased to meet Smuts, and enjoyed the few days he spent with me. We got on very well, and were quite open and frank to each other. I showed him and told him everything, and took him round as much of our front as time would permit. He realised easily enough the amount of work which had to be done and the state of previous neglect on our new front, but he was pleased at the great progress we were making to rectify these things. I took him one cold and foggy morning as far forward as Epéhy, which already was well advanced in its defences, with elaborate lines of heavy wire, and this strong point impressed him a good deal. It was these defences, together with the determined and stout hearts of its garrison of the 21st Division, which held up the German attack for twenty-four critical hours during the battle.

In our feverish preparations to meet the German menace, our difficulties were not all directly attributable to our enemies on the other side of No-Man's-Land. The origin of some was to be found at home. Of these, the supply of men to fill our depleted battalions was one of the most serious. The losses involved in over three years of war, fought all over the globe, usually under the pressure of the call to assist an Ally, had undoubtedly been a great drain. Nevertheless hundreds of thousands of men were still retained under arms in England—kept there partly from a ridiculous fear of a German invasion, and partly because the Cabinet actually did not desire to trust Haig with any more men, blaming him for all that 1917 had cost the British. This seems both a weak and an unjust attitude for Mr. Lloyd George and his colleagues to have taken up. The battles of 1917 had been fought with the knowledge and consent of the Cabinet and at the particular demand of the French. Mr. Lloyd George had made a determined effort to place the British Army directly under the orders and control of General Nivelle and of the

French General Staff for the Battle of Arras—and indeed for the duration of the War. If the latter part of his plans had been carried out, the British Army would have fought even harder than it did, with correspondingly heavier losses. Our voluntarily-assumed burden was expensive enough. It would have been infinitely more so if we had been merely the humble agents and servants of the French, as was the demand of many persons having little knowledge of the real facts or giving them insufficient thought.

The situation in the early months of 1918, however, was that the Germans were now threatening to attack us in overwhelming force, and every consideration should have been put aside except the vitally important one of ensuring the strength of the British Army to resist that attack successfully. If it had been thought necessary, definite and clear orders could have been given to the Commander-in-Chief as to how his troops should be employed, and that no offensive operations were to be contemplated, but the Army should not have been deliberately kept below establishment at this critical juncture.

In consequence the infantry in France had to be reorganised. Every brigade was reduced from four battalions to three—a loss in itself of one quarter of our strength; this was intensely serious, but the new grouping induced a further weakness, since it was a new and an untried organisation for battle, and one greatly inferior to the original. All our divisions in turn had to undergo this reorganisation, which took place early in 1918, and left us considerably weaker from every point of view.

Moreover, the drafts which we were now getting were composed largely of returned wounded. I remember going to Nesle to inspect one such draft. It was not a day I shall easily forget, as it was snowing heavily and nothing would keep the snow out of the inside of the car; in spite of all windows being shut, by the time I reached Nesle there were three inches of snow on the bottom of the car, and our legs and knees were covered as well. When I walked down the line of this draft I found about half of the men wearing the wound stripe and many wearing two or more. It struck me at the time as unjust to send back such men, who had already faced death and danger, had already suffered more or less severely, while there remained at home many thousands of comparatively young men who had never seen a shot fired. One's heart went out in sympathy and in admiration to those men standing in the square at Nesle that day.



Anxious as was the situation which the Fifth Army faced at this time, my thoughts were not entirely confined to our immediate horizon. The general situation in England provided some cause for anxiety as well. I felt we were nearing a crisis in our fate. I knew that the War would not be decided entirely on the battlefield. This War, to a far greater extent than we had ever before experienced, was being fought by the people themselves. The War could be, perhaps would be, won or lost at home. Russia had already given us an example of this, for her collapse was due first to the disintegration, failure in resolution, and the outbreak of revolution among her people. It was from home that weakness spread to her Army. The same phenomenon was to be seen in Germany before many months were over, but in January 1918 this was still hidden in the lap of the gods, though even at that time I could sense the danger of a possible collapse in Britain herself.

The Army at the front was still as staunch as ever. But at home signs were not wanting that the strain was beginning to tell—articles in the Press, attacking the leaders of the Army and Navy—statements by people in authority—stories brought back to the front from many a London drawing-room. It was reported to me that a civilian who was touring the front got on a wagon in the streets of Péronne, and from this extemporised platform addressed all and sundry who were in the streets of that ruined town. He told the soldiers there that 'every one at home was fed up to the back teeth'—that 'if only the soldiers would refuse to fight there would be peace'! This last sentence expressed a fallacy which is often the outcome of a combination of ill-regulated thought and badly-digested sentiment. If the soldiers of the Fifth Army had refused to fight (and this gentleman in company with all his fellow countrymen may thank God that they did not!), the only peace which we could have obtained would have been one dictated by the Germans after a disastrous and disgraceful defeat.

Though such terribly irresponsible appeals fortunately fell on deaf ears, they were a sign of the state of mind of some people in the country, and it behoved all of us who were in any way responsible for leadership to take note of it.

Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston was not only a Corps Commander, but also a Member of Parliament, and as I knew he was at home at that time, I wrote to him and begged him make a speech in the House of Commons which would do something to cheer and

hearten our people, to show them that the state of Germany was worse than our own, and to appeal for steadfastness, courage and resolution, those great qualities of our race, so necessary at this moment. Hunter-Weston did make a speech to this effect, which, coming from him, a serving soldier, had a very great effect. It was much quoted in the Press, in speeches all over the country, and copies were made for distribution in factories, schools and clubs all over the country.

In this letter I pointed out that though Germany was in sore straits, her people starving and longing for peace, yet her leaders well knew how often brave and resolute people, even in the most desperate straits, have won because they were superior in that one quality—Resolution.

We were in much the same position—it had come to a contest in Resolution between the British and the German peoples. To encourage Britain, to keep her steadfast, we must realise that behind this great barrier of German trenches, barbed wire, and brave soldiers—which, like a dam, held back our advance—a work of steady disintegration was going on. No one could see what was happening at the base of that dam, but suddenly it would burst and the flood pour through.

I said that I did not think the German people could stand the pressure another year, and it behoved us to remain hopeful, resolute and courageous. The situation was really better than it looked.

As far as my own Army was concerned, I felt it my duty to tell officers and men frankly of the menace looming beyond our trenches, but at the same time to appeal to their virtues, their courage, their sense of duty, and the great traditions behind them. I issued a call to the officers and men, but realising that in so great a machine as a modern Army I could not speak to every one, I asked my Divisional Commanders to help me.

I recalled the objects for which we have entered the War, and quoted the words of Abraham Lincoln in a crisis of the American Civil War, when he said:

'We accepted this war for one object, a worthy object, and the war will end when that object is attained. Under God, I hope it will never end until that time.'

And finally, I said:

'I would call to your memory—you, the soldiers of to-day—the great deeds that have been performed in the past by the regiments to which you belong, deeds which speak to us from

the pages of History, from the old church walls of England, deeds in foreign lands against many different foes, but always the same cause—the freedom of our Country.'

## III

The Fifth Army, accused of many sins of omission in the first moments of panic which had swept over London and through the country, had in reality laboured strenuously to prepare itself to meet the coming storm and to make good in the time available the deficiencies existing on its unprepared front. In spite of all difficulties, the worn and tired troops, forced to adopt a new organisation, loyally gave up all ideas of rest and training, and dug, wired, and carried stores and ammunition with whole-hearted energy.

Many of the steps taken by the Army were new. The following are some examples. In January we informed G.H.Q. that all the bridges in our area should be prepared for demolition, which was agreed. Lists of all the bridges in each corps area were drawn up and the corps engineers instructed to inspect them and place the necessary charges, fuses, etc., in position in weatherproof covers. In every case a special party was definitely detailed to blow up the bridge in case of necessity, and all concerned knew their mission. The only exceptions were the railway bridges, belonging to the French. They and our own railway service objected to their destruction being carried out by the Army, and they undertook to blow them up themselves should necessity arise; G.H.Q. assented to this suggestion, and in consequence we were forbidden to touch them. On 10th March the Fifth Army wrote to G.H.Q. that its engineers were

in close touch with the O.C. the French Railway Troops operating the Chemin de Fer du Nord. All that requires to be done is to ensure that the commander of these railway troops should receive orders from his superiors to act in accordance with the attached instructions.

I should be glad if you could arrange for this to be done, and if the matter could be treated as urgent.

It does not seem that G.H.Q. took up this matter sufficiently seriously, for when the time came the French failed to blow them up, but the Fifth Army during its retreat destroyed over 250 bridges for which it was responsible.

By 21st March we had had two months of dry weather, and the Somme, never a large river above Péronne, was very low—about four feet of water in most places. In a few cases our charges did not act as effectively as they were expected to, and here and there a girder or two still stood and allowed the German infantry to scramble across, and in all cases the wreckage falling into the comparatively shallow water created islands and steps which helped the Germans to cross. But these were conditions over which we had no control.

Certain important road and railway bridges behind the German lines and within range of our guns were selected, and orders issued for their systematic destruction by a concentrated bombardment, once we were certain of the imminence of the German attack. They were not to be fired on before that, however, lest such action should arouse suspicion and give the Germans time to establish alternative routes. This bombardment of German bridges actually began on 14th March and was effectively carried out.

Orders to 'prepare for battle' and 'man battle positions' were drawn up and issued, and the procedure was periodically practised. The result of these orders was that when the attack did break over the Fifth Army, every man of the few available was 'on parade,' as a private once described it to me. I may say that he added that 'we need not bother about those who criticised the Fifth Army but who were not on parade on 21st March.' Certain localities of tactical importance on every brigade front were reconnoitred, and the companies which were in reserve for counter-attack purposes were specially instructed to be ready to retake these and were, during their tour of that duty, regularly practised over the ground. Several counter-attacks made by troops in the battle had actually been practised previously exactly as they were eventually carried out.

Tanks were still too new an arm to have a code of tactical instructions for all occasions, and so far we had had no experience of their use in defence. It was in the Fifth Army that their employment in this capacity was first worked out. The Tanks were placed in sections of two or three attached to the counter-attack troops, and were moved into position concealed from the air close to these troops. There they were retained till the battle opened, and their action along the front in close co-operation with the supports was most useful and enabled many



points to hold up and delay the German attackers for hours. The rest of the Tanks with the Army were kept further back under the orders of the various Corps Commanders.

But we also had to anticipate the possibility of the employment of Tanks by the enemy, and this question also was very thoroughly considered. I admit I was genuinely very anxious on this subject. There is no doubt that the effect of efficient Tanks would have been enormous on our front in exploiting an already overwhelming attack. The Germans had had plenty of time to create a force of Tanks, for, from examination of those they had captured from us in previous years, they would have been saved the trouble of experiments with the mechanism.

The steps we took to meet this possible danger were, first, to move forward single field guns, carefully hidden, within 2000 yards of the front line. These guns were never to open fire till the enemy's infantry advanced, so as to ensure their presence remaining a secret. About eight of these guns per corps were placed in these forward positions—a total of over thirty. But besides this, after a thorough reconnaissance of the ground, Tank mines were laid in certain localities over which it was thought any advancing Tanks must pass. These mined areas had to be carefully marked to prevent our own troops crossing them and blowing themselves up.

We also turned our attention to the use of aeroplanes in defence, and in conjunction with General Charlton (who was now commanding the Air Force in the Fifth Army) we drew up a plan for specially designated aeroplanes to engage the attacking infantry and the known batteries by flying low and using their machine guns. Weeks before the attack the pilots for this duty were detailed and knew their task and the ground over which they were to operate.

Before February, we issued instructions to the four Corps Commanders that all the personnel of the various schools—such as the Artillery Schools, the Infantry Schools, the Trench Mortar Schools, the Sniping Schools—were to be looked on as immediate reinforcements in case of necessity, and that their employment was to be thought out and provided for in all schemes of defence.

In addition to the usual lines of trenches, wire, etc., the Fifth Army had arranged for a line of redoubts for all-round defence to be prepared and garrisoned. These were sited on localities

of tactical importance, from 1000 to 2000 yards behind the front line, and there was one on almost every battalion front. These redoubts performed most effective service, and in almost all cases were most gallantly defended.

Certain of our most forward hospitals, Casualty Clearing Stations being their official title, were evacuated before the battle and brought back considerably to the rear.

Finally, the *morale* side was not neglected, and besides the appeal which I made to the whole of the Fifth Army through my Divisional Commanders, I was at times asked to speak to the troops and on all these occasions I stuck to one theme, which can be deduced from a copy of some notes in pencil which I found among my papers—and which I give here as originally written :

What our Country now demands from her soldiers.

The Germans will attack—their weight, their hopes.

It is their last card.

If that fails—all is lost, for them.

It will fail—if we stand firm.

But this is a crisis.

What we fight for—necessary to nerve ourselves.

We entered war with Enthusiasm—

But now—must be carried on—with Patience, Perseverance,  
Dogged Courage.

But these qualities required at home also.

We soldiers must realise that it is the People at war. We must  
help those at home by our own cheerfulness—our own  
courage.

So far, spoken to you as Citizens—

Now a few words as soldiers—

Remember our Traditions.

We are now responsible for a great Trust.

When the time comes—let us be—Ready.

Vigilant.

Resolute.

Cheerful.

When we have secured—Our Homes—our Honour—and Peace.

Then our children can say that we failed not in our duty, we  
handed them a great and noble Heritage.

These may sound exaggerated words in these days, thirteen years after the War, when it is not so much the fashion to set duty and sacrifice for others in the forefront of our conduct in life, but in those distant days such words, spoken to officers and men who understood something of the reality of these matters

and of the magnitude of the task before them, did not fall, I believe, on deaf ears. The Fifth Army did respond to the call of Duty; it did fight the German effort to a standstill; it did shatter their last hope; it was ready, vigilant, resolute and cheerful, under conditions of danger, terror, fatigue to a degree to which no other soldiers have ever been exposed. They 'stuck it out' grimly.

Moreover, I verily believe that the appeal to our great race is always most potent when it is made to its courage, to its sense of duty; when it calls for self-sacrifice, for noble aims, rather than to self-interest, or hatred, or to the baser passions. I have such a faith in my countrymen wherever they are found all over the world that I am sure they will always do their duty if they are told what it is, and are asked to do it. That is still the great cry to the heart of our people; nor do I think that such appeals, on the rare occasions when they are required, should be dismissed as purely hot air.

When all the defensive measures of the Fifth Army are studied, and when the thorough way in which they were gone into is seen (as is evident in the official instructions, letters, etc.), it can hardly be said that with the time and forces available much was neglected which the wit of man could devise for making good our defence.

Over some vital matters we had no control: the number of men at our disposal; the long-continued dry weather in mid-winter prior to 21st March; and then dense fog.

As to the numbers at our disposal, Brig. General E. A. Wood wrote to me on 23rd April 1925, and said: 'Our last meeting was on 19th March 1918—when I was holding the front line at Fort Vandreuil, with my brigade—the 55th (18th Division). You came up with the Corps Commander, General Butler, and I remember your severe criticisms on the thinness of my line over a vast front.'

My own activities during these weeks of preparation were naturally confined a good deal to the office, studying reports and maps, discussing and drawing up with the Army Staff the issue of orders and instructions, corresponding with G.H.Q. and my neighbours. But I got out often enough to go along all our forty-two miles of front, and see nearly all the Divisional and Brigade Commanders at one time or another. I used to make rough notes of what I saw and ask the corps concerned about the matters on my return.

As a sample which may prove of interest, here are some of my notes made one morning during a tour of the fronts of the VII and Cavalry Corps.

1. Security of troops in rear—not attended to. Picquets wanted in proportion to strength of force, not merely sentries—example—St. Emilie, Ronssoy. Templeux Quarries. Frequent inspection by Div. Staffs necessary.
2. Garrisons of Posts—not clear as to duties—or best use of fire—no idea of mutual support, or value enfilade fire—all fire direct. Again—frequent inspection by Staffs wanted.
3. Plans of defence—too disjointed.  
Too much left to juniors.  
But plans belong to seniors.  
Result—badly laid out defences—no mutual support—only isolated and direct defence.
4. 1 battalion—at Villers-Faucon—support to brigade 4000 yards from Epéhy—over an hour's march. What are its orders? Is it to reinforce and hold Epéhy? If so—what posts is it to occupy?
5. 2 battalions—Reserve Brigade. Longavesnes. 4000 from rear—Battle Zone—1 hour. What are their orders?  
Should move to Saulcourt (2 miles) on order—'prepare for battle'—
6. Ronssoy—and Lempire (two villages which ran into one)—held by one battalion, very small for so large a place.  
If Reserve Battalions are to go up to Ronssoy how do they fit in with present garrison?  
What posts do they occupy? Do they know them?
7. 24th Division.  
Reserve Brigade—Montigny—Bernes 2 to 3 hours' march.  
Cannot some battalions be kept forward—at Hesbécourt—Hervilly—?  
Anyhow—to move there—on 'prepare for battle' order—  
3rd Cav. Div.—one brigade—one battalion at Vadencourt—  
What is its rôle—its orders—?  
Who is responsible for defence Le Verguier?
8. Discipline at Schools.  
Comfort of officers and men.

These notes give some idea of the life of an Army Commander in the field, and his duties. Constant inspection and instruction by the higher Staffs were needed. Many points which were noted would have been dealt with by Battalion and Brigade Commanders in the days of a professional and fully-trained



Army, but though the constant fighting of the previous year had taught officers much and nerved them for the fray, it had left them ignorant of much which they should have known but which they never had the time to learn.

The system of Army Schools for junior officers was designed to meet this difficulty. A certain proportion of the officers and N.C.O.'s were withdrawn in turn from the line and sent to these schools for a couple of months, in order to get an all-round training, which they could not acquire in the trenches. But the system fulfilled another essential object ; it gave our greatly strained young officers and N.C.O.'s a complete change and some comfort, brought them back to civilisation and to a certain amount of good cheer. I used to go down, when possible, at the end of each course to give away the prizes, and sometimes dined at the school mess afterwards. It reminded me of the '*bonne camaraderie*' of old days in the Army—toasts, songs and a bear-fight.

It was on one of these occasions that I found a contingent of young American officers who had just finished the course with our own. They were a delightful lot of young men, frank, cheerful, desperately keen to learn, modest and free from all jealousy. They presented the school with a gramophone as an expression of gratitude for the good time they had passed there. The presentation was accompanied by speeches, toasts, etc., in which chaff, fun and wit were conspicuous. In the subsequent bear-fight, which I surveyed from the safe vantage point of the doorway, it was impossible to differentiate between British and Americans ; the hurly-burly of merry shouting youngsters was a kaleidoscope of happy augury.

One wondered how men could so quickly throw aside the memories of the desperate enterprise they were engaged on, how quickly they could change to earnest, stern, resolute leaders in battle. But human nature is largely made that way, at least the best of it is ; it is well that it is so, otherwise we could never carry on in times of great suffering, and should lose half the happiness of life. The capacity for recovery from mental and physical shock and strain is one of the highest tests of character and vitality. It was an attribute desperately needed and doggedly applied by all ranks of the Fifth Army in the weeks that were to come.

IV<sup>1</sup>

*Der Tag* was now approaching. We were nearly certain of the day.

Very early on March 19th, the last pieces of evidence from the Fifth Army front regarding the approaching storm were gathered. A German artillery non-commissioned officer captured west of Bony, an aeroplane pilot brought down near Ly-Fontaine, infantry prisoners captured south-west of Villers-Guislain, and Alsatian deserters from a trench-mortar battery south of St. Quentin, all told the same story, each in his own way—in some cases, it is true, unwittingly. The sources of information were not only independent, but the prisoners were of widely differing types: and the news they gave, corroborating many other indications, completed the last link in the chain of evidence gradually forged during the preceding weeks. All these matters were reported by 'urgent operations priority' telegrams to G.H.Q., and after several long telephone conversations between the writer<sup>2</sup> and Cox it was agreed that the final details as regards the date and hour of the enemy's attack, the nature of the preliminary gas bombardment, the German reserves available, etc., were now in our possession.<sup>3</sup>

On 19th March I wrote to my wife:

I expect a bombardment will begin to-morrow night, last six or eight hours, and then will come the German infantry on Thursday, 21st.

Every one is calm and very confident. All is ready.

The final steps over which the Fifth Army had control were now taken.

On 18th March I had moved the 2nd Cavalry Division (General Greenly) down to the right as a reserve to Butler's III Corps. It was the only reserve at the disposal of this Corps, which was holding a front of eighteen miles. I also moved the 39th Division a little closer to Congreve's front, VII Corps.

The 20th Division was fifteen miles behind the front of the XVIII Corps, and I wanted to move it up five to eight miles further northward, to Ham and north of it. In addition, I wished to move forward the 50th Division at least a day's march and bring it across to the east side of the Somme—as it

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 17, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> Lt. Colonel F. S. G. Piggott, in an article in *The Army Quarterly*, January 1925. Lt. Colonel Piggott, in March 1918, was G.S.O. 1 (Intelligence), Fifth Army.

was more than twenty-five miles behind our front—and I asked authority of G.H.Q. for these moves. These steps were in my opinion most urgent, almost vital. G.H.Q. refused to allow me to move a man.

The Chief of the Staff spoke to me on the telephone one evening after dinner, about the 19th, and said that it was not sound to move reserves before the situation was clear, that to move them up would be to tie them down, and that 'they would be committed.' He thought it a mistake to have moved the 2nd Cavalry Division to the III Corps. These moves, he said, were premature. He spoke in general terms, and gave me, in fact, a little lecture on the conduct of military operations in accordance with the teachings of the great Masters. I was quite well aware of these principles, but they did not apply to the situation in which the Fifth Army was placed at that moment. We knew we were to be attacked in overwhelming force. We knew our line was dangerously thin, and that the fighting which the difficult and delicate rôle of a delaying action and the '*manœuvre en retraite*' imposed on us must involve a prolonged struggle, and it was important to spare the troops as much hustle and fatigue as possible. Moreover, all the lessons of the War, both in attack and defence, had taught us how important it was, once your action was decided on, to close up the supports and reserves behind the line. No one had suffered more from the failure to recognise this principle than had Haig himself at the Battle of Loos, when Sir John French had denied him the use of his reserves till too late.

The admonitions of the Chief of the Staff therefore failed to impress me. I could not understand his point of view under the circumstances, and I answered that to move up reserves close behind the threatened points was an equally well-known axiom, and I thought these two divisions should certainly be moved forward.

I failed, however, to obtain the sanction of G.H.Q., and I never discovered if Lawrence was delivering me a message from Haig or representing the General Staff view of the case.

In any case, I thought it was a grave mistake at the time, and events and further consideration have not made me change my opinion. I knew a great deal more of the circumstances on my front and grasped the situation facing us a great deal more clearly than did G.H.Q. at this time—or, in fact, at any time during this battle.

