

CHAPTER X

PASSCHENDAELE, OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 1917

(See Map 9 and Sketches 43-45)

The Background to Third Ypres

PASSCHENDAELE, a typical crossroads village in Flanders, has given its name to an entire campaign; though officially the designation belongs only to the two last of eight battles known collectively as “Ypres 1917”, or “Third Ypres”. In this series of operations, which began at the end of July, the role of the Canadian Corps comprised the diversionary efforts in the Lens area already described and the four attacks between 26 October and 10 November which constituted the Second Battle of Passchendaele.¹ Because of the wide notoriety attained by these battles and the bitter and prolonged controversy