It is impossible for me to say that G.H.Q. showed a full understanding of the circumstances and progress of the battle. Neither the Chief of the Staff nor any senior Staff Officer visited me personally during its course. I believe some junior officers from G.H.Q. were sent to visit the divisions and may have come into the Army office and talked to the junior members of the Army Staff, but I never saw them. I believe they reported that, in spite of the desperate odds and the heavy losses of the strenuous retreat, the spirit of officers and men was splendid and their courage unabated. I dare say they found the same atmosphere existing at Army Headquarters—for it certainly did. But these casual visits of junior officers were far from being the steps which the situation demanded. By 10 a.m. on 21st March G.H.Q. must have known the magnitude of the attack. Officers of their senior Staff might have been with me, in the early afternoon at latest, and perhaps daily during the ensuing days of the fighting. I could have made the situation much clearer to them personally than was possible on the telephone. They might have helped considerably in the co-ordination of the action of the two Armies.

During the whole eight days' battle, the only member of G.H.Q. who came to see and hear things for himself was Haig. He came and saw me once—on Saturday, 23rd. We did not go at all into details of the situation, nor of the action of the Third Army. The possibilities of its holding up the German advances on my flank, and the chance of success of a heavy counter-attack by this Army on my left and the great effect such action would have had, were not discussed. Haig was calm and cheerful, but all he said to me was: 'Well, Hubert, one can't fight without men'—a fact which I could well appreciate, and which the gallant soldiers of the Fifth Army must also have realised as they struggled to stay the flood, to fill gaps which suddenly opened first here and then there, owing to the sway and swirl of the thin retreating line.

But to return to the 20th and 50th Divisions in G.H.Q. Reserve. If they had been moved up as I asked, their men would not have had to enter on a terrific fight without rest after long and harassing marches, their officers could have reconnoitred their positions, and a little more time would have been available to strengthen them. If the attack had not come and they had not been required, they could easily have been withdrawn and despatched elsewhere. To move them up was not



to commit them. I still consider that retaining them under G.H.Q. so long was an error, and that they should have been placed under my orders on arrival in my area. Though Haig could not, quite justifiably when the strategical situation is considered, send the Fifth Army any further material support, G.H.Q. might have helped in other directions more than they did. In several matters the Fifth Army was not too well served. G.H.Q. had refused to give me the Chief of the Staff for whom I asked; they removed General Pulteney from the III Corps and sent General Butler shortly before the battle without consulting me; they took away the commander of the 50th Division, General Clifford Coffin, V.C., without giving me any warning or asking my opinion, on the eve of battle itself, and appointed in his place a Brigadier who was in one of the Divisions engaged on the III Corps front (General H. C. Jackson); he could not be immediately spared to take over his new command, and, in any case, was a complete stranger to it. This left the 50th Division to be commanded in the greatest battle we had yet fought by the next senior officer, to chance in fact, and he was not the man for such a task. Furthermore, Lt. Colonel S. S. Butler, the head of my Intelligence Section, was taken to G.H.Q. *on 18th March*, and Lt. Colonel P. R. C. Commings, A.Q.M.G.—the second senior on the Administrative, or Q side, under Hambro—was moved to G.H.Q. *on 17th March*.

The two cavalry divisions of the Indian Army, moreover, were also withdrawn from the Fifth Army at this critical moment, and sent to Palestine. At the moment the battle opened they were embarking at Marseilles and were of no use to any one. For this reduction in my strength I do not think G.H.Q. was responsible. This was due to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff in England and the Cabinet, but perhaps a strong protest and a more convincing assertion of the imminence of the storm might have retained these two divisions for a few weeks longer at the spot where the great decision was being fought out. They would have been a valuable reinforcement.

On Sunday, 17th—St. Patrick's Day—the 20th Division had some sports and an Officers' Jumping Competition, for which I entered both my chargers. In the afternoon I went down to have a chat with the officers of this division and rode my two horses, one of them being 4th out of a total of 120 entries. I did this not only for the sake of a ride round the jumping course, which I enjoyed, but because I thought it was good to meet the

20th Division and see its members under friendly conditions, and also to show some calm confidence in the outcome of the great events before us. I remembered that the Duke of Wellington attended the Duchess of Richmond's Ball in Brussels just before Waterloo, and that one of his principal reasons for doing so was the same. I felt I had a good precedent for thus spending my Sunday afternoon.

During March the Germans began bombing us severely at night, wherever a target was to be found. About a week before the battle they attacked Congreve's Headquarters, which were established in a group of huts, with little or no bomb-proof protection. A Member of Parliament had come out to visit my Army, and I sent him for a night or two to stay with Congreve and study our front there. He was unlucky enough to be there during this attack, and it must have brought home to him in full force the horrors and terrors of war. A succession of German planes dropped bombs on these Headquarters for several hours. Congreve and his Staff had just sat down to dinner, but in spite of the terrific explosions all round, Congreve sat quietly on and ate his dinner entirely unmoved. All the wind-screens and every pane of glass of the motors attached to Corps Headquarters were smashed, but otherwise not a car was touched. Two officers and three men were killed—the wonder was that they were not all blown to bits.

A night or two afterwards, the Germans dropped some bombs on Nesle, close to my Headquarters. I went out to see what mischief had been done, and found a bomb had dropped on a shed used as a billet by a company of one of our Labour battalions; several men were lying among the wreckage, dead or wounded. I bent over one man in the dark, an old labourer of about fifty years of age. He was quite calm, though this must have been his first experience of war at close quarters, and in spite of the great shock that the explosion of a bomb causes, he said to me, 'I am going; put your hand into my jacket and pull out my pocket-book and write what I tell you.' I said, 'Oh no, you just keep quiet and rest yourself.' But he insisted, and said, 'I want to have everything settled up nicely for my missus.' It struck me as a wonderful tribute to his coolness, his courage, his thought for others. I flattered myself that perhaps it was only among the British such a spirit could have existed under similar conditions.

On Tuesday, 19th, it began to rain, and this continued at

intervals during the next day—the first rain for nearly eight weeks. This was the prime cause of the very heavy fog and mist which so handicapped our unfortunate troops during the first three days or so of the battle. I went round all my four Corps Commanders on Wednesday to have a final talk over everything before the battle. With Army Headquarters some thirty miles behind the front, a journey of this kind took up a large part of the day.

At this stage—on the very eve of the battle, so to speak—it is convenient and pertinent to give some details of the German forces opposed to the Fifth and Third Armies.

On our extreme right, south of the Oise, General Boehn's Seventh Army had 2 divisions facing 2 brigades of our 58th Division—but made no attack.

From La Fère, for five miles northwards, was Gayl's Corps of 4 divisions, facing 1 brigade of our 58th, and 1 brigade of our 18th Division.

From here to the north, as far as the Omignon River, stood Von Hutier's Eighteenth Army with 13 divisions in front line and 8 in second line, a total of 21 divisions.

To meet him stood 4 divisions, and two brigades of the 18th Division, of our III and XVIII Corps, with the equivalent of another brigade, in the form of the 2nd Cavalry Division, in support. It might be fair perhaps also to count the 20th Division in G.H.Q. Reserve, though it was fifteen miles from the front, and could not get into the fight on 21st March.

North of Von Hutier's Army was the German Second Army under Von der Marwitz. It stretched northwards from the Omignon River, as far as our left, and beyond it had 4 divisions still further north, facing 3 divisions of Byng's Third Army in the Flesquières salient, but these made no attack on the 21st.

Von der Marwitz's Army attacked the Fifth Army with 13 divisions in front line, and 4 in second line, a total of 17 divisions. To resist this attack stood 5 British divisions of our XIX and VII Corps in front line, with 1 division (the 39th) in support, and the equivalent of 1 brigade in the form of the 1st Cavalry Division.

North of Von der Marwitz's Army was the Seventeenth Army under Von Bülow. He delivered a secondary attack on the Third Army, north of the Flesquières salient, with 9 divisions in front line and 6 in second line, a total of 15 divisions. To

oppose this attack the Third Army was able to employ 8 divisions on 21st March.

The odds in the actual attack against the two British Armies on 21st March were, therefore :

FIFTH ARMY	I Brigade 58th Division	} opposing	Boehn's Seventh Army	Gayl's Corps of 4 divisions
	I Brigade 18th Division			
	III and XVIII Corps with equivalent of 5 divisions	"	Von Hutier's Eighteenth Army	21 divisions
	XIX and VII Corps, with 6½ divisions	"	Von der Marwitz's Second Army	17 divisions
THIRD ARMY	8 divisions	"	Von Bülow's Seventeenth Army	15 divisions
A total of 42 German divisions against 12 British in the Fifth Army				
and 15 " " " 8 " in the Third Army				
or a grand total of 57 " " " 20 "				

Behind Von Hutier there were 8 more divisions coming up, 4 of which were within 8 miles of the front on 21st March, while to the rear of Von der Marwitz were a further 4 divisions.

The Fifth Army had behind it—

The 20th and 50th Divisions, which got into action on the 22nd.

One French division (125th), which came into action on the 23rd.

The 8th British Division, which began to arrive on the 23rd.

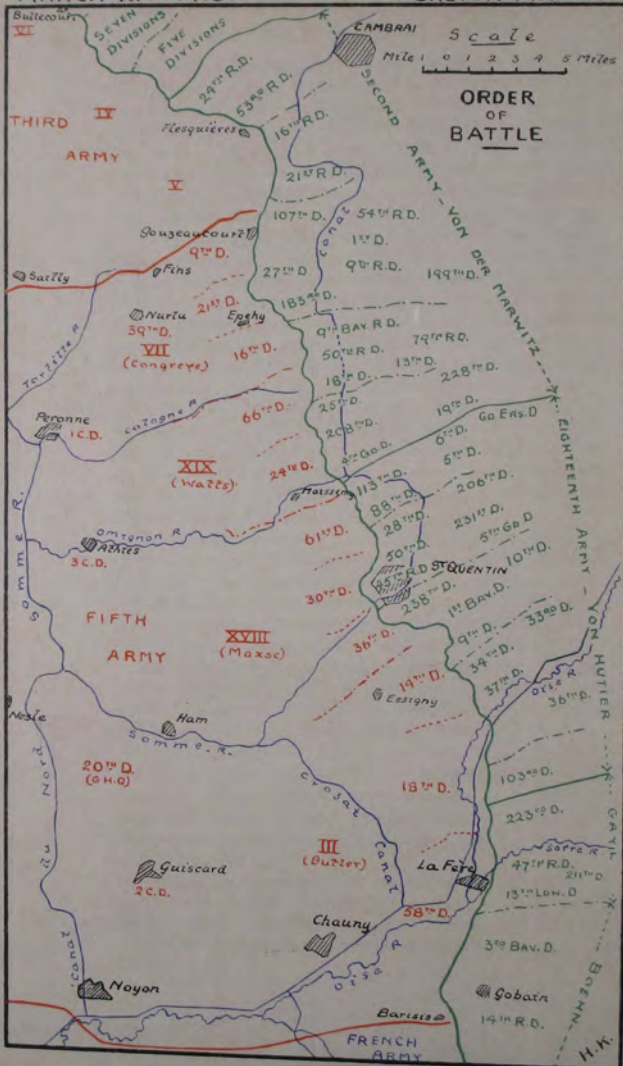
Two more French divisions, which arrived on the battlefield by the 24th (9th and 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division).

Total reinforcements up to 24th March—6 divisions.

The enormous odds facing the Fifth Army are thus immediately apparent. Furthermore, it should be remembered that while the German divisions had been strongly reinforced, our own were grievously under establishment—the average strength of our battalions scarcely exceeding 600 men. This, coupled with the loss of a battalion per brigade, to which I have previously referred, meant that each division was reduced practically to one-half of its former infantry strength.



SKETCH MAP 17.



us. The Fifth Army Staff alone had foreseen that such an attack was possible.

The night of 20th March every man in the Fifth Army whose duty allowed him to do so, lay down calmly enough for a night's sleep, but all of us felt perfectly certain that we would be wakened before morning by the roar of battle. And so we were!

## CHAPTER X

### THE BATTLE OF ST. QUENTIN

*The Storm Breaks—News from the Corps—Inaction of G.H.Q.—The Battle Day by Day—A Fighting Retreat Ordered—Filling Gaps—The Retirement behind the Somme—Difficulties of the Third Army—The South African Brigade—Extemporised Battalions—The Visit of Foch—The Last Assaults—Relief of the Fifth Army—Aftermath—Conclusion.*

I<sup>1</sup>

*Thursday, 21 March.*

AT 10 minutes past 5 I was awakened by the roar of a bombardment, which, though it sounded dully in my room in Nesle, was so sustained and steady that it at once gave me the impression of some crushing, smashing power. I jumped out of bed and walked across the passage to the telephone in my office and called up the General Staff. On what part of our front was the bombardment falling? The answer came back almost immediately: 'All four corps report heavy bombardment along their front. Third Army report bombardment on about ten miles of the southern part of their front. The French report no bombardment on their front. No signs of any infantry advance as yet.' This at once opened my eyes to the magnitude of the attack on the Fifth Army. It dispelled with brutality any lingering hopes and ideas that I might further thin out some unthreatened part of my line and concentrate more troops against the main German attack, and perhaps collect enough to launch a powerful counter-attack. Obviously that was not to be; the problem was more simple, though far more terrible and menacing. The whole thin line was involved, and our few supports, reserves, and all the energies of our minds and bodies would be called on to maintain it intact along its whole length.

We issued a few orders, and warned all concerned. Troops in reserve, under G.H.Q. or not, were ordered to be ready to move. At the moment there was nothing more to be done. All the necessary steps to meet the storm had been taken: the

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 18, p. 282.

German infantry would not attack for several hours. I looked out of my window, and in the morning light I could see that there was a thick fog, such as we had not yet experienced during the whole of the winter. We were getting into spring, and it was extraordinary to have so dense a fog at this date. Very dimly I could see the branches of a tree in the garden about forty feet from my window. The stars in their courses seemed to be fighting for the Germans. But it was imperative that we should not be discouraged; it was necessary to make a further call on our hearts for Resolution, determining that we would win, cost what it might, in the end, even if all went against us at first.

I threw myself back on my bed, and went to sleep for an hour. By 8.30, shaved, bathed and fed, I was back at the telephone, but no reports of the German advance had yet reached us. I was convinced of the magnitude of the attack by now, the bombardment continuing unabated and reports having come in of the smashing effect on our trenches and wire. Our batteries were being smothered by gas shells, but in spite of all the personnel having to wear their masks—a great handicap to violent exertion—they were firing rapidly on known targets 'by the map'—for nothing could be seen owing to the fog, and they could not therefore fire on anything visible. Our aeroplanes could not get into the air, nor could the pilots have seen anything if they had succeeded in doing so: our plans for their employment, therefore, were of no avail, or, at any rate, could not be put into force till hours had passed and the fog had begun to lift.

This was no moment for delay or awaiting authority. I therefore sent orders to the two divisions in G.H.Q. Reserve: to the 20th to march on Ham, and come under the XVIII Corps orders as soon as possible; to the 50th Division to get ready immediately to entrain the infantry and send the artillery by road, to come under the orders of the XIX Corps.

Having warned and started these two divisions, I called up G.H.Q. and asked for their authority to move them, which was now granted. I found myself speaking to General Davidson. I asked when we could expect support, and I told him that we certainly should want it. He told me that all the G.H.Q. arrangements for moving down fresh divisions to our front were being set in action: but these arrangements were to send four divisions to the Third Army first, and that the fifth division



would be sent to me; 'I could not expect it for 72 hours.' That would be Sunday morning. The question came into my mind, could we last as long? It was asking a good deal of the Fifth Army. As events turned out, this division actually arrived a little sooner.

During the morning reports of the action began to come in, and we knew something of what was taking place along our front. The terrific bombardment had cut most of our signal wires and prevented our runners from getting back with messages, most of them becoming casualties long before they could reach their destination, while the fog prevented all observation or visual signalling. The reports therefore were still meagre and scrappy, and did not enable either Corps or Army Headquarters to be absolutely sure of the true course of events. Meanwhile, though the fog was now lifting, the din and roar of battle continued. Roads, especially cross-roads, aerodromes and our back areas were being kept under a heavy fire by long-range guns.

The German gunners had not only an enormous concentration of guns and trench mortars, but also plenty of ammunition, and they were firing at a tremendous rate, so much so that it was said that in many instances their guns became so hot that periodical pauses were necessary to cool them. It was on this preponderance of artillery that the Germans depended for the first phase of the assault in the blasting of a gap through which the masses of infantry could pass. Their hopes were high and their anticipations extensive: based on their experiences at the Battles of Riga and Caporetto, the two German Armies of Hutier and Marwitz expected to reach the line of the Crozat Canal and the Somme as far north as Péronne by the evening of the 21st March.

But when the first fateful day of the struggle closed they were far from attaining these objectives, thanks to the gallantry, the sense of duty, the heroic self-sacrifice of the officers and men of the Fifth Army.

☛ In the Forward Zone of our defence, thinly held by about twenty battalions on the whole front of nearly forty miles, eight or nine battalions entirely sacrificed themselves and disappeared, but not before they had inflicted very heavy losses on the Germans, and had already begun to wear out many of the enemy divisions. If there had been no fog the German losses would in all probability have been doubled.

The battlefield consisted of bare open plateaux, with long spurs after the nature of fingers, running east and west.

Between these fingers lay broad deep valleys. Of woods there were few, and those more of the nature of copses, with the exception of Holnon Wood, strongly prepared for defence, in the centre of the XVIII Corps line.

Although our trenches were continuous, our line was not so by any means. Our numbers were far too few to permit of our maintaining a continuous line. Our front, therefore, was held by isolated posts, in irregular and zigzag lines, so laid out that the posts, and machine guns in particular, could fire along long belts of wire and take an attacking enemy in enfilade. The posts were drawn back in the valleys, with the object of firing across and sweeping the opposite spurs. Our forward guns were also placed at the end of valleys to sweep not only the valley but also the spurs on either side. To obtain the full power of such a defensive system a visibility of 1000 yards at least was required.

But the fog on the 21st reduced the visibility to 20 yards, and our elaborate arrangements of flank defences were brought to nought. The garrisons of the isolated posts could do nothing but wait till they could see their foes, which was not possible until the latter were within 20 to 50 yards, by which time the first wave of the attack had often already passed behind them. There was then nothing left to the posts but to fight it out as best they could, each a little island among a sea of enemies, alone and unsupported. Moreover, the bombardment had caused heavy casualties, many of our posts being annihilated by the artillery fire before a single German appeared, and many others losing a large proportion of their effectives.

Before 10.30 a.m. reports came in :

The III Corps—the 18th Division had repulsed an attack, and the 14th Division said it was fighting in the forward and battle positions.

The XVIII Corps reported its line intact.

The XIX Corps—the 66th Division reported that the situation seemed developing.

The VII Corps reported attacks on Quentin Ridge and Gauche Wood—held by the 9th Division.

Soon after this, the III Corps reported that the enemy, debouching from La Fère, had taken the Forward Zone held by a brigade of the 58th Division.

Between 10.30 and 11.30 a.m. reports reached us at Army Headquarters that the attack was general along the whole Army front, and that everywhere the enemy had penetrated our Forward Zone, though many isolated redoubts were gallantly holding out and were still able to communicate with their divisions and corps.

At 12.15 p.m. the XIX Corps reported that their 'Front Battle Zone was being turned from the north.' This pointed to the capture of Ronsoy, and this was confirmed shortly afterwards by the 16th Division who had been holding that village. Congreve—VII Corps—reported that he was dealing with this situation, and sending up some reserves. He said the 21st and 9th Divisions were holding their line firmly, although heavy fighting was going on.

Such were the first messages which came in to our Headquarters.

About 1 p.m. the fog had lifted sufficiently for our aeroplanes to get into the air, and shortly afterwards we heard from them that masses of Germans could be seen moving forward, and that the roads in their rear for ten to fifteen miles were 'packed with troops.'

It was evident that the Germans were attacking in overwhelming masses along almost the whole length of the Fifth Army front.

The III Corps reported the loss of the important villages of Essigny and Benay in its Battle Zone, and that the 14th Division had suffered very heavy losses. I talked to Butler on the telephone. He had only the 2nd Cavalry Division in reserve, the equivalent of one infantry brigade, and his line was 18,000 yards long. He did not think it possible then, or later on, to launch so small a force in order to retake these villages, and I agreed. It would have required at least a division, and that ready and on the spot, to have successfully counter-attacked against them.

It was now evident that the German attack was so serious that I could not hope to fight it out successfully in the Battle Zone, but must carry out a delaying action, which would aim at saving the Army from complete annihilation, but which would enable it at the same time to maintain an intact, though battered and thin, line in face of the German masses until such time as the British and French Commands could send up sufficient troops to hold the ground.

In adopting this policy we would fight hard enough to inflict very heavy losses on the Germans, wear them down and perhaps

exhaust them. Our Supreme Command would then be in a position to strike a powerful, possibly a decisive and final blow.

This reasoning was reinforced by the instructions I had already received from Haig, confirmed in writing by the letter of 9th February from G.H.Q. already quoted. Moreover, I knew by now how small were the resources on which I could rely in order to play the delicate rôle allotted to the Fifth Army.

From the British Army I could expect one division <sup>1</sup> in three days, and one more the following day. From French sources, one division would be with me ready to take its place in the battlefield after two days, and then I might hope for two more after three days; a total of five fresh divisions in action by the fifth day of battle, a help certainly, but—when a front of over forty miles had to be reinforced—still quite insufficient to bring to a standstill the German masses which would also be receiving reinforcement. We must look forward to maintaining the struggle for at least eight days. Our losses in the Forward Zone, where our battalions had so faithfully and steadfastly fought it out, and had been almost annihilated in doing so, had proved what the result of a decisive battle would be.

The French Sixth Army in position on our right informed me it was sending one division across the Oise on Friday, but it would not be in line till Saturday morning, the 23rd, and General Humbert, who was commanding the Third French Army, in reserve behind our right, informed me that no troops had been placed at his disposal by General Pétain for co-operation with me.

The particular rôle of Humbert's Army, as I had been given to understand, was to move up to our support in case of necessity, and to take over again its original front, relieving the Fifth Army.

The majority of its divisions, however, had been moved to other parts of the French front, in view of possible German attacks, as already stated.

In a narrative by the German Staff <sup>2</sup> on this battle it appears that when discussing the attack on the British Army, Sauberzweig, Chief of the Staff, Second Army, said, 'The French will not hurry themselves to the help of their Ally when attacked.

<sup>1</sup> As already stated, the first division to arrive (the 8th) began to appear in line in two days, but I did not at the time expect it before the third day.

<sup>2</sup> *The Army Quarterly*, January 1929.



They will wait first to see if they will not themselves be attacked on their front, and they will not decide to assist their Ally until the situation is completely cleared up for them. This will be late, for demonstrations will be executed by the Crown Prince's Group of Armies to deceive the French.'

It seems that the German Staff had arrived at a fairly accurate conclusion as to how events would influence the minds and the action of the French.

Later on, Humbert came in to see me, and when I said something to the effect that it was a desperate struggle and that I was glad to see him with his Army, he replied, '*Mais, je n'ai que mon fanion,*' referring to the little pennant on his motor with the Army colours. This, however, was not exactly the aid that we were looking for at that moment!

I spoke on the telephone to all the four Corps Commanders during the early afternoon, and told them that our policy was to fight a delaying action, holding up the enemy as long as possible, without involving the troops in a decisive struggle to hold any one position.

This was confirmed next morning by the following telegraphic order:

10.45 a.m.—In the event of serious hostile attack Corps will fight rear-guard action back to forward line of Rear Zone and if necessary to rear line of Rear Zone. Most important that Corps should keep close touch with each other and carry out retirement in close touch with each other and Corps belonging to armies on flank.

Immediately after my telephone conversation with the Corps Commanders, I got into a car and went round to see them. Owing to the rapid movement of events, I could not be away too long from the telephone, so I was only able to pay each a hurried visit. Before I started—about 3 o'clock—I ordered the 3rd Cavalry Division to move down at once to the support of the III Corps, and it reached its destination by 10 that evening.

### III Corps.

Butler was the first of the Corps Commanders whom I visited, as the situation seemed more serious here than elsewhere, and it was necessary to decide what steps should be taken on this flank before deciding on the course of action of the other Corps. I found him perhaps a little anxious, but this, of course, was very natural in view of the situation. The fact of losing ground and guns in his first battle as a commander pressed rather heavily upon him, and it was not, of course, an

encouraging start-off. However, I did not let him worry much about that; the Corps had had to encounter enormous odds, and now the only thing which mattered was to take the right steps to meet the menacing storm.

His left—14th Division—had been very severely handled, and driven back a considerable distance, thus exposing the left of the 18th Division, the right of which was also being threatened from La Fère. We decided, therefore, to draw back his whole Corps behind the Crozat Canal, and I told him that I was reinforcing him with the 3rd Cavalry Division.

I found Maxse and his Staff cheerful, active and confident, *XVIII Corps*. and thus they remained throughout the whole of the battle. His XVIII Corps had done magnificently, and after desperate fighting still held its Battle Zone intact. The nine battalions, however, holding its Forward Zone had sacrificed themselves, bravely and stoutly, and had been almost annihilated in doing so.

In spite of the firm front which the XVIII Corps could still show, both its flanks were seriously threatened, its right by the loss of Essigny on the III Corps front, and its left by the loss of Maissemy by the XIX Corps. Maxse and I arranged, therefore, that he should continue to hold his Battle Zone as long as possible on Friday, 22nd, but that he should draw back his right flank, to keep touch with the III Corps which was withdrawing to the line of the Crozat Canal, and that he should also throw back his left to cover the Omignon valley and keep touch with the XIX Corps.

Though Watts's XIX Corps had not lost as much ground as *XIX Corps*. the III Corps, it was facing perhaps the most serious prospect on the front of the Fifth Army; for the odds against it were heavy, its troops were few, and any reserves on which it could count were a long way behind it. It consisted of only two weak divisions, the 24th and the 66th, with the 1st Cavalry Division in support. The 50th Division, which I had allocated to Watts, was too far away to be any use that day, and he was only able to get it hurriedly into position by Friday morning, after it had spent a day in the train and had marched all night.

The Forward Zone of this Corps had also been overrun, and its right driven back considerably. It had lost Maissemy in the Battle Zone early in the day, but in its centre the 8th Queen's in Le Verguier were maintaining a stout defence. On the left, which the loss of Ronssoy by the 16th Division of the VII Corps

had exposed, the line had also been driven back to the village of Templeux.

Watts was a spare, active man, quiet and very modest in demeanour, but one of the most courageous and experienced of our commanders. Having retired from the Army previous to the War, he returned on its outbreak and was at once put in command of one of the brigades of the 7th Division, intended for the relief of Antwerp. Since then, engaged in almost every battle, he had risen to the command of a corps. His judgment, sane as it was courageous, was an inestimable asset to his Corps, and to me.

My instructions to Watts were to hold his present front as long as possible, but to bend back his left and there keep in touch with the VII Corps.

*VII  
Corps.*

Congreve's Corps had maintained its Battle Zone intact on the left where it was in touch with the Third Army (V Corps), but its right had been pressed back considerably and Ronssoy lost. Acting with decision and energy, Congreve had brought up the 39th Division and built up a new front with one of its brigades. The 21st Division was still holding Epéhy in spite of the desperate assaults of the Germans, and the 9th Division had also brought the German attack to a standstill in front of its Battle Zone.

The fall of Ronssoy left the 2nd Royal Irish Regiment almost isolated in the neighbouring village of Lempire. Here, almost completely surrounded, it held on with great tenacity till 2 p.m. against overwhelming assaults, and long after that hour some posts were still bravely holding out.

The Munsters holding the hill south of Epéhy fought on until 5 p.m., and then the remnants fell back into the village and played a gallant part in its defence until it eventually fell next day.

About 5 p.m. the news of the position on the Third Army front came in and made its position clear to us. The Germans had attacked its front north of the Flesquières salient, and had driven in a wedge to a depth of three miles or so, and were already across the Bapaume-Cambrai high road in front of, or in actual possession of, the villages of Demicourt, Doignies, and Beaumetz. This was indeed a very serious threat to Byng's V Corps, which had three of its five divisions in the Flesquières salient. Their retreat was now compromised. He had decided, therefore, to withdraw this corps to his Battle Zone, which was

behind the left of my 9th Division—which was still holding the Forward Zone. The retirement of the Third Army would leave my left in the air, and Congreve therefore was obliged to withdraw this division during the night.

Except for the few miles south of the Oise, the fighting along our whole front had been close and desperate throughout the day, many counter-attacks had been made on the enemy, some of which were successful and threw him back for a time. The officers and men of the Fifth Army along almost our whole front had been exposed to a terribly hard and exhausting day; the Corps and Divisional Commanders, called upon to meet constantly changing situations in the ebb and flow of the violent battle, had to guard new flanks, fill sudden breaches, keep in touch with their neighbours, to find troops for these various tasks as best they could with their very small resources, and to decide with rapidity and act with decision.

Some of the redoubts in the Forward Zone were still holding out. The officer commanding the 7th West Kents had got a message through saying: 'Holding out—Boche all round within fifty yards—can only see fifty yards, so it is difficult to kill the blighters.'

The defence of Manchester Hill in the Forward Zone is another instance of the heroic behaviour of our troops. This hill—opposite St. Quentin, on the front of the 30th Division—was held by the 16th Manchester Regiment, under Lt. Colonel Elstob. On taking over the defence of this position, he had already impressed on his battalion that 'there is only one degree of resistance and that is to the last round, and to the last man.' This injunction was heroically carried out to the letter. At about 11 a.m. Colonel Elstob reported to his brigade that the Germans were swarming round his redoubt. At about 2 p.m. he said that most of his men were killed or wounded, that he himself was wounded, that they were all nearly dead-beat, that the Germans had got into the redoubt, and hand-to-hand fighting was going on. He was still quite cheery. At 3.30 p.m. he answered a call on the telephone and said that very few were left and the end was nearly come. After that, communication ceased. Wounded three times, using his revolver, throwing bombs himself, and firing a rifle, he was last seen on the fire-step, and when called on to surrender by Germans within thirty yards, replied 'Never!' upon which he was shot dead.

Before the battered position fell, the Germans had brought



up field guns to within sixty yards of the redoubt. For 'this most gallant and heroic conduct' (to quote the words of the *Gazette*) Elstob was posthumously awarded the V.C.

To such a leader and to the men who followed him, England owes a debt of gratitude and a measure of admiration which it is impossible to express adequately.

There are countless similar stories of the heroic spirit and the astounding gallantry and energy of officers and men engaged in these days of battle, but the reader must seek them in private letters, regimental histories, the *Official History*, and in Mr. Shaw Sparrow's book.

The 21st March, terribly strenuous day as it had been, was only the beginning of the great struggle which faced the officers and men of the Fifth Army. They were to endure a continuous strain for eight days and more, and as the casualties grew and the brigades and divisions became daily smaller, even greater calls were to be made on their energy, their courage, their endurance.

In no direction can evidence of this energy be seen more clearly than in the capacity for improvising fighting formations of all and sundry, of creating makeshift companies, battalions and even brigades, which so many displayed. Hunt's Force, Carey's Force, Harman's Detachment, were examples of this energetic improvisation, as will be mentioned later.

The result of the first day's battle could be considered satisfactory and as a magnificent effort. We had identified over forty German divisions actively engaged against the Fifth Army. Their losses had been very heavy but the odds were still enormously in their favour, and many fresh divisions were, we knew, marching up close behind the front of attack. On our side the Fifth Army had hardly any fresh men with which to strengthen its line or relieve any of the battered divisions. The line had been thin on the morning of 21st March, but the heavy casualties of the day necessarily caused it to be a great deal thinner on the morning of 22nd March. Those who still stood in the line had been through a terrific day. How did they keep it up for eight days? I never cease to wonder. It was, I think, their invincible courage, sense of duty, profound belief that Britain, in the end, is never beaten, and perhaps also that strong sense of humour which can see at times the ridiculous in the most terrible situations.

That evening after dinner I had a talk to the Chief of the

General Staff on the telephone, and told him of our day and the situation in front of us. I said the Army had done splendidly in holding against such enormous odds practically the whole of its Battle Zone with the exception of the three breaches in our line, at Essigny, Maissemy and Ronsoy. I told him of the number of divisions which the Germans had brought into action against us, and the masses still in rear. I then went on to express very considerable anxiety for the next and following days. The Germans would certainly continue to push their attack on the next day, Friday, and it would undoubtedly continue with unabated fury for many days. Could our tired and attenuated line maintain the struggle without support? That was the question, and it was a grave one. Lawrence did not seem to grasp the seriousness of the situation; he thought that 'the Germans would not come on again the next day'; 'after the severe losses they had suffered,' he thought that they 'would be busy clearing the battlefield,' 'collecting their wounded, reorganising and resting their tired troops.'

I disagreed emphatically, but I failed to make much impression. It has always been my opinion that G.H.Q. did not fully grasp the magnitude of the assault on the Fifth Army or the desperate odds which it had to contend with, and this may have accounted for the misconceptions that were allowed to circulate so freely, even in the Cabinet, during the following weeks.

It has been said that G.H.Q. were misled by my optimism. I do not know that I gave them any valid reason for reaching such a conclusion; certainly my official letters can hardly be said to justify it. I may have hoped to hold the line against some forms of attack and may have said so, but in this case almost the whole available force of the German attack was thrown against the Fifth Army, and when I recognised the unpleasant fact and the necessity for the policy of a battle in retreat which it entailed, G.H.Q. seemed slow to grasp the implications. I found it difficult to get the full gravity of the situation understood. The impression I gained from Lawrence was that he was trying to encourage me and to cheer me up, but that was not what I was wanting. I was quite ready to deal with facts, however menacing, and to handle the situation, however precarious it might be, but it was important that G.H.Q. should realise the position, stripped of all illusions, and I began to think that I had not succeeded in making G.H.Q. understand.

The telephone should not be the only means of communication, and though of immense service it is not sufficient when grave situations have to be examined in all their bearings. Then personal contact is of vital importance. The failure of G.H.Q. Staff to maintain this personal contact, and thus to ensure the necessary co-ordination between the Third and Fifth Armies, was perhaps one of the weakest features of the direction of the battle.

II<sup>1</sup>

*Friday,* When day broke on Friday the Fifth Army had taken up its  
*22 Mar.* new alignments, and though the eleven divisions which had been engaged holding its forty miles of front had suffered heavy casualties, the corps and divisions had managed to get a few fresh troops into line. The III Corps had withdrawn successfully behind the Crozat Canal and had reinforced its new front with some cavalry from the 2nd Cavalry Division.

*III* The fog was as thick as ever in the early morning, and in the  
*Corps.* III Corps area, the Germans, not knowing the exact positions of our men, did not advance in force till about 11 a.m., when the fog had begun to clear a little. After many hours of fierce fighting they succeeded at 7.30 p.m. in capturing Tergnier from the 8th Londons (58th Division). But some posts still held out and were fighting in the village next morning; in fact one post fought on and held its position till 5 p.m. that evening (Saturday).

North of Tergnier the Germans succeeded in forcing the passage of the Canal, and thus the right of the III Corps was pushed back. Along the rest of the front the Germans attacked the corps posted behind the Canal fiercely all day and at times gained a footing on our side of the Canal, but resolute counter-attacks drove them back once more, and when the day was over our men were still holding most of their positions along the Canal.

The French were now sending this Corps some help. Their Sixth Army on our immediate right moved the 125th Division across the Oise, and this division reached a position in reserve about Chauny during the afternoon (22nd) and its artillery came into action.

Meanwhile the 58th Division on our extreme right had come

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 18, p. 282.

under the orders of the French. This was in accordance with the agreement previously made between our G.H.Q. and French G.Q.G., that in case of attack the French would take over once more their original front and thus relieve the British troops. On the XVIII Corps front fighting began earlier than XVIII on that of the III Corps and went on much later—till after Corps. midnight, in fact. Up to the early afternoon a fierce struggle was carried on along the front of the position held in the morning. Many German attacks were repulsed, and on several occasions when they succeeded in gaining a footing in our line gallant counter-attacks made by the few available troops in reserve often succeeded in temporarily recapturing the lost ground. But the battalions were suffering heavy casualties, and Maxse felt that they could not hold on against the continuous and persistent attacks of Von Hutier's Army without being eventually overwhelmed. He had also received the Army order to fight a rear-guard action, and therefore by 1 p.m. he issued an order to his Corps to retire behind the Somme. The brigades broke off the fight therefore, and commenced to retire a distance of eight or nine miles covered by the 20th Division, but this was only done at the cost of much severe fighting.

One brigade of the 20th Division was south of the Somme ; the other two brigades (six battalions) held a line of over 14,000 yards to cover the retirement of the 30th and 61st Divisions. It was a very thin line, even for a rear-guard, amounting to about 1 man to 3½ yards of front. But these six battalions served their purpose, and held up the German advance sufficiently to allow the remainder of the Corps to cross the river. The Germans pressed on with energy and in great force, and under their energetic and resolute leadership there were no signs of 'clearing the previous day's battlefield' or 'reorganising their troops.' They meant to overwhelm us if they could.

Before dawn next morning (Saturday) the XVIII Corps was established along the Somme on both sides of Ham, with the 36th Division on its right—in touch with the III Corps on the Crozat Canal—the 30th in the centre, and the 20th on the left. The 61st had been pulled back behind the 20th in reserve, with the prospect before it of a few hours' rest. The bend of the Somme forms a bow here and was not parallel with the original front, rather lengthening the XVIII Corps line with the left further back than the right. The result of this was that the left



of the Corps was now no longer in touch with its left-hand neighbour, the XIX Corps, which was still some three miles east of the Somme, and this caused Watts grave anxiety, which was naturally reflected in my Headquarters. It upset our plans and demanded new decisions.

Such moments of anxiety were of course of frequent occurrence in this great battle when the long thin line was constantly swaying, opening and closing under the tremendous stress and pressure to which it was exposed from the overwhelming numbers, the energetic leadership, and the efficiency of the German Armies.

It called for a great effort of will to deal decidedly and resolutely with these threats as they arose; the demand was made of all ranks, from the highest to the lowest, struggling desperately to maintain an unbroken front.

XIX  
Corps.

On the XIX Corps front a heavy bombardment of its positions began at 4 a.m. By 7 a.m. the Germans were vigorously attacking the 66th Division, and before 8.30 they were at the 24th Division. The latter repulsed the first attack with heavy loss to the enemy; but before 10 a.m. Le Verguier on the front of our Battle Zone, fell. This village was most gallantly and stubbornly defended for nearly twenty-four hours by the 8th Queen's, and before it was finally in the hands of the Germans it had been attacked by five battalions and the artillery of two divisions, from three sides. Colonel Piers eventually withdrew what remained of his battalion, but immediately took up a new position and continued the fight a few hundred yards from the village. Trinket redoubt, also held by men of the 24th Division, repulsed many attacks and was not captured till 1 p.m. During the previous day and night the 50th Division had been coming up by train and road and by 8 a.m. its three brigades were in position from Caulaincourt to Boucly—a front of about 14,000 yards—to cover the retirement of the rest of the XIX Corps. The long and tiring journey inevitably meant that the division was not in the best physical condition to meet the strain which it was to be called upon to face. Moreover, its Commander had been taken away just before the battle. Shortly after 12 noon the 24th Division began its retirement, and eventually it was concentrated in rear of the right of the 50th Division.

On the 66th Division front the mist hung thickly in the Cologne Valley, and at first the Germans, pressing vigorously down this valley on the left of this division and the right of the

VII Corps, succeeded in gaining a good deal of ground. But small parties of various units manned tactical points in rear and thus checked their advance.

Counter-attacks by supporting troops also fell upon the Germans. The 8th and 19th Hussars with six Tanks drove them back into Hesbécourt, and for a time stayed their advance.

But the 16th Division (VII Corps) on the left was beginning to retire, and therefore the XIX Corps ordered both the 66th and 24th Divisions to retire behind the 50th Division. This was successfully carried out under cover of small forces who fought heroically. In one case forty men of the 15th Hussars and 2nd/6th Lancashire Fusiliers held out till fifteen only were left; eventually these were surrounded and overwhelmed.

The Germans continued pushing on with their usual energy and determination, and by 4.30 p.m. heavy attacks were being made on the 50th Division. After bitter fighting, involving attack and counter-attack, their superior numbers enabled them to take Caulaincourt on the right about 6 p.m. In the centre our line held, inflicting heavy casualties on the Germans, but on the left Nobescourt Farm was lost.

Watts reported the situation to me. He wished to withdraw the 50th Division, and I concurred. Under cover of darkness, therefore, between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. on Saturday, the 23rd, the 50th withdrew about two miles and took up a new line, Monchy-Lagache-Vraignes-Brusle.

The outlook for the next day on Watts's front was a serious one. The losses among his divisions had again been very heavy. They had all been fighting desperately or marching for two days and one night. Having held on bravely during the day, he now found his right very much in the air at Monchy-Lagache owing to the retirement of the XVIII Corps behind the Somme. He immediately took steps to deal with this threat, and the 24th Division, instead of getting a few hours' rest, was ordered forward once more to cover the right of the Corps. Before dawn on Saturday, 23rd, it was in position south of Monchy-Lagache as far west as Guizancourt, but this did not completely fill the gap which still existed between the two Corps. Accordingly the 1st Cavalry Division, which by evening had been collected, was also moved south in the early hours of Saturday to the right of the 24th Division, to hold the crossings of the Somme at Béthencourt and Pargny.

The 66th Division also was not allowed a night's rest, but

was moved across the Somme and took position to hold the river from Eterpigny to Péronne, a front of 3 miles.

The 8th Division, my first British reinforcement, was due to arrive on Friday night, detraining from four to sixteen miles west of the Somme. It was placed under Watts's Command, and he directed it to hold the Somme from Pargny to Eterpigny. Only one brigade, however, was able—and that only partially—to get into position by dawn on Saturday, 23rd.

Watts's XIX Corps front, like that of the XVIII Corps, had now considerably increased—from 13,000 yards to 21,000 yards.

*VII  
Corps.*

On the left of the Fifth Army the VII Corps had also had a day of very severe fighting. In company with Watts's XIX Corps, the 16th Division was heavily bombarded from 4 till 7 a.m. and then attacked in great force down the Cologne Valley. The Germans, driving back the left of the XIX Corps, turned and enfiladed the right of the 16th Division and forced it back. The rest of the division repulsed all attacks till about 11 a.m. when, orders for a retirement having been given, the units withdrew to the next position, fighting a well-organised rear-guard action. Near St. Emilie, however, three companies of different battalions—1st Munsters, 6th Connaughts, and 13th Royal Sussex—did not get the order to retire. When they found they had been left behind, they fought on rather than surrender, and it was not until 4 p.m. on Friday, the 22nd, when, short of ammunition and greatly reduced, they were finally overpowered.

Meanwhile the 39th Division from reserve had, under Congreve's orders, taken up a covering position. Epéhy and its sister village Peizière were still resisting all attacks, and continued to do so for many hours, till finally, with Epéhy in the hands of the enemy, Peizière was evacuated about noon. On the left of the Corps powerful attacks were made on the 9th Division, and Chapel Hill, gallantly held by the South African Brigade, fell about noon.

After 4 p.m. renewed attacks were hurled at the Corps' new front, and by dusk it had fallen back to the line Tincourt-behind Liéramont-Nurlu-Equancourt. One company of the 9th Division still hung on to its post at Revelon Farm, surrounded, bombarded by artillery, trench mortars, and even aeroplanes; it was finally overwhelmed about 6 p.m., having, in the words of a German account, 'covered the retreat of the main body even to the extent of being destroyed itself.'

Another platoon, left in the front of the Battle Zone behind Gouzeaucourt, maintained itself till 10 at night, when its commander marched off in the dark for four miles through the Germans, attacking several parties en route, and eventually bringing his men back to the new position. Here the left of the Fifth Army found a considerable gap of two and a half miles, the Third Army's right not having fallen back so far. This gap caused Congreve considerable anxiety, but by the evening the V Corps had pushed forward a brigade (99th, 2nd Division) from reserve; this filled part of the gap, and the rest of it was successfully blocked by the following morning.

During these two first days of battle the artillery of the Army had well served their comrades of the other arms, and in many instances had sacrificed themselves. Terribly hampered by the fog in the early mornings the guns fired 'by the map,' often until the enemy was on top of them and even round them. They fired at times point-blank, getting their guns away under close machine-gun fire: at other times they had to abandon their guns, as teams could not be got up. Then the officers and men, on their own gallant initiative, formed themselves into small groups, seized perhaps an abandoned machine gun, and fought on as infantry, performing most effective service in a heroic but matter-of-fact way which is beyond praise. Some of our single forward guns fired every round they had—450 each—with terrible effect on the enemy at close range. Two guns fired 1900 rounds before they were knocked out.

The Fifth Army during the first two days had lost about 350 field guns and 150 heavy guns, but largely, thanks to the great activity and energy of General Uniacke commanding the artillery of the Army, these losses were replaced from reserves and gun parks, some of which were under G.H.Q.<sup>†</sup> control. But considerations of routine did not prevent Uniacke from getting things done promptly, and he laid his strong hands on guns in any place where they were to be found, organised the personnel required, and sent them forward again into the line of battle as rapidly as possible.

### III<sup>1</sup>

Owing to the forced retirement of divisions, all Headquarters had to fall back, and Maxse's Staff went back to Nesle, while *Saturday, 23 March.*

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 18, p. 282.



we had to pack up and get back to the next knot of communication wires, which was at my original Headquarters at Villers-Bretonneux.

*III Corps.* Saturday morning therefore found me established there. The situation of the Army continued to be critical. Though the *III Corps* still hung on to the Crozat Canal, the long line of the Somme, thinly held and running back in a bow considerably to the left rear, placed it in a precarious salient.

*XVIII Corps.* Similarly the *XVIII Corps*, holding this long bend of the Somme with Ham as its centre, and now facing north and north-east, might find its right in a dangerous position if and when the *III Corps* fell back.

*XIX Corps.* The *XIX Corps* in the centre, still 5 or 6 miles east of the Somme, had its right flank very exposed and its front was very thinly held by weary troops. The *VII Corps* on its left, also with very attenuated ranks, was still further forward, thus also exposing its right flank, while its left was in an even more precarious position, as the *V Corps* of the Third Army, though holding ground in front of the *VII Corps*, had left a wide gap which it had not yet filled.

These positions were not those of my own choosing, but they were forced on me by the varying pressure on the fronts of the different corps. But such as they were we had to deal with them, and they demanded the exercise of decision to rectify and adjust them—some at once, and others later in the day as the situation developed.

*XIX Corps.* The first thing to do on this morning was to get the two divisions of the *XIX Corps*, the 24th and the 50th, back behind the Somme in line with the *XVIII*, and orders for this were issued before dawn. The line of the river in their rear was held by troops previously withdrawn, viz. the 66th Division on the left near Péronne, and the 1st Cavalry Division on the right. Moreover, the 8th Division, our first British reinforcement, was arriving. Its first brigade got hastily into position on the Somme about 7 a.m., but the next brigade did not take position till 5 p.m.

The morning fog was again lying thickly over the battlefield. At times it favoured our men in allowing them to get away unseen. On other occasions it was a source of great danger to our rear-guards, allowing the enemy to approach unseen and surround them. A retirement by daylight is a difficult operation, but it was successfully accomplished, although at the

expense of some severe rear-guard fighting in which many companies sacrificed themselves, fighting at times hand-to-hand against greatly superior numbers. By 3 p.m. the 24th and 50th Divisions were safely back across the Somme.

Meanwhile serious events were occurring on both the right *III Corps.* and the left. On the right of the Army the first French division to arrive, the 125th, had got into position on Friday evening, and one of its regiments (equivalent to our brigade) launched a counter-attack on the early morning, with a view to recapturing Tergnier. But the French were tired after a day and a night of marching, were short of ammunition, which we could not supply, and were hampered by the fog. Their attack failed, though Colonel Bushell of the 7th Queen's, weary as were his men, led them forward again, and taking charge of the French line as well as of his own, carried the attack forward: though severely wounded, he kept the line firm until he fainted.

The Germans early renewed their attacks in great strength all along the Canal front, and before midday they had forced back our hard-pressed troops composed of infantry, cavalry, engineers, and details from many units, as well as the French, to a line about two miles from the Canal. Thus pressure was now developing on the right of the XVIII Corps, facing north *XVIII Corps.* along the Somme. To add to the difficulties of the division on this flank (36th), the Germans early in the morning got hold of Ham and crossed the Somme to the east of it. They were enabled to do this on account of the thinness of the line, and the consequent inevitable gaps: the fog also covered them. They drove a wedge into the XVIII Corps front here, southwards, but failed to extend westwards owing to the resolute bearing, the gallant counter-attacks, and the energetic steps taken by all concerned to improvise some fighting force to oppose them. One of these counter-attacks was made by a brigade of the 61st Division, now reduced to a hundred men!

Here the III Corps pushed up a mixed force of cavalry, of 600 infantry, collected from men returning from leave, reinforcements, and men of a Balloon company, and placed it under General Harman of the 3rd Cavalry Division. This force took up a position to block the centre of the XVIII Corps and protect the rear of the III Corps. When night fell the 36th Division found itself facing at the same time east, north, and west. To extricate it from such a position called for prompt action on the part of the commanders concerned, but the

Divisional Commander did not withdraw his line till late the following morning, and to remain thus long demanded much courage and self-sacrifice from some of his units.

The left of the XVIII Corps held the line of the Somme successfully during the day and the following night, much severe fighting going on all the time. Some of the 8th Division had begun to arrive on the Somme, and a few of the French 10th Division had also arrived and taken up a line a little behind the centre of the Corps.

*VII  
Corps.*

Anxieties were not confined to the right and centre; the left of the Army, under Congreve, was meeting its full share. Marwitz was throwing the full force of his Army against us, and now, bringing forward his right, he seriously attacked for the first time the V Corps on the extreme right of the Third Army, which he roughly handled during this and subsequent days.

Perhaps as a result of this attack the V Corps was unable to keep in touch with the left of the Fifth Army, thereby adding enormously to Congreve's difficulties, and to the strain which his gallant divisions were called upon to support. Moreover, before nightfall the V Corps was driven out of its positions and forced to retire in a north-westerly direction, thus increasing the gap, until by dawn on Sunday, the 24th,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles of country lay open to an enterprising enemy, in spite of the fact that Congreve had stretched his line until it was covering three miles of ground which lay within the Third Army's boundary. When the Fifth Army Staff informed the latter of this situation, however, it promised to fill the gap.

During the day Congreve's VII Corps was forced back about seven miles on its right and four on its left, fighting desperately all the way till 10 p.m.

It had been a strenuous day for us all; before 4 a.m. I was talking on the telephone to Congreve and Watts. At midnight messages were still coming in and instructions going out of our office. The fighting had been fierce, and often at close quarters.

Up to 12 (noon) this day, the Intelligence Section of the Army Staff, now under Lt. Colonel F. S. G. Piggott, had identified 45 German divisions opposite the Army front, and this number it reported to G.H.Q. as 'conservative.' The rapidity with which these identifications were made and reported reflected great credit on the Intelligence Staffs of the Corps and divisions, and also on the organisation of the Signal Service—for which Colonel E. G. Godfrey-Faussett was responsible.

At 12.20 p.m. on the 23rd, Saturday, G.H.Q. issued an order to the Third Army to prepare a line from the Somme through Albert, to Gommecourt, with a switch line from Bray on the Somme to Albert. Evidently the prospect of the retreat of the Third Army was already being seriously considered.

But at 5.30 p.m. G.H.Q. issued a further order, which said :

Fifth Army must hold the Somme at all costs. There must be no withdrawal from this line. It is of the greatest importance that the Fifth Army should effect a junction with the French on their right without delay. Third and Fifth Armies must keep in closest touch in order to secure their junction and must mutually assist each other in maintaining Péronne as a pivot.

The line of the Somme, as far as it was an obstacle to an advance from the east, was only a small proportion of the whole extent of the vast battlefield, stretching from Noyon in the south to Croisilles in the north—seven miles south-east of Arras. If the line fell back on both sides of this comparatively small frontage of the Somme (as it actually did) it would be almost impossible to hold on, and certainly would have been most unsound not to withdraw in time.

The junction with the French was quite secure at the time this order was issued. If it was intended that touch with the French must be maintained even in the case of their falling back south and south-westwards to cover Paris, it was not very clear, and in that case it might have entailed an effort by the Fifth Army to stretch still further its already thin and over-extended line, for even armies have a definite limit to their elasticity !

To keep in touch with the main British Army and to cover its right and Amiens was undoubtedly the correct course for the Fifth Army to pursue. The only movement for which Péronne could have formed a pivot was an offensive swing-forward of the Third Army against the right wing of the German attack, but, as things then were, such a manœuvre was out of the question. The Third Army was not able to do anything to maintain Péronne as a pivot, and it does not appear that G.H.Q. put any further pressure on it to do so.

It was early this afternoon that Haig came round and saw me, as I have already mentioned. But this visit did not take the place of a General Staff conference, which was badly needed.

The Fifth Army had now been exposed to three days of con-



tinuous fighting and of constant movement both by day and night without relief or any fresh support, except on the right in the III Corps area, where three French divisions had just begun to appear in the fighting line, and one British division (8th) in the area of the XIX Corps. These French divisions belonged to General Pellé's V Corps, of Humbert's Third Army. Two of them, the 1st Dismounted Cavalry and the 9th, arrived behind the III Corps front on this evening, but they could not get into action till Sunday, the 24th, and Pellé arranged with Butler that on arrival they should relieve our 18th and 14th Divisions.

As these reinforcements came into line, the command passed to the French, and thus by Sunday our III Corps front came under the orders of the French Third Army. This shortened my front, and was an important relief to the Fifth Army Staff, for a front of over 40 miles, exposed as it was along nearly its entire length to the fluctuations incidental to a violent battle, was more than one Army Staff could properly supervise. The Fifth Army was fighting two Armies—Hutier's and Marwitz's, each of which was considerably more powerful than itself—while on its extreme right, south of the Oise, possibilities of attack by a third, Boehn's Seventh, could not be ruled out.

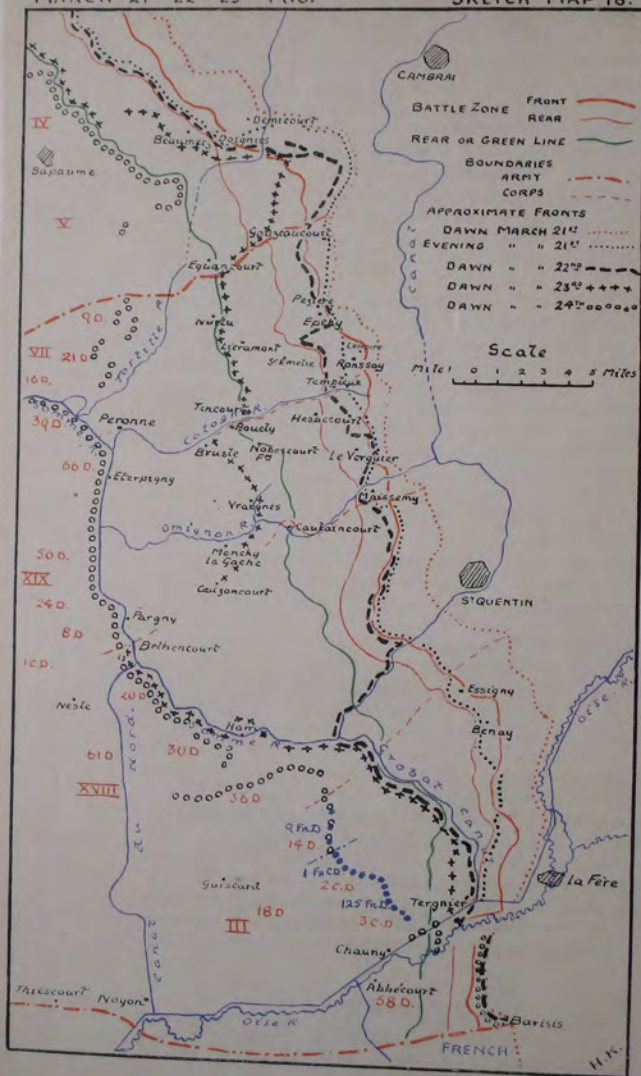
Now that the French were coming up, I hoped to pull out my III Corps and its divisions gradually, and to concentrate them behind my centre for the support, from my own resources, of the overstrained troops there. I could hope for little from elsewhere.

But the French did not part with a man or a gun of mine for many days, and on the 28th, when I handed over my command to General Rawlinson, Butler was still away with the French, and, though Maxse was co-operating closely with the Fifth Army, he was still supposed to be under French orders.

Casualties by now had been so heavy that in some cases two or three brigades were organised into one, and battalions were concentrated as companies; yet all the time the frontage remained the same, and so did the pressure of the German attack. It placed a terrific strain on the moral and physical stamina of the men of Britain who composed the Fifth Army. The frequent gaps which inevitably occurred as the line got thinner and thinner brought a further severe strain on officers and men, who were always finding their flanks turned, having to make sudden counter-attacks to clear them, or to throw back



SKETCH MAP 18.



a defensive flank, and finally to retire across the open under close and heavy fire.

But they never broke; desperate, grim resolution, and a dogged courage characterised them all.

IV <sup>1</sup>

When Sunday morning broke on the fourth day of the *Sunday*, struggle, the situation was critical; our task was still un- <sup>24 Mar.</sup> finished, and the question was becoming more poignant: how much longer would the officers and men be able to stand the tremendous strain? Certainly three fresh French divisions had taken over the front of our III Corps, and the 8th Division had arrived and was now holding the line of the Somme on the front of the XIX Corps, and it had repulsed several German attempts to force a crossing during the night. But the Germans also had received reinforcements, in even greater numbers. The odds against us were heavier than the first day, taking into consideration the fatigue of our men and the severe losses the units had suffered.

The French did not take the divisions of the III Corps out of the battle, but placed them in supporting positions, while the remnants of our 14th Division (III Corps), now under the orders of General Greenly, with some of the cavalry, still held the left of the French front. The very critical position of the 36th Division on the right of the XVIII Corps, facing in three directions, still continued, and the menace of a German advance southwards from Ham had become more accentuated, threatening both this division and the three French divisions still holding the line well to the east.

The Germans north of the Oise attacked the French on the *III* old III Corps front early in the morning from the direction of *Corps*. the Crozat Canal. Though our Allies were but freshly arrived, they were in retreat by 9 a.m. and the roads in rear began to get terribly congested with retiring transport, guns and troops. The French Staff work was not particularly good, the divisions arriving being extremely ill-equipped, short of even ball ammunition, as well as of their transport and artillery.

Lee, commanding the 18th Division, at once deployed his division on the line Caillouel-Beaugies to cover the French retirement, and held up the German infantry till 9 in the even-

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 19, p. 300.



ing with some French on his right and left. Further retirements of the French then exposed Lee's left, and at midnight he withdrew about three miles through the French, where he was again in close support of them.

The French fell back seven or eight miles during the day, and our 14th Division, falling back also, deployed on several occasions to cover their retirement. Eventually the division crossed the Canal du Nord, north of Noyon, during the night and took up a position to hold the Canal behind the French.

XVIII  
Corps.

The French 10th Division had arrived the previous evening—but without artillery—and by Sunday morning it had occupied a position south of Ham in rear of the right of the XVIII Corps, facing north and north-eastwards. Before night this division was involved in the general retirement and eventually occupied the left of the new French line, which stretched south-westwards from the Canal du Nord to Abbécourt on the Oise—a distance of about 12 or 13 miles. Behind the left of the XVIII Corps, two more divisions of the French II Cavalry Corps—62nd and 22nd—were beginning to arrive near Nesle during the day, but only a part of the 62nd came into line that evening on the Canal du Nord.

In spite of the very exposed position of the 36th Division it was not till the afternoon that it began to retire. On the extreme right near Cugny the 2nd R. Irish Rifles, finding itself practically cut off, just fought it out, heroically holding up the Germans for five hours and inflicting heavy losses on them, until its ammunition began to run out, when the battalion was finally overwhelmed. About this time a body of 150 cavalry made up from three different regiments, the Royals, 10th Hussars and 3rd Dragoon Guards, under General Harman, charged the Germans. They lost half their numbers, but they rode over a battalion of the German 5th Guard Division, killed or captured about 200, and took several machine guns. Some of our gallant infantry, exhausted and decimated as they were, jumped up on seeing this charge and rushed forward behind it, retaking some of the lost ground. This combined and gallant action stopped the German advance in this part of the field for a time.

During the night, the 36th Division was at last withdrawn behind the French for a short respite of rest and reorganisation, though its artillery remained in action under the French, as their own had not yet come up. Further south the line of

the Canal du Nord was held by our 14th Division in support to the French.

The centre and left of the XVIII Corps held the Somme west of Ham, where the attack was renewed at an early hour. The Germans gained a footing across the river at Canizy, but a counter-attack of three companies, by this time scarcely numbering 80 men, drove them back again for a time. By 10.30 a.m., however, the centre of the XVIII Corps had to fall back, and eventually took up a position on the Canal du Nord in touch with the left of the French, who had by then fallen back to their new line stretching from here southwards in front of Noyon to Abbécourt. Here the XVIII Corps was mixed up with the French 62nd Division, which by the evening was coming into line. The Germans came on towards the Canal du Nord behind our retreating men, but as they crossed the open ground our guns punished them heavily, in some cases remaining in position and firing till the enemy were within 800 yards.

The 20th Division was on the left of the XVIII Corps along the Somme. During the course of the day, its right flank exposed by the retirement of the rest of the Corps, it was also forced back to the line of the Canal du Nord after some hard fighting and several counter-attacks. During the day the 8th Division on its left was also driven off the Somme at Pargny, and a considerable gap occurred between these two divisions—in other words, between the XVIII and XIX Corps. The XIX divisions on either side of this gap threw back their flanks *Corps.* north-west of Nesle to cover it as best they could during the night.

Thus by dawn on Monday, 25th, the Canal du Nord marked the front of the XVIII Corps, which had its left thrown back round Nesle. Southwards the line of the Canal was occupied by our 14th Division as a support to the French. Regarded as an obstacle the Canal du Nord was of little value, being unfinished and only flooded to the extent of about one foot deep of water.

Humbert's Third Army was now taking shape and he assumed command of the front as his divisions arrived, our British divisions being placed under his orders until they could be relieved, when they were to return to the Fifth Army. Maxse, however, kept a firm control over his own troops, and I kept in close touch with Maxse.

During these days I did not confine myself to using the telephone, but I motored over to see the Corps Commanders almost

daily. I was thus able to learn not only the latest positions of the Corps but—what was almost more important—I could gauge their moral and physical condition as well. Such personal interviews enabled me to keep my finger on the pulse of my Army. I could see that every one was now beginning to look drawn and tired, but there was still a confident cheery manner everywhere. 'We are killing an awful lot of the Boche,' even if we have to fall back, we will keep the line intact until reinforcements come up in sufficient numbers, and then we will have a go at him.' Such was the tenor of the remarks made to me in the course of my visits. All the same, it was evident that we could not go on for ever, and that if the divisions and battalions were not 'nursed,' and if they were exposed too long to the onslaught of superior numbers, there would be a complete break.

The officers and men were playing their part in this desperate game splendidly, and I had to play mine too; this was to see, as far as I could, that units were not exposed to annihilation or to complete exhaustion, that flanks were not permanently exposed, nor gaps left too long unfilled. To continue the retreat was therefore still the right course to pursue, as it was the only one which could ensure keeping the line intact.

But I did not mean to give up the line of the Somme if I could help it; indeed, G.H.Q. had issued orders that it was to be held 'at all costs.' In fact, the XIX Corps held on to it for two whole days—the 24th and 25th—and was not withdrawn till the French on the right had fallen back to Roye, seven miles to the west, and our Third Army on the left was retiring on the line Bray-Albert—the Ancre, eight miles and more behind that flank. To increase our difficulties, both colleagues on our flanks tended to retire away from us, as well as behind us, the French for several days falling back south-westwards to cover Paris, while the Third Army on this and the two following days was forced away westwards and sometimes even north-westwards.

Intending to hang on to the Somme as long as possible, I now thought the arrival of the French 22nd Division near Nesle offered a good opportunity for delivering a counter-attack in some force, to throw the Germans back across the Somme at Béthencourt and Pargny. Robillot commanded the French Corps here, and I had met him in 1913 when I attended the French manoeuvres. He was an active, strong, thick-set little man and a well-trained officer; I hoped, therefore, for his

whole-hearted co-operation. Late that evening I arranged with him, Maxse, and Watts, who all had to take part in this projected counter-attack, that the French 22nd Division would attack northwards from the direction of Nesle, and part of our 8th and 24th Divisions south-eastwards, in order to regain the line of the Somme about Pargny early next morning, converging on the Germans from two directions.

The hour was fixed for 8 a.m. on the 25th, but when the time came the French were not near the position; in fact they had not advanced beyond Billancourt, about two miles south of Nesle. The hour was postponed till 11 a.m. By then the French 22nd Division was retreating and the Germans attacking us heavily, so the counter-attack as arranged never came off. When Maxse protested to Robillot because the 22nd Division was not ready at the hour arranged, and never moved forward at all to the attack, Robillot replied, '*Mais, ce n'était qu'un projet!*' One cannot always be sure that '*projets*' will turn into facts when working with Allies!

But to return to Sunday, the 24th. Some very severe fighting took place also opposite the right of the 8th Division (XIX Corps) during the day. Here the battalions of this division, and eventually those of the 20th Division (XVIII Corps) on its right, as already stated, were driven from the line of the Somme at Béthencourt and Pargny. Several fierce counter-attacks were made, but though they checked and delayed the Germans very considerably, there was never enough weight in them to throw back the enemy to the far side of the river, and before nightfall the Germans had penetrated about a couple of miles from the Somme, forcing their way between the two Corps (XVIII and XIX). On the rest of the XIX Corps front for seven or eight miles as far north as Péronne our troops successfully resisted all attempts of the Germans to force a passage of the river.

Though the fighting had been severe on my right, the presence of the French afforded me some relief, and the responsibilities there were gradually being transferred to their shoulders. It *VII* was towards the left that anxieties were now being principally *Corps* felt: the pressure exerted by Von der Marwitz's Army had been increasing in that direction, and Congreve was finding great difficulty in maintaining touch with the Third Army. The boundary between the two Armies ran rather south-west, but the V Corps of the Third Army was compelled by superior



force to retire westwards, and even north-westwards, thus ever widening the gap between us. By Saturday evening Congreve was holding more than three miles of the Third Army front in a vain endeavour to fill the gap. Though it could be ill spared by Watts, I sent the 1st Cavalry Division up to Congreve early on Sunday morning, as a mounted cavalry force was essential to cover his constantly exposed and moving left flank. Before two days had passed, I wished I had it back, for when Congreve and all his troops north of the Somme were placed under the Third Army, this cavalry division passed to it also. The Somme did not prove to be a good boundary between the Armies, and was no improvement on an arbitrary line drawn on the map. The Third Army, during the following days, fell back several miles behind my left and did not destroy the bridges or post any troops to hold them, and it carried Congreve's VII Corps with it. A cavalry division under my orders south of the Somme could have been moved quickly to meet this unexpected situation and would have saved many commanders in the Fifth Army, including myself, some extremely harrowing moments of anxiety, and the lives of a good many of our men.

I had passed on the order that the line of the Somme and the Tortille northwards was to be held at all costs, in accordance with orders received from G.H.Q.; but this was not possible, and Congreve realised that he would have to fall back. He therefore decided early in the day on a second position and issued orders for its occupation in case of necessity. Behind and south of the Somme, near Péronne, his line was held with comparative ease, but north of the river, which here turned west again, very heavy fighting was experienced during the day. By 12 (noon) the remnants of the 21st Division had been driven back a distance of two miles to the spurs in front of Hem and Maurepas.

The 35th Division was now arriving and this had been placed under Congreve's orders. The leading two battalions of the first brigade, after a night-march of over ten miles, were now ordered forward to retake the lost ground. As our battalions went forward the Germans were advancing also, but when they saw our men they turned round and fell back, taking up a defensive position. The advance of these battalions stopped the Germans in this part of the field till 5 p.m., and a fight at close ranges ensued, during which the Germans suffered heavy casualties. Then our men retired under orders to a position in rear, which by now was held by the rest of the 35th Division,

and what remained of the 21st was withdrawn for rest and reorganisation.

Further to the left the 9th Division held the line as far north as Saillisel—three miles inside the Third Army front. On its right stood the South African Brigade under General F. Dawson. The Divisional Commander had told him the night before that the line was to be held 'at all costs,' and this he and his brigade, now reduced to 500 men, determined to do.

By 9 a.m. the Germans attacked him and by 10 a.m. the troops on both flanks began to retire. By 11 a.m. the Germans, having set fire to the grass, got up under cover of the smoke to within 200 yards of the South Africans, but here they were held. By 3 p.m. the Germans had seized a village (Le Forest) in their rear. During all this time the gallant band had been subjected to a heavy bombardment. At 4.30 p.m. the Germans brought up three fresh battalions and overwhelmed it, reduced as it then was to 100 men. In this gallant defence some parties of the 21st Division had taken part. The position had been held for seven and a half hours, and the losses inflicted on the Germans had been very heavy. It is difficult to find words to express our debt to, and our admiration for, these brave men. Perhaps no better tribute can be paid them than to quote the sincere but simple praise of their foes. In one of their regimental histories these words are found: 'during the afternoon the 357th and 237th Reserve Regiments captured Marrière Wood in spite of the heroic and desperate defence of the almost completely destroyed South African Brigade.'

While this splendid stand was being made by the men of South Africa on the left of the Army, some forty miles away on the right a battalion of Irishmen, the 2nd R. Irish Rifles, as has already been stated, had also fought to the last and was overwhelmed after five hours. Many desperate counter-attacks had also been made by men from the home-land along the whole front.

Are we not justified in seeing a deep significance in the fact that such endurance, courage and self-sacrifice was being displayed this day by men who came from homes many thousands of miles apart? Surely there is something in the spirit of the race that binds all the peoples who come within its fold into a great brotherhood? Surely we can preserve this great thing? The words of the Eton boating song come back to me: 'And nothing on earth shall sever the chain that is round us now.'

The principal links in that chain seem to me to be a sense of duty, and a generous sympathy for each other, wherever we come from. As long as those characteristics mark the people of this Empire, I do not fear its disruption.

The annihilation of the South African Brigade now reduced the 9th Division to two brigades only. These two brigades, hammered, battered, and exhausted after four days and nights of fighting, fell back during the day about five miles. Here the 35th Division, just arrived, had established the front, reinforced and supported by 'Hunt's Force.' This was one of many of our extemporised formations which necessity forced upon us. It was formed, by Congreve's orders, of his Corps reinforcements, consisting of unfit men, recruits who had never been in battle, men back from leave, men at courses of instruction, etc. Colonel Hunt, with great energy, organised all these men in the course of a day into eight battalions, supplied them as best he could with machine guns, Lewis guns, etc., which he salved from other units, and then brought these improvised battalions forward into the battle.

The right of the Third Army during the day fell back about eight miles, and that night it was established at Bazentin-le-Petit, behind our left and with a gap of over two miles between the two Armies. Into this gap Congreve thrust the 1st Cavalry Division with its left back thrown back north of Montauban.

Meanwhile Congreve's right, the 39th Division, still held the Somme behind Péronne, and as his left fell back, this division and what remained of the 16th took up a line further west along the Somme facing north to protect his flank here along this part of the river. These troops were not seriously attacked on this day, but they could see the German forces pushing on north of the river, and fired heavily into their flank.

The original plan of the German High Command had been to employ Hutier's Army to hold the line of the Crozat Canal, and the Somme as far as Péronne, as a protection to hold off the French, while the rest of their forces was to drive back the British north of the Somme, cut them from the French and press their right back towards the sea. This, however, had been considerably modified. Hutier was under the orders of the Crown Prince, who, finding that he was getting on, persuaded the High Command to reinforce him. The majority of the German reserves, therefore, were sent to their left flank against

the Fifth Army and the French, and not against our Third Army. The result was that when the gap was created on Monday and Tuesday, the 25th and 26th, north of Albert and the Ancre in the front of the Third Army, there were insufficient German reserves near by to exploit it. If Ludendorff had kept to his original plan, the consequences for the British would have been grave. I could not know any of these plans at the time, however, nor had I time to think of much more than the immediate dangers facing the Fifth Army.

That afternoon I went out to see Watts and Congreve. As I passed near a Divisional Headquarters I looked in about 5.30 p.m. and found the General so weary that he could hardly keep his eyes open. I do not think he had had four hours' sleep in three nights and days. I made his A.D.C. promise to make him lie down and not disturb him for two hours and then see that a good dinner was ready for him.

I then passed on to see Congreve, who was in a small canvas hut on the north bank of the Somme. When I walked in he was speaking on the telephone to one of his divisions and I waited till he had finished. I heard him say, 'I don't care a damn, it has got to be done!'

He then turned and saw me, and said, 'Hullo, is that you?' There was no lack of nerve, energy or courage in his keen smiling eyes, and his determined spirit was typical of his gallant and hard-pressed Corps.

## V

Very early in the morning, before 2 a.m., orders arrived from *Mon-*  
G.H.Q. placing all the troops north of the Somme, with VII *day, 25*  
Corps Headquarters, under the Third Army, and at the same *March.*  
time informing me that it had now been arranged that the French should take over up to that river, under General Fayolle, who was commanding the group of armies in that area. The Fifth Army was thus cut off from G.H.Q. as regards military operations, and G.H.Q. gave up all responsibilities for the British troops under my command south of the Somme.

The line of the Somme now made a clear line of demarcation between the Third Army and ourselves, and might therefore have helped to prevent gaps arising, but this arrangement in fact did not really benefit the Fifth Army, and the junction between the two Armies became daily more unsatisfactory.



After all, it is better to make one unit responsible for both sides of a valley which runs at right angles to the front. In any case, it would have been better if Congreve with the VII Corps Staff had remained with the Fifth Army even if his troops north of the river were placed under the Third Army. All sorts of units were now being piled on to the XIX Corps, in my endeavours to reinforce and help it. As I managed to get back troops from the French belonging to the III and XVIII Corps, these were sent to reinforce the XIX Corps, together with many extemporised formations, and before Wednesday General Watts had some nineteen different units under his orders and administration. This was far more than one Staff could properly handle. Staff work would have been infinitely easier if the XIX Corps front had been divided between it and the VII Corps.

Placing the Fifth Army under Fayolle's group of armies made no material difference. He issued no orders to me, and I only saw him once for a few minutes.

It may have been in Haig's mind that by getting the French to be responsible for the line up to the Somme he could more easily induce Pétain to keep in touch with the British Army rather than to retire south-west to cover Paris, as he was already commencing to do.

*French  
Third  
Army.*

By Monday morning the French had become responsible for the ground lately occupied by the right of the Fifth Army, and Humbert of their Third Army assumed command. By now he had two Corps, the V under General Pellé and the II Cavalry under General Robillot.

A general account of events in this area will enable the reader to follow the course of the battle and the situation of the Fifth Army as it was affected by the French on our right.

On this Monday morning Pellé's Corps consisted of four French divisions, the 9th, 1st Dismounted Cavalry, 10th and 55th, the two latter having arrived the previous day. These were holding a line from Abbécourt on the Oise, running north-westwards behind Guiscard for ten miles where they connected with Robillot's Corps and our XVIII Corps. Behind the French, under Pellé's orders, were the British 18th and 14th Divisions and the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions, in positions of close support. Robillot's Corps, mixed with the divisions of our XVIII Corps, carried the line on to the Canal du Nord. The line then ran northwards along the Canal as far as the east of Nesle, where it was swung back about a mile round the north

of the little town in order to meet the situation which had been created by the German success of the previous evening, when they had forced back the left of the XVIII Corps and the right of the XIX Corps from the Somme at Voyennes, Béthencourt and Pargny.

The Germans early drove a hole into Pellé's line, and he retired the centre of his Corps about three miles, thus creating a dangerous re-entrant, his right having the Oise close behind it. The Germans were quick to take advantage of this, and about 1 p.m. attacked Pellé's right from the north. By 5 p.m. they had driven it south across the Oise. Two more French divisions, the 1st and 35th, arrived during the day, and with the help of these Pellé maintained his centre in front of Noyon for some time, but his left fell back behind the Canal du Nord and did not stop till it reached Lagny, two miles west of the Canal. Pellé then issued orders withdrawing his right behind the Oise and his centre and left behind Noyon.

Meanwhile our 18th Division, which was holding a line in support of Pellé's right, had been attacked and was fighting hard before 11 a.m. By 3.30 p.m. the orders to retire south across the Oise were received, but General Sadleir-Jackson, commanding a brigade of the division, seeing that the retirement of the French on his left would be difficult, launched a counter-attack at 5.30 p.m. against the village of Babœuf, which had been seized by the Germans. His brigade had come through five days' continuous fighting and was greatly reduced in numbers, but within half an hour it retook Babœuf, captured 10 machine guns, and killed or captured 230 Germans, and retained its position till 2 a.m. next day, when it crossed the Oise and rejoined its division, now concentrated under orders from the French ten miles south-east of Noyon: thence it passed completely out of Butler's control for many days.

Our 14th Division, which started the day by holding the Canal du Nord north of Noyon, in support of the French, was involved also in some rear-guard fighting in the evening as the left of Pellé's Corps fell back past it, and during the night it was also withdrawn southwards under French orders six miles west of Noyon.

Our cavalry under Harman had been pushed forward north of the 14th Division, to cover the retreat of the French, and it held the line of the Canal du Nord till the early hours of the following day.

The 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions were concentrated once again during this day, and by nightfall they also were withdrawn three to four miles south of Noyon.

Thus, during Monday, Pellé's Corps, now consisting of six French and three very attenuated British divisions, had been driven back and retired about eight miles, partly due south and partly south-westwards—towards Paris and away from the Fifth Army! Tuesday morning found his Corps in a half-circle, with Noyon about two and a half miles in front of its centre.

These dispositions had drawn the whole of the III Corps away from the Fifth Army—the 18th, the 14th and the two Cavalry Divisions finding themselves by the evening either south of the Oise or west of Noyon.

The French Command, though it quite properly commanded our troops when on the actual battle front, had no right to withdraw them in this direction to cover Paris. The understanding was that as the French took over our line our troops should be relieved as early as possible and sent back to the Fifth Army. I was counting on them, and frequently sent messages to Humbert and also to Anthoine, of Marshal Pétain's Staff, asking for my divisions back. It was weak of Butler and an error of judgment to allow his divisions to be moved in these directions, and he should certainly not have consented to it without my knowledge and approval.

Maxse's conduct under similar circumstances was very different. He retained a firm hold over his troops, and though readily and willingly co-operating with the French, he was careful to remain an integral part of the Fifth Army and keep as closely in touch with me as circumstances would admit.

It is interesting to reflect what would have been the result of the day on the front of Pellé's Corps if it had been held by an equal number of British divisions. The front held in the morning was ten miles—a front covered by less than two divisions of the Fifth Army on the 21st March when they were attacked by overwhelming numbers of fresh and confident Germans. By Sunday the German troops were already showing signs of weariness. When one sees what barely 300 tired men of Sadleir-Jackson's brigade were capable of doing at Babœuf, it is by no means outside the bounds of possibility that six comparatively fresh British divisions would have thrown the German attack back on this part of the battlefield. As it was,

the repercussion of the retreat of Pellé's Corps was felt along my whole line, as far north as Péronne.

Further north, on Pellé's left, stood the French 62nd Division of Robillot's Corps, and the line was carried on round Nesle by our 30th, 20th and 61st Divisions, all under the orders of Robillot. *French II Cav. Corps.*

In the morning, the gap between our XVIII and XIX Corps north of Nesle still existed. It had been my intention to rectify this by attacking the Germans and driving them back to the line of the Somme about Pargny. The fresh French division, the 22nd, was to play the main part in this action, as has been already recounted, and the attack was timed to take place at 8 a.m. The French first asked that the counter-attack should be postponed till 11 a.m., but as a matter of fact the 22nd Division had never come forward at all and remained south of Nesle. Long before that hour the Germans were attacking vigorously in an endeavour to exploit the gap between the two Corps.

The 24th Division, XIX Corps, through a misunderstanding, was also late in coming up to fill the gap as had been intended, and when it advanced it found the Germans already north-west of Nesle.

The German attack therefore fell only on the thin line of tired XVIII troops belonging to our 61st and 20th Divisions, but they covered Nesle for some three hours and did not retire till 11 a.m. when they fell back to Billancourt about one and a half miles south of Nesle, where the French 22nd Division was found. The left of our troops holding the Canal du Nord was now turned, but in spite of this the Scottish Rifles on the extreme left held on till 2 p.m., very few of them surviving. The rest of the Canal du Nord was covered by the British 20th and 30th Divisions for three miles southwards and was successfully held till nearly 5 p.m., when the French 62nd Division on their right was driven off the Canal. Both flanks of these two divisions on the Canal were thus exposed and they had to retire. But the Germans were close on our men, and they could not get away without some fierce counter-attacks and heavy casualties. *Corps.*

Eventually, as evening came on, our divisions were withdrawn behind the French 62nd and 22nd Divisions, and—contrary to French instructions—owing to Maxse's firm orders—all his divisions were concentrated westwards in the neighbourhood of Roye.



Meanwhile Robillot's Corps continued its retirement south-westwards during the night, and by Tuesday morning it was standing on the line Lagny-Roye facing north-east, having fallen back during the previous twenty-four hours a distance of about seven miles.

Maxse's firmness and decision in keeping his Corps together and moving it westwards and north-westwards saved the Fifth Army, and in fact the whole British Army and the Allied cause, from a disaster : for a complete separation of the French and British Armies would have been nothing else.

*XIX  
Corps.*

While all this was going on, the XIX Corps was struggling to maintain itself on the Somme. Its right flank was already thrown back from St. Christ towards Licourt to guard against the irruption of the Germans across the river at Pargny. Its left flank was uncovered by the retirement of the Third Army, whose line, Curlu-Bazentin-le-Petit-west of Bapaume, was already four miles behind it.

Nevertheless it was not till late in the evening that orders for a retirement of four miles were issued. The counter-attack to re-establish the right of the Corps on the Somme was never carried out, as we have seen.

The 24th Division was moving up to support the counter-attack of the 8th Division and fill the gap between it and the French, when it found the Germans in occupation of Dreslincourt ; the enemy at once began pressing this division, but were successfully held till the afternoon. The pressure and the casualties were heavy, and eventually the division fell back after dark to Hattencourt-Hallu. Here some reinforcements in the shape of three extemporised battalions were sent up by Maxse to the 24th and proved very useful.

About 8 a.m. the Germans had also attacked the 8th Division, and by 10.30 had taken Licourt, though two companies of Yorkshires bravely defended it to the last. By 1 p.m., after continuous heavy fighting, the 8th Division held Hyencourt and Marchelpot, in touch with the 24th on its right and with its left still holding the Somme at St. Christ.

St. Christ was held till late in the evening, when the Germans, still pressing our line back from the south, made the position untenable, and our men had to fight their way back.

Further north, the enemy, under cover of a heavy machine-gun and artillery fire, gradually established a footing on our bank of the Somme at Eterpigny on the 66th Division front.

Captain Toye, commanding a company of the Middlesex, held on here till he was surrounded. With 10 men left he fought his way out, then collected 70 more of another battalion and led his party back to our new line. For this very determined and gallant action he was awarded the V.C.

Watts now felt the position of the XIX Corps was becoming impossible, and he was right. He spoke to me on the telephone, and I authorised a withdrawal of four miles after dark, to a new line—Hattencourt—Chaulnes—Estrées—Frise (on the Somme), where we hoped to obtain touch with the Third Army. There were now six divisions under his command, but hardly one of them could muster more than 1000 rifles, and his front was thirteen or fourteen miles long, with both flanks exposed.

About 11.30 that evening we heard from the VII Corps that *VII Corps.* the Third Army was retiring again during the night to the line Bray—Albert—the Ancre. This would place the Third Army once more five miles behind our left at Frise, but according to the G.H.Q. orders fixing the Somme as the boundary, it was supposed to be responsible for the line of the river. Nevertheless we took steps to guard the river crossings ourselves, between our new front at Frise and Bray, and this duty was allotted to the 16th Division.

The line of the Somme about Brie was still held by the *XIX Corps.* XIX Corps at 6 p.m., and the general retirement to the new line commenced after dark. About three companies of the Middlesex never retired, but fought it out. The rest of the battalion, covered by a rear-guard composed of its own commanding officer, Lt. Colonel Page, and some of his battalion Staff, only got away just in time. By dawn next morning the new line was occupied, but both flanks were still in danger, the French holding a thin and very shaky line on our right and the Third Army being once more five miles behind the left.

To meet possible developments resulting from this situation, we issued Army orders to the XIX Corps at 10 p.m., to the effect that if it was heavily pressed it was to fall back fighting to a line Rouvroy—Proyart—Froissy, which would bring the Fifth Army back into line with the Third Army, and during the night the XIX Corps issued orders to some entrenching battalions and engineers to commence fortifying this line.

It was during this Monday and the previous night that the *The Third Army.* Third Army gave up Bapaume and fell back behind the Ancre and north of it, a distance in places of over ten miles. A very

dangerous situation developed on its front during this afternoon. Its IV Corps (General Harper), although it consisted of six divisions, left a gap of four miles in its line, from Hamel to the north of Puisieux, which was some twelve miles north of the left flank of the Fifth Army. Into this gap the Germans had penetrated to a depth of three miles, and had seized Colincamps before nightfall. Colincamps is barely nineteen miles north-east of Amiens. At the same time the Fifth Army was still holding off the Germans on the Somme at Brie—twenty-three miles from Amiens.

That the Germans did not exploit this great advantage which they had won was due to the fact that they had comparatively few divisions concentrated against the Third Army owing to their reinforcements having already been sent to their left and centre under Hutier and Marwitz. It was fortunate for us that this was so. To have rolled up Byng's right wing from the north and advanced on Amiens would not only have cut the British Army from the French, but would have enabled the enemy to destroy the right wing of the Third Army.

Although the Fifth Army was echeloned several miles to the east in front of the Third Army, and in that position was the best possible protection to its right, it seems that G.H.Q. was possessed with the fear that the chief danger lay to the south of the Third Army, and issued orders that troops should hold the line of the river facing south, and at one time the 1st Cavalry Division was directed to take up such a front. In reality, the danger to the Third Army lay to the north, on its own centre and left, inasmuch as the Germans were already in Colincamps, and actually the Fifth Army was the one which required protection along the Somme—from the north!

G.H.Q. at this time undoubtedly under-estimated the Fifth Army, what it had done, and what it was still capable of doing, to stay the attack of the Germans, and to exhaust their divisions, in spite of the terrific strain imposed on its troops. Such a misapprehension was due, at least in part, to the lack of personal contact maintained between G.H.Q. and me. The state of mind existing there was such that the Fifth Army was now entirely discounted, the Third Army was looked on as the right of the British Army, and the danger of it being turned, driven north of Amiens and completely cut off from the French, took sole possession of the General Staff mind. But the situation was not as bad as all that. The Fifth Army still existed,

and the Germans had still to take it seriously into account. As long as it remained in being south of the Somme, the right of the Third Army was safe. Even by this Monday evening the Germans were becoming worn and spent. Before the shattered remnants of the Fifth Army were withdrawn from the battlefield, the German prospects of final victory were gone, the War was lost for them, if it was not quite over.

Indications exist that G.H.Q. regarded even the line of the Ancre as merely a rear-guard position, and were contemplating further retirements.

Two days later the Third Army left the bridges over the Somme unguarded, permitting the Germans to cross to the south bank in rear of the overstrained men of the Fifth Army, still devotedly holding back the enemy after seven days and nights of continuous fighting.

It was during the afternoon of this Monday—25th—that the momentous conference at Doullens took place. All the Army Commanders were present except myself. Considering how little G.H.Q. knew of the situation and *morale* of the Fifth Army, it was unfortunate that I was not there, as I could have thrown some light on the real situation of the Germans, the Fifth Army, and the French. It could not have been that G.H.Q. thought the position on my front required my unremitting attention, for Byng was present, and the situation of his Army with the enemy pressing into Colincamps, if not already in actual possession of it, was one to cause even more anxiety and demand more immediate attention than that on the Fifth Army front.

Not only was I not summoned to this conference at Doullens, but I was not even informed that it had taken place, and I knew nothing about it till months afterwards.

The only indication that reached me of its deliberations and conclusions was that on Tuesday I received a brief message telling me that Marshal Foch had been appointed Generalissimo and that, as he would visit my Headquarters in the afternoon, I was to stay in to meet him. But I will return to this later. It was during this Monday afternoon that we organised under the Staff of the Army a body which later attained some notoriety as 'Carey's Force.'

This force consisted of every one we could collect, and included electrical and mechanical engineers—surveyors—500 men of the U.S. Engineers—tunnellers and miners—Army, Corps and Sniping Schools—signallers. The Army Signal School



supplied its communications, 9 grooms acted as mounted orderlies, and it was equipped with some wagons and lorries for transport work.

The total strength of the force amounted to just over 2000 men, and for the moment I put General P. G. Grant, who was my Chief Engineer, in command, and gave him two officers of our Army Staff to assist him. When General Carey returned from leave on Tuesday afternoon (26th) I directed him to take command to set General Grant free to attend to his proper functions.

This force was deployed eventually along the line of the old Amiens defences east of Villers-Bretonneux, which I had rescued from demolition in December when the Fifth Army first arrived on this front.

Carey's force was not the only force of this nature which was organised in the Fifth Army, though it is the best known to the public—principally due to the statements made by Mr. Lloyd George in the House of Commons. Congreve had already organised Hunt's force of eight battalions, as already mentioned. Watts in the XIX Corps had also organised a number of reinforcing units from any available troops, such as men at schools, reinforcement camps, stragglers, etc. In his report he writes: 'This procedure was continued. These units were pushed forward to divisions in accordance with urgent demands, and they were undoubtedly of great value in restoring the situation at critical points. It is possible that as time went on they added a certain amount to the disorganisation which inevitably took place, but they did good work.'

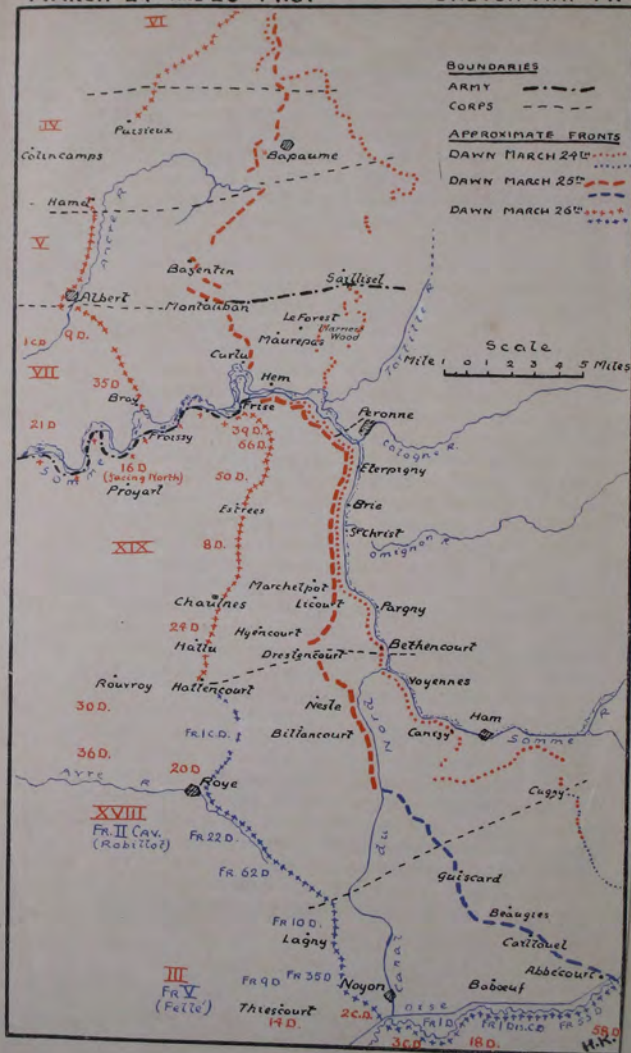
Maxse also had organised similar units and he had sent three of these improvised battalions to reinforce the 24th Division, XIX Corps, during the day, as I have previously mentioned.

Late in the afternoon I went over to see Maxse and Watts. Maxse's Headquarters had just been bombed, but the absence of his artillery was all that was worrying him. I found him very indignant with the French, for though they had sent his divisions back, they had taken all his artillery south-westwards with them. This roused me also, and I wrote Humbert a sharp letter demanding the immediate return of our guns. On my way back I saw the sad, but rather familiar, tragedy of civilians, chiefly women, in a retreat, trudging down the road, and picked up several of them and gave them a lift on their way.



MARCH 24<sup>TH</sup> AND 25<sup>TH</sup> 1918.

SKETCH MAP 19.



The atmosphere behind our lines was full of wild rumours: every one except the speaker was 'running away'; the Germans were already through our line and behind us; German officers dressed in British uniforms were said to be going about telling every one that all was lost and that they should retreat at once. It recalled the days of August 1914. Not a quarter of the stories were true, and I never heard that we caught a single German behind our lines in British uniform.

These inventions did not remain altogether in the area of the Fifth Army—they floated back much further, growing in volume as they went. They acquired fine proportions by the time they reached G.H.Q., but they attained their full stature only on arrival in London! It was a strange anomaly—the nearer the front line, the greater the feeling of confidence: the only signs of panic were to be found well behind our front, at Doullens, and in London!

VI<sup>1</sup>

The French now held the south bank of the Oise as far as Noyon, but this front was not attacked. On the right of the battle, from the Oise northwards, Pellé's V Corps held a line, its right on Mont Renaud and its left north of Lagny, a front of about five miles. The remnants of our 14th Division and our 2nd Cavalry Division were in reserve and represented what remained of our III Corps: the 58th Division was holding most of its original front south of the Oise, while the 18th and 3rd Cavalry Divisions were between five and ten miles south of Noyon, behind the Oise, and were no longer under Butler's control. *Tuesday, 26 March.*

North of Pellé stood Robillot's Corps, with the 62nd, 22nd and 1st Cavalry Divisions.

Maxse's XVIII Corps was on the left rear north-west of Roye, and it was fortunate its divisions were so placed, for they were thus able to fill the big gap of five miles on the right of our XIX Corps which the retirement of the two French Corps seven to ten miles southwards and south-westwards created. *XVIII Corps.*

From Hattencourt, five miles north of Roye, where rested the left of Robillot's command, consisting of his own and Maxse's Corps, Watts's XIX Corps stretched to the Somme at Frise, a front of thirteen miles. With the Third Army four miles in its *XIX Corps.*

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 20, p. 320.



rear at Bray, this was now the main part of the Fifth Army's front; but it could not be held for long, with both its neighbours falling back behind it and away from it.

The Germans began their attacks at 6 a.m. this day on the centre of Robillot's Corps in front of Roye and to the east of it, and by 11 a.m. they had captured the town, the French falling back some three miles, almost due south.

About this hour a new French Corps (the VI) began to arrive west of Roye, but actually only its 5th Cavalry Division appeared. This division, however, helped to fill the gap between the left of Robillot and the right of Maxse, for by nightfall the former's Corps had been driven five miles south-westwards, thus ever widening the gap between the French and the Fifth Army.

*French  
V Corps*

Meanwhile Pellé's Corps, on the right of the battlefield, was also attacked at an early hour and began to give ground. In consequence, our 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions, under Generals Pitman and Harman, were ordered forward, and with considerable skill, mobility and much steadfast gallantry, held almost the whole of the French line of this Corps for some six hours, and only fell back after 4 p.m. when the French on their left (uncovered in turn on their left flank by the retirement of Robillot's Corps) began falling back.

By 6 p.m. Pellé's Corps was established on its new line, having pivoted on its right on Mont Renaud, which it had held throughout the day, while its left fell back a distance of about five miles. The Corps was thus facing almost north when day broke next morning. The British troops in this part of the field were now again in reserve: the 18th and 3rd Cavalry Divisions south of the Oise, the 14th and 2nd Cavalry Divisions being in billets some five miles south-west of Thiescourt, behind the centre of Pellé's front.

The 14th Division, which had commenced the battle with an infantry strength of only 190 officers and 5737 men, had already lost in the desperate and continuous fighting 128 officers and 4261 men. Other divisions in the Fifth Army may not have suffered quite so severely, but these figures are not far from average ones and will enable the reader to grasp the extent of the sacrifice made by these men in fulfilling the task which was set them.

*XVIII  
Corps.*

We must now return to Maxse and his four divisions, all safely under his own command, near Roye and westwards—except

for the artillery, both field and heavy, all of which had been carried off under orders of the French to support them as they moved south. Thus the unfortunate men of this Corps were exposed to the attack of the German guns and infantry without one single gun to cover them during the whole day's hard fighting, which was the sixth they had been called on to undertake. It is no wonder that I had found Maxse the previous evening in no sweet and gentle mood !

Maxse's first orders were to establish a line with the right on the Avre and the left at Rouvroy, a front of about five miles, to which latter place the right of the XIX Corps was retiring. This line was to be occupied by the 36th, on the right, and the 30th, on the left ; before the 36th could reach its positions, however, it found the enemy already in them, having early driven the French out of Roye.

The Germans, fortunately, did not seem inclined to attack, in spite of immunity from artillery fire, and it was not till after dark that they advanced, when they took part of our line ; but a counter-attack threw them back, and our line here was successfully held throughout the day and the night. But a dangerous situation for the 36th now arose, for, owing to the Germans occupying its designated position, a gap was created between its right and the left of the neighbouring 30th Division. The enemy penetrated into this during the evening, temporarily cutting off two brigades of the 36th. On the left of Maxse's Corps no serious attack was made during the day, though a rear-guard of a hundred men of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, under the brigade major, held the village of Le Quesnoy, fighting desperately and coming more than once to the bayonet, until 6.30 p.m., when the few survivors fell back to our main position.

Meanwhile the artillery of this Corps had been covering and supporting Robillot's French Corps and had fallen back southwards with it, but during the night, partly owing to peremptory orders from Maxse, some of the batteries moved across towards Montdidier and came under the orders of their own Corps once again.

Owing to the position on both flanks the XIX Corps, now the main part of the Fifth Army, received orders early to fall back to a new line—Rouvroy-Rosières-Proyart—the Somme, where it was hoped a firm connection with the Third Army would be established at Bray.

The Germans were attacking heavily by 8 a.m. and Watts's exposed right was turned and driven back, while the village of Herbécourt on his left was also captured. By the afternoon, under continuous pressure, but fighting steadily, the Corps had withdrawn and was established on its new line.

In the 24th Division, on Watts's right, a battalion of East Surreys did not get the order to retire till the Germans were within a hundred yards. It was then too late, and the C.O., seizing some old trenches, fought it out till ammunition was completely exhausted, when the Germans were able to capture the position and 2 officers and 55 unwounded men, the only survivors of the battalion. This is one more example of the heroic, the steadfast, the self-sacrificing spirit with which our men fought, worthy representatives of a great people.

During this day's retirement, another counter-attack was carried out by our tired men, when part of two battalions of the 50th Division—now at last under the command of their new General, H. C. Jackson—re-took most of Framerville and put a stop for the day to any further advance by the Germans from this direction.

On the extreme left, the 16th Division, terribly reduced, established the new line and beat off various attacks during the afternoon and evening, but its flank resting on the Somme was shot into and enfiladed from across the river, the Third Army having been pushed back about seven miles.

What was even more serious was the fact that the bridges had not been secured or destroyed. Thus the enemy could cross to the south bank and descend in the rear of the Fifth Army—which, in fact, he proceeded to do next day. There were no fresh reserves with which to meet this new threat on the left of the XIX Corps, and it was, in fact, very nearly the last straw. The reports of the retreat of the Third Army and of the unguarded bridges did not reach Watts until nine in the evening, when he at once issued orders to destroy all the bridges as far west as Cerizy and called on the Fifth Army for help to meet this new danger.

To deal with it I had little under my hand, but fortunately Grant had organised his heterogeneous force and it was already in position on the old Amiens defence line, about seven miles behind the XIX Corps front, and in touch with the right of the Third Army across the river.

We sent 300 men of this force, six Lewis guns, and a

Canadian motor machine gun battery to Watts in response to his request.

While these events were taking place on my front and engaging my attention, I received the message from G.H.Q. briefly telling me that as Marshal Foch would be coming to see me during the afternoon, I was to wait in for him. By this time my Headquarters had been moved back to a little chateau in Dury, south of Amiens, as Villers-Bretonneux was required for Watts's Headquarters, and it was here that I had my interview with Foch.

He arrived accompanied by General Weygand, and I received him in a frank and friendly manner.

To understand my position during this interview, several points must be borne in mind.

I was entirely ignorant of the Doullens Conference, and of the atmosphere approaching almost to panic which existed there, and of the absurd stories about the Fifth Army which were circulated in that assembly. I was equally unaware of the decisions arrived at. My own view of the situation generally was one of confidence and I was well satisfied with what the Fifth Army had done, and indeed I was proud of its conduct. I was under the illusion that the same view was held at G.H.Q. It should have been as well known there as it was at my own Headquarters that the Army had been set the definite task of fighting a rear-guard action and of holding up the German attack with little or no support, in order to enable the Supreme Command to discover where the blow was really coming, to permit of Haig maintaining a firm hold of the Channel Ports, and to create the opportunity for a decisive blow against the Germans when the right time and place were decided on. I already could feel the weakening of the German attack and I realised that their great effort to break through was nearly foiled. I felt that the Army had faithfully carried out the terrible and heavy task that Haig had set it.

Moreover, I had always been particular during the four years of the War to maintain a friendly attitude towards French officers. We were always obliged to speak French; I never spoke in my own tongue to a French General throughout the War. My French was quite good, though of the polite order more suitable to drawing-rooms than to a sharp argument: perhaps I had not a sufficient command of stern phrases, which were apparently required in such an interview as I had with



Foch. All these facts placed me at a distinct disadvantage, and exposed me to considerable surprise. Foch was peremptory, rude, and excited in his manner. He began at once by asking 'why I was at my Headquarters and not with my troops in the fighting line?' He then said, 'why could I not fight as we had fought in the first battle of Ypres in 1914?' 'Why did the Army retire?'

'What were my orders to the Army?' He waited for no replies to any of these questions, and he did not expect one, except possibly the last. This was just as well, for any explanations would have probably led to an altercation. But the answers were indeed simple. I was at my Headquarters because I had been ordered to meet him there, and also because it was my proper post. My task was not to lead a battalion or a company but to attend to what was going on along my extended front.

We were not holding the ground as we did in 1914, because, heavy though the odds against us had been in those weeks, they were more than doubled now. In the First Battle of Ypres, the Germans had not the massed superiority to maintain a continuous battle and they made a succession of attacks, with sometimes more than a day between each, enabling the defence to make a re-shuffle of its troops and give them some rest. In March 1918 the German numbers were such that the attack was continuous for days and nights, and our outnumbered men never rested; they fought, they marched, they dug, for days and nights together.

The Fifth Army had fought a rear-guard action because both strategical and tactical situations demanded such a course, it was 'in accordance with plan'—in fact, with the plan of the Commander-in-Chief.

It can be imagined how surprised I was at this outburst on Foch's part. Surprise rather than indignation was my first impression. I now ask myself, how was it that a British General was placed in such a position? How could it arise that he was exposed to such rudeness from an Allied officer? How could Foch be so amazingly ignorant of the situation as not to realise the splendid fight that the Fifth Army had put up? How did he know so little that he could thus talk to me, its Commander, of its deeds, when his own French troops, fresh and in double or even treble the numbers per yard of front, were falling back faster than the tired Fifth Army, without counter-attacks, often

without even maintaining a firm hold of their own front, and when our own Third Army had already retired, thus exposing the left of the Fifth Army for three days? When the Germans, having driven a hole into the Third Army's front, were actually nearer Amiens there than at any part of the front of the Fifth Army?

How was it that he was so unaware of the real facts? I was taken aback. But it can be asked, was Foch's behaviour due entirely to his natural and normal manners? He had come from Doullens and from G.H.Q., where he had been talking to British Ministers, British Generals and Staff Officers. There can be little doubt that he derived his impressions largely from what he had heard there.

I kept my temper and told Foch what my orders to the Army had been—namely, to fight a rear-guard action, and thus gain time for the Allies to send up their reserves. He did not inquire into the position of the divisions of the Fifth Army, nor their strength or condition, but said in a loud, excited manner, 'There must be no more retreat, the line must now be held at all costs,' and then walked out of the room back to his car. He apparently did not know when supports could be expected and gave me no information on this important point or any other instructions or suggestions.

Even if my personal feelings are put aside, it is unfortunate from all points of view when those in positions of responsibility are exposed to such treatment at the hands of other Nationals, for it reacts over a wide field, and its repercussions extend in ever-widening circles. I cannot think that in the settlement of the peace of Europe or in the Councils of the Nations in the ensuing years the voice of the British Empire was accorded the weight and respect which was due to its power and its conduct in the War, and the seeds of this regrettable state of affairs can well have been sown at this interview, to grow later on into a formidable plant.

These orders of Foch, given without full knowledge of the facts, and without much serious consideration, could not be carried out, though I passed them on to my troops in accordance with military discipline. The French were yet to fall back another ten to twelve miles, and to lose Montdidier and Moreuil before the battle closed, while what was left of the Fifth Army only retired a further five or six miles, and that principally in order to bring it on to the same alignment as the Third Army

on its left, though not a single fresh division was sent to its support.

The impression that Foch made on me was naturally not a favourable one. Excitable and evidently apt to jump to conclusions, he did not inspire me with respect or confidence.

Undoubtedly some authority was called for at this moment to co-ordinate the operations of the French and British Armies and to prevent Pétain from falling back on Paris in total disregard of his Allies. It is also true that even in this moment of crisis, even in the '*crise de nerfs*' from which the French were suffering, it is unlikely that they would ever have consented to a British generalissimo: the legend of the superiority of French leadership was naturally firmly established in France, and it found supporters even in England. Nevertheless, considering the question from a purely military standpoint as it appeared even *at that time*, could Foch's record as a Commander be compared with Haig's?

If we go into these questions we find that Foch had suffered a continuous series of reverses. Military critics among his own countrymen have pointed out that his leadership at Morhange was very faulty, and was largely responsible for the heavy defeat the French suffered there, and his conduct on the Marne in 1914 had nearly lost the War.<sup>1</sup> His operations in Artois in 1915 had been costly failures. He had been removed from command after the Somme by his own Government; for more than a year he had not been actively employed, and had been merely criticising and advising.

Haig's record was very different. He had made mistakes, as every commander always has and always will. He had at times misjudged situations and men: nevertheless, from the very outset of the War he had continuously and steadfastly borne the burden of heavy responsibilities. Since his appointment as Commander-in-Chief he had shaken the German Army to its foundations on the Somme, had loyally supported Nivelle's offensive by the operations at Arras, and by his operations at Passchendaele and elsewhere in 1917 he had secured the French Army against perhaps an overwhelming disaster! Furthermore, even this story, necessarily limited in its outlook, has

<sup>1</sup> See the reviews of the books by Colonel Mayer, by Colonel Lestern on the Marne, the Battle of Morhange by an anonymous writer, and Foch's own Memoirs, in *The Army Quarterly* of October 1930, July 1929, July 1931.

shown that of the two Haig was far more international in his point of view. Foch was essentially a French General: on the other hand—and this cannot be too often emphasised—Haig's conceptions always embraced the situation of our Allies and contemplated the vast theatre of the whole War. He had fought the battles of 1915, 1916, and still more those of 1917, not necessarily that the British Army should win victories, but in order to help our Allies to win them or—equally important—to save our Allies from losing them! Many of them were fought (notably the Battle of Loos) because they were strongly urged by Foch, against Haig's better judgment and contrary to his expressed opinion.

In 1918 Haig was the first among the Allied Commanders to see the significance in the change in the German resistance; early in September he had informed his Government that 'the character of the contest had changed, and that a decision in 1918 might be looked for.' *At this time Foch was still preparing and basing his hopes on a campaign for 1919!*

The final victories of August-October 1918, the foundations of which were 'well and truly laid' by the Fifth Army in March, are among the greatest that any army or any General has ever won, and they were won by a British General and British soldiers, without the guidance of Foch, and sometimes in spite of his wishes.

But with the inveterate tendency of the British to belittle themselves and their own achievements, Haig has never been awarded by his own countrymen the position in their estimation which is justly his due. Let History say which of the two was the finer Commander.

On the evening of this Tuesday I spoke on the telephone to the Chief of the General Staff and told him that the energy of the attacks was evidently weakening, and that the Germans were becoming worn out and very tired. Whenever our men advanced to a counter-attack, unless the German machine guns could stop them, the enemy fell back. I went on to say that if G.H.Q. could send me two or three fresh divisions I could push the Germans in front of us back as far as the Somme. Lawrence laughed and said it was good to hear that we had plenty of fight still left, though no reinforcements at the moment could be sent.



VII<sup>1</sup>

*Wednesday, 27 March.* Signs of weariness were now appearing in the enemy's ranks, and the Fifth Army, with the exhausted remnants of its divisions, their left on the Somme, still held fifteen miles of the front. The crossings over the river as far westwards as the Third Army's line, a distance of five miles, were only very weakly held by the hastily organised detachments which I had been able to send to Watts during the previous night.

But the task of the Fifth Army was not yet completed and the remnants of its gallant soldiers had still grimly to keep going for several more days.

*French V Corps.* During this day Pellé's Corps on the right, with four divisions in line, held its front of eight miles firmly. Our cavalry and infantry of the III Corps, still with the French, played little or no part in this day's fighting. I was most anxious to get these divisions back under my orders, in order to reinforce the unfortunate XIX Corps, which was very exhausted, and I was pressing the French for their return; in consequence I ordered Butler, early in the morning, to get the 2nd Cavalry Division and Canadian Cavalry Brigade together and send them back to me, for I felt that a strong force of mobile cavalry was now badly wanted. The 14th Division also moved south-westwards to refit. A great deal of the III Corps artillery, however, was still kept with the French and fought for them all this day, as well as the whole of the artillery of the 36th Division and six batteries of 6" howitzers of the XVIII Corps.

*French II Cav. Corps.* Robillot's Corps on Pellé's left was driven back southwards, and a very considerable gap was thus created between it and the troops on its left—the French First Army under General Debeney, which was now beginning to arrive. If the fatal policy of falling back southwards to cover Paris had been persisted in, it would have precipitated dangerous crises for the Allies. But Foch's influence here was usefully exerted, and Pétain from now on did his best to maintain a united front.

*French XXXV Corps.* During the afternoon and early the following morning the French XXXV Corps began to arrive, and came under Robillot's orders. It at first prolonged his left westwards to the south of Montdidier, but it left that town and a gap of six miles undefended on the right of the French VI Corps which belonged to Debeney's First Army.

*French VI Corps.*

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 20, p. 320.

This latter was also driven back during the 27th about nine miles, retiring westwards, and though it endeavoured to keep touch with the British, the direction of its retirement accentuated the six-mile gap between the two French Armies. During the following morning the remainder of the XXXV Corps came up, however, and filled this gap before anything disastrous had occurred.

The Germans walked into Montdidier (twenty-four miles S.E. of Amiens) unopposed about 7.30 this evening.

Meanwhile the French First Army was bringing up another *Mesple's Group*, consisting of the 133rd and the 4th Cavalry Divisions, which was under the orders of General Mesple. He was to relieve our XVIII Corps and take over its front.

Wednesday, 27th, was another difficult day for the XVIII *XVIII Corps*, as the French still kept most of its guns, and the tired men again fought with insufficient artillery support.

To make matters worse, the Germans were able to exploit the gap which had been made on the front of the 36th Division on the previous evening, and the two brigades on the right only got back with great difficulty: two battalions of the Irish Fusiliers, finding themselves surrounded, resisted and held up the Germans for four hours before the survivors surrendered. By nightfall the division had fallen back about four miles, when it was at last relieved by the French 56th Division of Mesple's Group.

The German attack on the rest of the front of the XVIII Corps, and on the right of the XIX Corps, began about 10 a.m. The 30th Division held the front between the two villages of Bouchoir and Rouvroy, while the 20th Division was in close support. By 11 a.m. the enemy captured Bouchoir and Rouvroy, and our front here began to fall back, but a counter-attack by one battalion (12th King's) from the 20th Division drove back the Germans and a line was taken up which was held for the rest of the day, being relieved by the French early next morning. During the night Mesple's Group managed to relieve some of the right of the XVIII Corps, but the division on the left was not relieved till Thursday morning.

The 61st Division had been in reserve during the day, and I seized on it in the evening to assist the XIX Corps, for a new and alarming danger had suddenly burst upon the latter.

The fact that the Third Army was several miles behind the XIX left of the XIX Corps, for the third day in succession, provided *XIX Corps*.

the Germans with the opportunity of crossing the Somme, and during this day they took advantage of it, thus seriously threatening to cut off the Corps, as will shortly be related.

The chief cause for anxiety on the XIX Corps front during the day resulted from the developments of this situation, and an afternoon and night of agonising anxiety was spent by the troops and their commanders in consequence, before the position could be made safe once more. But it is necessary to explain what took place during the day. On the right of the Corps the Germans began their attack between 7 and 8 a.m. The 24th and 8th Divisions, after heavy fighting and many small counter-attacks, maintained their positions with very little change. Rouvroy was lost by 11 a.m., but three companies led by Brig. General R. W. Morgan retook it by midday.

But when the XVIII Corps fell back on the right, the Germans once again captured Rouvroy, and the 24th Division retired about a mile to keep in line with the XVIII Corps. Here it held the enemy for the rest of the day and prevented them from debouching out of the village. The 8th Division, displaying great steadiness and making energetic counter-attacks, also maintained its front intact throughout the day.

Much heavy fighting occurred along the rest of the Corps line, the enemy pressing vigorously, but immediate counter-attacks, organised with wonderful determination and energy by the Divisional and Brigade Commanders, stopped the German advances and in places threw them back.

On the left front the village of Proyart was held, and though its defenders repulsed one attack, it was eventually turned from the north, and fell into German hands about 10 a.m. Between the village and the river, a distance of about one and a half miles, the German 4th Guard Division was repulsed, with the aid of our aeroplanes, who swooped down on the attacking lines and 'shot them up,' a fine example of the close co-operation of all arms, by land and air, though by no means an uncommon one, for ever since the Battle of Passchendaele both the Germans and ourselves frequently made use of our Air Service in this manner.

The capture of Proyart exposed the left of the 39th Division, which was holding the line to the south of that village, and by noon the whole of this division had fallen back about two miles. This obliged the 66th Division also to retire a short distance, but it maintained this new line all day.

Meanwhile Watts had ordered a counter-attack to recapture Proyard. Three battalions, from the 8th and 50th Divisions, undertook this task—scarcely 300 weary men, infantry, pioneers and engineers. As they topped a rise about 3.30 p.m. they suffered considerable casualties from machine guns, but on they went. The Germans were in some old trenches and houses, and thick belts of old wire crossed their front, but the attackers found gaps and still advanced. After hard fighting they drove the Germans out of their position, capturing many prisoners. Here the line was established and held against hostile counter-attacks till the withdrawal next morning.

Further south, another magnificent example of British tenacity, energy and courage was displayed. Owing to a misunderstanding, three battalions of Riddell's Brigade, 50th Division, began to retire about 1 p.m., and the Germans quickly followed, pouring into the gap.

Riddell with his Brigade Staff, clerks, signallers, servants, all turned out and stopped the retreat in front of Harbonnières. He organised three battalions for an immediate counter-attack. On his left, all Malcolm's reserves of the 66th Division co-operated and advanced. On his right, two battalions under a Brigadier of 8th Division threw themselves into the struggle. At 3 p.m. all these different bodies, with the Staffs of the three brigades concerned, advanced to the counter-attack. They came over a rise and met, at a distance of 300 yards, eight or ten waves of advancing Germans. Our line threw itself down and opened a heavy fire on the leading waves of the enemy. Our guns caught the rear waves and punished them heavily. The Germans fell back. Our line swept on, capturing prisoners and machine guns, and on the whole front the line of the 50th Division was re-established.

But the defenders of the village of Vauvillers were running short of ammunition, and though it was being brought up, it could not reach them in time, and by 5 p.m. the Germans drove our men out of the village. They now enfiladed the left of the successful troops of the 50th Division and by evening these had to retire, but our line after a day of steady defence and most gallant counter-attacks was back not more than two miles.

It is now necessary to relate how the very dangerous threat emanating from the north of the Somme developed and forced the retirement of the whole of the XIX Corps.

By the early afternoon two brigades of the 16th Division,



which were holding the line between Proyart and the Somme and which so far had repulsed all attacks on their front, found both their flanks turned and decided on a retirement behind Morcourt, a distance of under three miles. The orders did not reach three battalions, and these (a total of something more than 200) hung on till nightfall and then retired through the Germans to our lines, a very notable and gallant performance.

As the rest of the two brigades were taking up their new position west of Morcourt, to their surprise they came under heavy machine-gun fire from Cerizy. It was now evident that the Germans had crossed the river, and the two brigades fell back southwards to Lamotte, on the main Amiens road, and then rejoined Carey's force, which was in position behind that village.

The presence of the Germans south of the river must now be accounted for. They had advanced against the Third Army the six or seven miles along the north bank of the Somme which lay beyond the left of the Fifth Army without much difficulty, but when they ran up against our 1st Cavalry Division, which was now holding a line in advance of the right of the Third Army, they were held up by a stout defence. By way of turning it, they attempted to cross at Cerizy. The bridge here had been destroyed by the XIX Corps and the passage was obstinately defended by a company of 80 men of the 16th Division, which was all that the Fifth Army could spare to cover this exposed flank; the Germans, however, constructed a foot-bridge, and before midday they had forced the crossing. The only troops available to deal with this danger were two companies of Army Troop engineers, who had received no training as soldiers and could hardly handle a rifle. This attempt therefore failed to stop the Germans. Some engineers of the 16th Division were still near Morcourt, and they now faced north-west with their backs almost to the direction of the main German advance, and fired into the Germans advancing south from Cerizy. This delayed the enemy a short time.

Meanwhile General Feetham, 39th Division, had realised the danger, and collecting about 400 men of his own and of the 16th Divisions, attacked northwards towards Cerizy, and about 5 p.m. successfully seized a wood less than a mile south-west of the village.

The Germans were now reinforced and had four battalions across the river. They renewed their attack and drove our

detachments back. A German battalion occupied Lamotte on the main road by 7 p.m. and during the night ambushed several parties of our men, who had as yet no idea of what had occurred.

Information had been sent to the Third Army that the enemy was crossing the Somme at Cerizy, thus creating a desperate situation for our troops still fighting several miles east of that place, and by orders from that Army the 1st Cavalry Division was withdrawn from its front and sent back to me. It crossed the river during the night and came into position mixed up with Carey's force, between the Amiens high road and the Somme.

While these serious events were taking place on my left, I had gone out to see Maxse. I also visited Mesple at his Headquarters. Nothing was organised there, and his Staff scarcely had a map of their front between them. Mesple did not appear to be a very intelligent or resolute-looking person, and I did not feel much confidence that the German attack would now be held. I looked in also on General Daly, commanding the 24th Division, and was back at my Headquarters about 5 p.m. Here I found General Ruggles-Brise, Haig's Military Secretary, and not having an idea what he had come about, I sat him down to some tea. He then asked to see me alone and told me as nicely as he could that the Chief thought that I and my Staff must be very tired, so he had decided to put in Rawlinson and the Staff of the Fourth Army to take command. I was very surprised, and I suppose I was very hurt, but beyond saying 'All right,' I only asked when Rawlinson would be coming to take over.

I had not much leisure, however, to think over my own affairs, for the reports of the serious developments on the left of the XIX Corps were then coming in and steps to meet them had to be thought out and taken without delay. It was after this that we issued the orders for the move of the 61st Division by bus, and began to get in touch with the 1st Cavalry Division.

The 61st was the only division available in the XVIII Corps, and this was now ordered up as rapidly as possible in order to rectify this situation and to remove the danger threatening the XIX Corps. The Army Staff got hold of as many 'buses' as possible and the division was moved during the night of the 27/28 to Marcelcave, with the object of making a counter-attack from the south against Lamotte and then, with the aid of the 1st Cavalry Division, which was to co-operate on its left, to drive the Germans back across the Somme, thus freeing the XIX Corps from the grave menace which threatened it.

The day was by no means over, and in fact most of our days in the Fifth Army during this critical battle were of 24 hours : there were no ' 8-hour days ' for any of us !

Before relating how the XIX Corps extricated itself from its dangerous position, the astonishing adventures of the three Irish battalions of the 16th Division already referred to must be described. These battalions held their positions of the morning, nearly two miles east of Mericourt, all day and repulsed all attacks. They realised that they were isolated, but decided to wait till dark before attempting to get away. After dark they marched in column down the road to the bridge over the Somme north of Mericourt. This was strongly held by the Germans. They then marched down the tow-path to Cerizy, but took the wise precaution of sending forward a reconnoitring patrol. This found a German picquet on the bridge, which the main body surprised and shot, and then rushed the bridge. They were now truly in the enemy's country, on the north bank. However, no one expected them, and they again stuck to the tow-path on the far bank, and reached the next bridge at Sailly Laurette without incident. Here they rushed another German picquet, recrossed the river and marched into our own lines near Hamel. A truly wonderful example of courage and initiative.

The situation of the XIX Corps that night was as follows : the divisions had fought splendidly and shown a wonderful spirit after the week of storm and stress to which they had been exposed. There was no doubt that the vim of the German attack was disappearing. Comparatively little ground had been lost along the front, but behind the left flank the Germans were on the south bank of the Somme at Cerizy, in Lamotte on the main road, as well as close to the river near Morcourt. The 39th Division was already facing east, north and west. About 11 p.m. a line facing west astride the main road was formed by two companies of engineers.

The three Brigadiers were completely cut off from their Divisional Headquarters, and they very wisely decided to withdraw south and take up a new line Harbonnières-Bayonvillers, at 2 a.m. Two officers took a message, and by stalking got round Lamotte and delivered it. Then the Brigadiers received a message from their division, instructing them to hold on, as a counter-attack by the 61st Division on Lamotte was being organised ; but by 4 a.m. the division had received orders

sanctioning a withdrawal, and it was able to pass these on to its Brigadiers.

While the Brigadiers of the 39th Division had been anxiously discussing their situation, the Commanders of the three divisions—the 8th, 50th and 66th—were also holding a council at Cayeux. The danger of all three divisions being cut off completely if they remained in their present positions was obvious, and at 1 a.m. they communicated with their Corps.

This situation had already been referred to me, but I had been ordered by Foch to hold our ground at all costs until relieved by the French, and I was still anxious to comply with these orders if there was any prospect of French relief being in sight. But it was now evident that if we held on, the Corps would be destroyed. My Staff got through to Foch and he was roused from his bed, and after the situation had been clearly put to him he consented to the orders for a retirement being issued.

Such questions as this should have been referred to British G.H.Q. Haig was still responsible for the security of British troops, and I cannot say that I approved of the Fifth Army being handed over body and soul to the French even if Foch was Generalissimo.<sup>1</sup>

There can be no question that Foch's orders to me nearly brought about the destruction of the XIX Corps, and did in fact cost the lives of many British soldiers. If the order to retire could have been issued in time to enable the divisions to withdraw the previous night, they could have retired from their dangerous positions and taken up the new line before daybreak on the 28th with little loss, and with much better prospects of holding it. Foch knew, or ought to have known, that my troops were extremely exhausted after a week of desperate fighting, that their left flank was very exposed to attack for five miles, and that no reliefs were coming up for several days yet. Perhaps he was in the habit of issuing such orders to his French Generals, who evidently did not take them too literally, for the French troops on my right continued to make considerable retirements during the 27th. It is easy to say that a position

<sup>1</sup> After I had handed over to Rawlinson, G.H.Q. wrote him a letter directing him to remember that his responsibilities were first for the safety of the British forces under his command. Such orders should have been issued to me also, with a copy to the French, immediately on my being placed under the orders of Fayolle on the 25th March. It would have strengthened my hand considerably at this crisis, and would have been a support which was but due to me.



must be held 'at all costs,' and there are times when it should be held to the last, but when such an order is given without due regard to the circumstances it is a grave error and can be the cause of disastrous consequences. That Foch's hasty and ill-considered order did not lead to a disaster was only due to the gallantry of the exhausted fragments of the British divisions and the steady tactical leadership of their officers.

VIII <sup>1</sup>

The last day of my career as a soldier opened, therefore, with renewed anxieties and further calls for decisions.

The problem was how to withdraw the XIX Corps from the very critical position in which it had been placed through no fault of its own, and to supervise the carrying out of this difficult operation.

But before dealing with this, let me briefly relate the events of the previous day along the original Army front. On our right, Humbert's Third Army had steadied, and held its line more or less firmly against the attack of the tired German divisions. In fact, Humbert, with a sound military instinct, had ordered an advance against what was now the flank of a great German salient. In one place some ground was gained and the village of Assainvillers retaken, but on the whole little change took place. The French had not got the power in them to drive a large hole into the side of the German attack. The right of the French First Army lost ground south and north of Montdidier, but on fresh reinforcements coming up, some of this ground was recaptured and the German advance stayed. Mesple's Group and the French VI Corps, however, did not do well, and this unfortunately put an additional burden on the remnants of our divisions of the XVIII and XIX Corps, the latter being already in a most dangerous situation owing to the inrush of Germans behind its left.

The position of the Corps in a pronounced salient, with the French VI Corps on the right and our Third Army on the left both far behind it, made a retirement in any case inevitable, but now that the enemy was established in Lamotte and Cerizy, behind its left and centre, the situation was urgent and critical.

Similar situations had been met before by the commanders in the Fifth Army during the course of the battle, though not in

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch Map 20, p. 320.

so pronounced a degree, but we had withdrawn in time and extricated many units from dangerous positions, while keeping the line intact. We could have done the same in this case also if we had been left to our own initiative and military knowledge, alarming as was the situation, without the heavy losses which compliance with the order of Foch entailed.

Watts recognised the situation here as quickly as I did, but out of a misplaced desire to be loyal to Foch and our Allies, and having received no qualifying instruction or support from G.H.Q., I hesitated to ignore Foch's order to hold on at all costs.

I was to blame, and I should undoubtedly have acted entirely on my own judgment and ignored these orders. Three times during the course of the battle I received similar orders from my superior—'the position was to be held at all costs.' The first occasion was to hold the Péronne bridge-head east of the Somme. I did not act on this order, and retired across the Somme as soon as my front was broken in two places on the 22nd—at Caulaincourt and Nobescourt Farm.

Some critics may say that I was wrong in departing from my orders, but the situation was desperate and in my judgment no other course was open to me. The responsibility was certainly great, but even now as I try to reconstruct the past in the peace and quiet of my study it is my firm conviction that if we had not retired when we did, our troops east of the river would never have got back at all!

It has also been suggested that, if I had held the Péronne bridge-head, I could have re-formed and reorganised behind the river the divisions which had been so battered in the previous fighting. The futility of the suggestion will be at once apparent to the readers of this chapter. There was no question of re-forming the divisions which had suffered most in the early fighting, for there were no adequate supports to take their place or to cover them. They had to carry on the fighting themselves, and in fact did so for five more days; and by getting across the river when they did, the divisions of the XIX Corps were able to organise an adequate defence, which would certainly not have been the case if they had been driven back in confusion with the enemy close on their heels. As a matter of fact, these divisions held the river line for two days, with the Armies to the north and south falling back several miles on both flanks. Watts's judgment and my decision were right, and it was fortunate that we acted accordingly; our action saved the

Fifth Army and the British cause from defeat and ruin. Criticisms of the retirement across the Somme do not take into consideration the further disasters which would have overtaken the Fifth Army if it had attempted to continue holding the Péronne bridge-head when the Third Army retired on its left, which it did the next day.

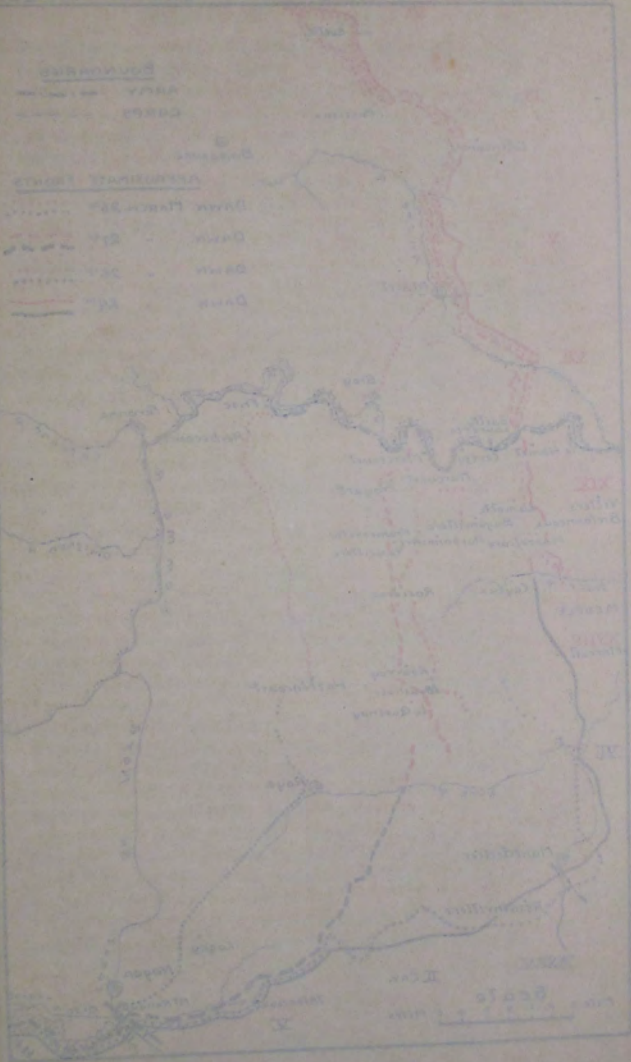
The occupation of Lamotte by the enemy on 28th March provides a striking illustration of the position in which the Army might have found itself!

The second occasion on which I received orders from the Supreme Command was once again to hold the line of the Somme 'at all costs.' On this occasion I did keep the Fifth Army on that line for two days while our neighbours fell back, and the price was the annihilation of the devoted South African Brigade and several other determined and courageous detachments. It would, in fact, have been better to have retired twenty-four hours earlier, and kept more in line with the Armies on my right and left.

Foch's order was the third one of this nature I had received, and though I now blame myself for not acting on my own better judgment, the Fifth Army at least did its duty in accordance with the very best traditions of the British people, and it is the last Army of whom it can be said that it retired too soon, or that its retirement was the reason for the retreat of others. The facts are exactly the contrary.

*Thurs-  
day, 28  
March.*

But to return to the 28th March. Orders were issued about 5 o'clock in the morning for a new line to be taken up, leaving the 24th Division still holding its line west of Rouvrois like a condemning finger pointing into the face of the Germans, while the three divisions were to take up a line now facing north-east and south of Lamotte. Actually, this plan was subsequently modified, and the 24th Division was brought back in line with the rest of the Army and the French. The retirement of the divisions of the XIX Corps had to be carried out by daylight, with the enemy pressing round both flanks, and treading closely on their heels. Gaps inevitably occurred, new lines were soon enfiladed, and the exhausted men only got back with difficulty, at the cost of many more casualties, and exposed to moments of sudden and great anxiety. The energy, devotion and resolution of their commanders and officers, coupled with the steadfastness of the men, saved them and enabled the Corps to fall back some six miles and eventually take up a line with the







French on the right and Carey's force on the left on a position behind Marcelcave to the Somme.

The 61st Division attacked Lamotte about noon, after a night in the buses, but being enfiladed by machine guns, failed to retake the village. Riddell, with the 50th Division, and its commander, Jackson, again on this day saved the situation by their prompt decision, Jackson sounding a hunting-horn to encourage his men to get forward! How he came to have a hunting-horn on him I could never guess, but I dare say its notes, so familiar to English ears, were encouraging to our tired men.

The XVIII Corps, having held the front line during the early *XVIII* part of the day, was eventually relieved by the French, and its *Corps*. divisions withdrawn to rest and refit, but I sent the 20th Division, now reduced to about 1000 men, across to help Watts, and called up the 18th Division and the 2nd Cavalry Division from our III Corps with Humbert's Third Army to support our weary and shaken line. These were the last operations I was ever to direct as a soldier.

At 4.30 that afternoon, Rawlinson arrived to take over the command. I told him all I could of our situation, and as I felt that I should only be an embarrassment to him in exercising his new command, I left Dury, not at all sure where I was to get a bed or dinner that night.

Before I handed over the command, the task of the Fifth Army can be said to have been completed. Very little more ground was lost, and that principally by the French. Within a few days the remnants of my exhausted divisions had been relieved by fresh troops, after having performed feats of gallantry and endurance that will be a military byword for many years to come.

A retreat is not necessarily a defeat. Some of the greatest victories in military history have been based on retreats. The retreat to Moscow and the consequent destruction of Napoleon's army is one example. Wellington conducted many retreats which led to great victories during the Peninsular War—the retreat to the lines of Torres Vedras—the retreat before Salamanca—the retreat from Burgos: these do not complete the list. The retreat from the battlefields of Ligny and Quatre Bras led to the victory of Waterloo.

If the Fifth Army had attempted to hold their ground at all costs—if the tactics had not been those of a great rear-guard

action—the whole Army might have been overwhelmed, in fact almost certainly would have been, in the first two or three days' fighting. There would then have been a gap, not of two or three miles which could be filled somehow—but of forty miles ! It does not require a great stretch of imagination to see the disastrous consequences to the Allies if such a position had been created.

The fighting retreat of the Fifth Army was no new operation of war, though perhaps conducted on a greater scale and under conditions of more difficulty and stress than any previous example. Its material effects were vital to the Allied cause. The highest hopes of the Germans, naturally so encouraged by the collapse of Russia, had been staked on this gigantic onslaught. And now the great effort of the German High Command to defeat the British, to cut them off from the French, and to drive them into the sea, had been defeated. The German Army was stopped, it had shot its bolt ; the high hopes of a great, decisive, and above all a *final* victory, were dead. From now on, though it still put forth at times a last despairing display of its ancient fierce strength, like the last flickerings of a dying candle, its *morale* rapidly sank.

The Channel Ports were secure, and though the few divisions of the Fifth Army were shattered and almost destroyed, Haig had economised his forces, and still had many divisions in hand for the great counter-strokes, when in four months' time the British Army was able to advance on broad fronts, gaining greater victories (if victories and defeats can be measured by captured prisoners and trophies) than it has ever done in its previous history.

Of the results of this battle the Germans themselves have written :

When a great attack, from which something decisive is expected, fails hopelessly with heavy losses, the cohesion of an army is more shaken than by an unsuccessful defensive battle.

A French officer wrote :

The *morale* of the German attacking divisions was very good. They were cheered by their successes at Riga and Caporetto, buoyed up by hope of victory at a single blow, an end to all their miseries. But if an instant success was not attained, their *morale*, thus disillusioned, would fall.

As indeed it did !

On 27th March, General Malcolm, commanding the 66th Division, which had just carried out a successful counter-attack and driven back the Germans, making some prisoners, while walking back to his Headquarters met a French officer, who in very evident anxiety inquired of the situation. Malcolm replied : ' It is quite good ; we have won the War.'

He realised the failing energy, the growing weariness of the German troops in his front ; he could feel the attack was stayed—the situation saved.

Lord Birkenhead, in his book, *Turning Points of History*, writing of the triumph of the Fifth Army in this battle, says :

On them fell the brunt of the attack. The Armies on his flanks did not hold as firm as they might have done. Gough had neither adequate rear lines of defence nor reserves. Yet with such tenacity and courage did he continue to oppose and muffle the enemy's advance that, after the first terrible fortnight was passed, the front still stood, and Ludendorff's last throw had patently failed. Amiens was saved ; so was Paris ; so were the Channel Ports. So was France. So was England.

What was the state of these steadfast and heroic men to whom these great results were due ? The story, as I have briefly written it, tells something of the heavy casualties, of the dead lying thickly across every mile of the fiercely disputed battlefield, of the wounded and prisoners left behind in the hands of the enemy. Of the survivors, an average of little more than 1000 could still stand to arms in the divisions whose strength on paper should have stood at 10,000 infantry ! Some battalions were reduced to 50 men. The Staffs, the clerks, the engineers, had all given up their ordinary functions to shoulder a rifle.

The cavalry had played a great part in the battle. Their mobility, and their capacity to cross any country on horses and therefore to get rapidly from place to place, made them far more powerful than their mere numbers would suggest. They were quickly able to cover an exposed flank, to seize a position or to threaten one. They were rushed from one position to another to fill a gap, and saved many a critical situation. They fought mounted or dismounted as opportunity offered. Their great value during these ten days should never be forgotten. Had the Germans been able to make use of cavalry of the same calibre during these events it is more than probable that the whole course of the battle would have been altered.



An instructive commentary on the value of cavalry in a crisis is supplied by the fact that, some time before the battle, several regiments of yeomanry had been dismounted and given bicycles. In the battle they abandoned their bicycles and were hastily remounted on any spare horses that could be collected, as the value of mounted troops was keenly realised.

The energy and the devoted courage of the gunners had saved many a situation, had covered and protected their comrades and had taken a heavy toll of the Germans, often exposed in thick lines across the open ground.

Our airmen had also largely abandoned their ordinary functions of observation, to concentrate on close fighting, swooping on the enemy's infantry; everything had to give way to the imperious necessity of giving the closest support to the infantrymen.

The state of exhaustion to which these were reduced can be realised from their own diaries. One says:

The troops were very badly in need of a rest; there was no such thing as a platoon or company, and the junior officers (mostly aged 19) were for the most part incapable of dealing with the situation. It appeared absolutely necessary that if the division was to be of any further use, it should be withdrawn from the line and given an opportunity to reorganise and pull itself together, even if only six hours could be allowed. This state of affairs was explained to the Corps, but the latter replied that such a course was unfortunately impossible and that the division must hold on in the line for the present.

This was a division which had been continuously in the line since the battle opened, and yet it lost little ground on the 27th—and counter-attacked the Germans with success.

Another diary says:

The troops were dazed and weakened by their long period of fighting without rest. There was no sign of panic, and any attempts to withdraw were quite orderly, and the men obeyed willingly when ordered to return to their position, but they appeared to have lost the sense of reasoning and it was difficult to make them understand.

Another diary says:

Men who are weary are unaccountable for their actions. They had fought for seven days and nights and could not have totalled eight hours' sleep in that time. They had dug trenches out of number, and had covered (at a low estimate) 60 miles, if one considers marches, counter-attacks, etc.

The Germans also were very exhausted. Our retirements were usually made at a slow walk, they following at a distance of a few hundred yards at the same pace, and halting when the British line halted and turned round.

## IX

Little remains to be told. Within a week I was ordered home and placed on half-pay. Haig sent for me to tell me the Cabinet's decision. He told me that there was to be an inquiry and that my Corps Commanders would be called to give evidence. He also told me that the Prime Minister had blamed me greatly, especially for not holding the line of the Somme.

How little did the Prime Minister know of the strategy that led up to the battle, and of the tactics which influenced its course, and even of the map; for the Somme only covered eleven miles of a battle front which extended over fifty-five miles when that of the Third Army is included; and the Fifth Army maintained its hold on the line of that river for two days while the French on the right, and still more so the Third Army on the left, had fallen back many miles on its flanks.

I did not say much to Haig—I did not want to bother him. I simply said, 'Never mind now, sir. I am not going to say anything: you have too many very serious matters to think about, and your responsibilities and burdens at the moment are much too heavy for me to add anything to them. Don't worry about me,' and I left.

When I reached home I heard nothing whatever from the War Office, and so eventually I asked for an interview with the Secretary of State for War (Lord Derby), and I saw him on the 8th April.

He was suave and pleasant in manner, but he did not enter into any details of the battle. He told me that an inquiry was going to be held into the circumstances of the battle, that my Corps Commanders and other witnesses would be called, and that if I were exonerated from blame, as he hoped and felt sure would be the case, I should be reinstated.

I heard no more, however, and after writing twice to inquire the date of the proposed inquiry, I received a letter from the War Office in which I was informed that no inquiry was to be held, and that I was mistaken in thinking that a promise to that effect had been made!

I also saw Lord Milner, a Member of the War Council. I found him polite, but quite unsympathetic. It was evident that he thought the Fifth Army was entirely responsible for the loss of ground, material, etc., in the battle. It was he who said to me, 'You must admit, General Gough, that your troops sometimes left their positions before they should have done.'

It is natural, and I hope pardonable, if feelings of indignation still rise within me at conclusions so hastily arrived at and so firmly held.

How many units had fought to the last, leaving their bodies to mark the spot of their gallant sacrifice?

The salient facts of the battle ought to have been known to Ministers by this time, and it seems curious that even the heroic conduct of the South Africans was unknown to Lord Milner.

I had hoped that the Fifth Army as a whole would be withdrawn to rest and refit under my orders after the stern trial through which it had just passed. It would have been a powerful and homogeneous body, animated and strengthened by the comradeship and confidence which is only born of duty faithfully achieved in days of a common adversity. We could then have returned again to the front to take an honourable part in those great victories, the foundations of which had been laid on the bodies of our dead and in the spent and exhausted souls of the survivors. But it was not to be, and I was not allowed to play any further part in the great events of the War which were yet to follow.

On the 9th April Mr. Lloyd George offered his explanation of recent events in France to his then faithful followers in the House of Commons, and made several direct statements which most ungenerously placed blame on the Fifth Army in general, as well as on myself in particular. These statements were quite inaccurate. He made several other more or less indirect statements, which in a thinly veiled way also implied blame on the Army, and made invidious and very misleading comparisons.

For example, he inferred that the Fifth Army was retreating precipitately while the Third Army held, 'never giving way 100 yards to the attack of the enemy.' Without in any way disparaging the Third Army, the readers of these pages will immediately recognise the incorrectness but also the absurdity of this statement. Mr. Lloyd George stated, in his now-famous story of Carey's Force, that 'He (Brig. General Carey) gathered together signalmen, engineers, and Labour battalions, odds and

ends of machine gunners, everybody he could find, and threw them into the line and held up the German Army and closed the gap on the way to Amiens for about six days.' General Carey did nothing of the kind. He was not in the slightest degree responsible for the formation, organisation or posting of this force. He was away on leave in England when it was formed and posted, and he did not take command of it until it had been in position for two days. This book clearly shows that such formations as these 'forces' were envisaged and provided for weeks before the attack, and were part of our defensive scheme. This force, which was only one of several, organised by the Corps as well as by the Army, was entirely formed, organised and posted under my directions and by my Staff.

The retreat, in fact, was a clearly-defined manoeuvre foreseen months before it took place, sanctioned by the Commander-in-Chief, and planned and prepared in great detail. The impressions left by Mr. Lloyd George in this speech were almost uniformly false and misleading. The Fifth Army faithfully carried out the heavy task allotted to it. There was no disaster: there was no defeat.

The facts should have been known to the Prime Minister by that time, and there was little excuse under any circumstances for making these false statements. Since then, however, much has been cleared up and the facts are now better known. Mr. Lloyd George, however, has never taken any steps to withdraw the undeserved and ungenerous comments he made on those heroic men who endured the main burden of that terrific ordeal in March 1918, over-stretched and grossly undermanned as was their line, largely because of his own policy and action (or rather his inaction!) and of his faith in any one rather than in his own countrymen.

To this day the reverberations of his ill-considered speech are heard, and he has done nothing to dispel the ignorant rumours which he initiated. To the memory of those thousands of gallant men who lie in that stricken area, men who gave their lives for the cause he represented—to their mothers and sisters who may still feel the wounds caused by unfounded suggestions that their loved ones were not heroes but cowards, and to those who, by some more favourable chance, survived the greatest battle in history, some acknowledgment is owing. It is sometimes said that their honour can now with confidence be left to posterity. It is an easy attitude to take up, but does it suffice?



Suddenly deprived of a Staff, of all my records, papers and means of communication with my corps and divisions, I was never able to thank the men of my Army officially for their faithful, devoted courage, for all they had done, suffered and achieved for their comrades, for Britain, and for the Empire. Some of the survivors I have been able to thank individually, others indirectly, but this book at last gives me an opportunity of telling all of them how sincerely, how deeply, I thank them. I hope its pages amply prove my appreciation of their splendid character and conduct. I know that, like every other general who has commanded troops in battle, I was guilty of mistakes and errors of judgment. 'The man who has never made a mistake has never made war' is a saying attributed to Napoleon. But whatever may have been my shortcomings, I am deeply conscious that my Army never failed me.

I think it was said by the Greeks that 'No man deserves to live who fears to die.' Then indeed the officers and men of the Fifth Army deserve to live—at least in the memories of their countrymen—for they knew how, and were not afraid, to die.

In an appendix to this book will be found the Order of Battle of the Fifth Army on the morning of 21st March 1918—a list of the gallant units who took the first shock of the great assault. It will repay study. In that list will be found the names of famous regiments, whose colours have waved over many a battlefield; in their ranks, and those of the auxiliary services, were men from all parts of the Empire, called together by a stern sense of duty. No greater battle honours were ever won than in this eight-days' inferno, when battalions dwindled to platoons, and when companies fought till no man remained alive.

To those who survived I say: Hold up your heads high with pride. History will proclaim the greatness of what you did. It can be said of no other troops that they did more to win the War. You are the remnants of a gallant band of brothers buffeted by adversity and grievously maligned, yet your spirit is too fine to be damped by such misfortunes: you are the men on whom Britain is based.

To my countrymen from all parts of our wide Empire I say: Read, and think of what it meant to you, this band of men who stood unflinchingly between you and all that defeat meant. And realise that many thousands of the survivors live to-day, passing unnoticed in a civilian crowd; you may meet them day

by day, unhonoured and unknown. Acknowledge their valour as and when you can ; it is too easy to forget.

To the relatives of the dead I say : Your men died as heroes among heroes. They faced overwhelming odds with a courage beyond the power of words to praise. Battered and bruised, they hung on to the last to enable their comrades to retire, so as to continue the battle—and to save Britain. When the end came they had no regrets ; they had done their duty. There is a broad wreath of British dead in that desolate land, which has now become once again a smiling countryside. The rows of crosses mark for ever the scenes of their valiant deeds : history at least will give them the great honour they earned. Britain can ill spare such men : they are of the breed which has made her honoured and powerful throughout the world.

## APPENDIX I

### PROJET D'ORGANISATION DE L'UNITÉ DE COMMANDEMENT SUR LE FRONT OCCIDENTAL

1° PAR délégation du Comité de Guerre britannique avec l'assentiment du Comité de Guerre français et dans le but d'assurer l'unité de commandement sur le front occidental, le Général en Chef français aura, à partir du 1<sup>er</sup> Mars, 1917, autorité sur les forces britanniques opérant sur ce front, pour tout ce qui concerne la conduite des opérations, et notamment :—

Le plan et l'exécution des actions offensives et défensives.

Le groupement des forces en armées et groupes d'armées.

Les limites entre ces grandes unités.

La répartition des moyens, matériels et ressources de toute nature entre les Armées.

2° Le Général en Chef français disposera d'un Chef d'Etat-Major Général britannique qui résidera au G.Q.G. français.

Ce Chef d'Etat-Major Général aura sous ses ordres :—

(a) Un Etat-Major Général chargé de l'étude des questions d'opérations et des rapports avec le Comité de Guerre britannique.

(b) Le Quarter Master Général.

Il sera chargé de tenir le Comité de Guerre britannique au courant de la situation des Armées britanniques et de lui transmettre les demandes émanant du Commandant en Chef français au sujet des besoins de ces Armées.

Il transmettra au Commandant en Chef britannique, aux Commandants d'Armées ou de Groupes d'Armées opérant isolément, les directives et instructions du Commandant en Chef français.

Sous l'autorité du Chef d'Etat-Major Général, le Quarter Master Général sera chargé de répartir les ressources de toute nature entre les Armées britanniques, et de donner au Directeur Général des Transports les instructions nécessaires à son Service.

3° Les questions de personnel et de discipline générale dans les Armées britanniques seront réglées par le Commandant en Chef britannique, les Commandants d'Armées ou de Groupes d'Armées

opérant isolement, et le Chef d'Etat-Major Général britannique, suivant les attributions qui lui seront fixées par le War Office.

4° La composition et le fonctionnement de l'Etat-Major Général britannique détaché auprès du Commandant en Chef français seront fixés par accord entre le Maréchal Sir Douglas Haig et le Général Nivelle.

5° Au cas où le Commandant en Chef français disparaîtrait ses attributions passeraient au nouveau Commandant en Chef français, à moins de décision nouvelle des deux Comités de Guerre.



## APPENDIX II

### ORDER OF BATTLE, FIFTH ARMY, 21ST MARCH 1918

#### *From the Right of the Line*

#### III Corps

Lt. General Sir R. H. K. Butler.  
B.G.G.S. Brig. General C. G. Fuller.  
D.A.Q.M.G. Brig. General J. F. I. H. Doyle.  
C.R.A. Brig. General T. A. Tancred.  
C.H.A. Brig. General A. E. J. Perkins.  
C.E. Brig. General A. Rolland.

#### *58th (2/1st London) Division*

Major General A. B. E. Cator.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel R. H. Mangles.  
*173rd Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General R. B. Worgan.  
2/2nd London. 3rd London. 2/4th London.  
*174th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General C. G. Higgins.  
6th London. 7th London. 8th London.  
*175th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General H. C. Jackson.  
9th London. 2/10th London. 12th London.  
*Pioneers.*—1/4th Suffolk.

#### *18th Division*

Major General R. P. Lee.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel W. D. Wright, V.C.  
*53rd Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General H. W. Higginson.  
10th Essex. 8th R. Berks. 7th R. West Kent.  
*54th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General L. W. de V. Sadleir-Jackson.  
11th Royal Fus. 7th Bedfordshire. 6th Northamptonshire.  
*55th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General E. A. Wood.  
7th Queen's. 7th Buffs. 8th East Surrey.  
*Pioneers.*—8th R. Sussex.

*14th Division*

Major General Sir Victor Couper.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel A. C. Bayley.

- 41st Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General P. C. B. Skinner.  
8th K.R.R.C. 7th Rifle Brigade. 8th Rifle Brigade.  
*42nd Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General G. N. B. Forster.  
5th Oxford L.I. 9th K.R.R.C. 9th Rifle Brigade.  
*43rd Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General R. S. Tempest.  
6th Somerset L.I. 9th Scottish Rifles. 7th K.R.R.C.  
*Pioneers.*—11th King's Own.

*2nd Cavalry Division*

Major General W. H. Greenly.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel H. de Burgh.

- 3rd Cavalry Brigade.*—Brig. General J. A. Bell-Smyth.  
4th Hussars. 5th Lancers. 16th Lancers.  
*4th Cavalry Brigade.*—Brig. General T. T. Pitman.  
6th Dragoon Guards. 3rd Hussars. Oxfordshire Hussars.  
*5th Cavalry Brigade.*—Lt. Colonel W. F. Collins.  
Royal Scots Greys. 12th Lancers. 20th Hussars.

*3rd Cavalry Division*

Brig. General A. E. W. Harman.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel J. A. Muirhead.

- 6th Cavalry Brigade.*—Brig. General A. Seymour.  
3rd Dragoon Guards. 1st Royal Dragoons. 10th Hussars.  
*7th Cavalry Brigade.*—Brig. General B. P. Portal.  
7th Dragoon Guards. 6th Innis. Dragoons. 17th Lancers.  
*Canadian Cavalry Brigade.*—Brig. General Rt. Hon. J. E. B. Seely.  
R. Canadian Dragoons. Lord Strathcona's Horse. Fort  
Garry Horse.

**XVIII Corps**

- Lt. General Sir Ivor Maxse.  
B.G.G.S. Brig. General S. E. Holland.  
D.A.Q.M.G. Brig. General L. H. Abbott.  
C.R.A. Brig. General D. J. M. Fasson.  
C.H.A. Brig. General H. E. J. Brake.  
C.E. Brig. General H. G. Joly de Lotbinière.

*36th Division*

Major General O. S. W. Nugent.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel C. O. Place.

*107th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General W. M. Withycombe.  
2nd R. Irish Rifles. 1st R. Irish Rifles. 15th R. Irish Rifles.  
*108th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General C. R. J. Griffith.  
12th R. Irish Rifles. 1st R. Irish Fus. 9th R. Irish Fus.  
*109th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General W. F. Hessey.  
1st R. Innis. Fus. 9th R. Innis. Fus. 2nd R. Innis. Fus.  
*Pioneers.*—16th R. Irish Rifles.

*30th Division*

Major General W. de L. Williams.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel H. R. Blore.

*21st Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General G. D. Goodman.  
2nd Wiltshire. 2nd Green Howards. 17th Manchester.  
*89th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General F. C. Stanley.  
17th King's. 18th King's. 19th King's.  
*90th Infantry Brigade.*—Lt. Colonel H. S. Poyntz.  
2nd Bedfordshire. 2nd Royal Scots Fus. 16th Manchester.  
*Pioneers.*—11th South Lanes.

*61st Division*

Major General C. Mackenzie.  
G.S.O. 1. Brig. General R. O'H. Livesay.

*182nd Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General W. K. Evans.  
2/6th R. Warwicks. 2/7th R. Warwicks. 2/8th Worcester.  
*183rd Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General A. H. Spooner.  
9th Royal Scots. 5th Gordon Highs. 8th A. & S. Highs.  
*184th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General Hon. R. White.  
2/5th Gloucester. 2/4th Oxford. 2/4th R. Berks.  
*Pioneers.*—1/5th D.C.L.I.

**XIX Corps**

Lt. General Sir H. E. Watts.  
B.G.G.S. Brig. General C. N. Macmullen.  
D.A.Q.M.G. Brig. General A. J. G. Moir.  
C.R.A. Brig. General W. B. R. Sandys.  
C.H.A. Brig. General C. G. Pritchard.  
C.E. Brig. General A. G. Bremner.

*24th Division*

Major General A. C. Daly.

G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel J. H. Mackenzie.

*17th Infantry Brigade*.—Brig. General P. V. P. Stone.

8th R. West Surrey. 1st Royal Fus. 3rd Rifle Brigade.

*72nd Infantry Brigade*.—Brig. General R. W. Morgan (on leave 15th-24th March). *Acting Brig.*—Colonel L. J. Wyatt.

9th East Surrey. 8th R. West Kent. 1st North Staffs.

*73rd Infantry Brigade*.—Brig. General W. J. Dugan.

9th R. Sussex. 7th Northampton. 13th Middlesex.

*Pioneers*.—12th Notts and Derby.*66th Division*

Major General Neill Malcolm.

G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel A. R. Burrowes.

*197th Infantry Brigade*.—Brig. General O. C. Borrett.

6th Lancs. Fus. 2/7th Lancs. Fus. 2/8th Lancs. Fus.

*198th Infantry Brigade*.—Brig. General A. J. Hunter.

4th East Lancs. 2/5th East Lancs. 9th Manchester.

*199th Infantry Brigade*.—Brig. General G. C. Williams.

2/5th Manchester. 2/6th Manchester. 2/7th Manchester.

*Pioneers*.—5th Border.

## VII Corps

Lt. General Sir W. N. Congreve, V.C.

B.G.G.S. Brig. General Hon. A. G. A. Hore-Ruthven, V.C.

D.A.Q.M.G. Brig. General A. A. McHardy.

C.R.A. Brig. General K. K. Knapp.

C.H.A. Brig. General F. H. Metcalfe.

C.E. Brig. General R. D. Petrie.

*1st Cavalry Division (in Reserve)*

Major General R. L. Mullens.

G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel S. F. Muspratt.

*1st Cavalry Brigade*.—Brig. General E. Makins.

2nd Dragoon Guards. 5th Dragoon Guards. 11th Hussars.

*2nd Cavalry Brigade*.—Brig. General D. J. E. Beale-Browne.

4th Dragoon Guards. 9th Lancers. 18th Hussars.

*9th Cavalry Brigade*.—Brig. General D'A. Legard.

8th Hussars. 19th Hussars. 15th Hussars.



*16th Division*

Major General Sir C. P. A. Hull.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel L. C. Jackson.

*47th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General H. G. Gregorie.  
6th Connaught Rangers. 2nd Leinster. 1st R. Munster Fus.  
*48th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General F. W. Ramsay.  
1st R. Dublin Fus. 2nd R. Dublin Fus. 2nd R. Munster Fus.  
*49th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General P. Leveson-Gower.  
2nd R. Irish. 7th (South Irish Horse) R. Irish. 7/8th  
R. Innis. Fus.  
*Pioneers.*—11th Hampshire.

*39th Division (in Reserve)*

Major General E. Feetham.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel F. W. Gossett.

*116th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General M. L. Hornby.  
11th R. Sussex. 13th R. Sussex. 1/1st Herts.  
*117th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General G. A. Armytage.  
16th Notts and Derby. 17th K.R.R.C. 16th Rifle Brigade.  
*118th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General E. H. C. P. Bellingham.  
1/6th Cheshire. 4/5th Black Watch. 1/1st Cambridge.  
*Pioneers.*—13th Gloucesters.

*21st Division*

Major General D. G. M. Campbell.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel H. E. Franklyn.

*62nd Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General G. H. Gater.  
12/13th Northumberland Fus. 1st Lincoln. 2nd Lincoln.  
*64th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General H. R. Headlam.  
1st East Yorks. 9th K.O.Y.L.I. 15th D.L.I.  
*110th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General H. R. Cumming.  
6th Leicester. 7th Leicester. 8th Leicester.  
*Pioneers.*—14th Northumberland Fus.

*9th Division*

Major General C. A. Blacklock.<sup>1</sup>  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel T. C. Mudie.

*26th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General J. Kennedy.  
8th Black Watch. 7th Seaforth Highs. 5th Cameron Highs.  
*27th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General W. D. Croft.  
11th Royal Scots. 12th Royal Scots. 6th K.O.S.B.  
*South African Brigade.*—Brig. General F. S. Dawson.  
1st South African. 2nd South African. 4th South African.  
*Pioneers.*—9th Seaforth Highs.

## Divisions in G.H.Q. Reserve

*20th Division*

Major General W. Douglas Smith.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel J. McD. Haskard.

*59th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General H. H. G. Hyslop.  
2nd Scottish Rifles. 11th K.R.R.C. 11th Rifle Brigade.  
*60th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General F. J. Duncan.  
6th K.S.L.I. 12th K.R.R.C. 12th Rifle Brigade.  
*61st Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General J. K. Cochrane.  
12th King's (Liverpool). 7th Somerset L.I. 7th D.C.L.I.  
*Pioneers.*—11th D.L.I.

*8th Division*

Major General W. C. G. Heneker.  
G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel C. C. Armitage.

*23rd Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General G. W. St. G. Grogan, V.C.  
2nd Devon. 2nd West Yorks. 2nd Middlesex.  
*24th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General R. Haig.  
1st Worcester. 2nd Northampton. 1st Sherwood Foresters.  
*25th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General C. Coffin, V.C.  
2nd R. Berks. 2nd East Lancs. 2nd Rifle Brigade.  
*Pioneers.*—22nd D.L.I.

<sup>1</sup> Brig. General Tudor, C.R.A., commanded during the first days of the battle, as Major General Blacklock was away on leave when the battle opened.

*50th Division*

Brig. General A. U. Stockley, officiating till 24.3.18,  
replaced by

Major General H. C. Jackson.

G.S.O. 1. Lt. Colonel E. C. Anstey.

*149th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General E. P. A. Riddell.

4th Northumberland Fus. 5th Northumberland Fus. 6th  
Northumberland Fus.

*150th Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General H. C. Rees.

4th East Yorks. 4th Yorks. 5th Yorks.

*151st Infantry Brigade.*—Brig. General C. T. Martin.

5th D.L.I. 6th D.L.I. 8th D.L.I.

*Pioneers.*—7th D.L.I.

*V Brigade R.F.C.*

Brig. General L. E. O. Charlton.

*15th (Corps) Wing.*—Lt. Colonel I. A. E. Edwards.

Nos. 8, 35, 52, 82, and 53 Squadrons.

*22nd (Army) Wing.*—Lt. Colonel F. V. Holt.

Nos. 23, 24, 54, 48, 84, 5 (Naval), and 101 Squadrons.

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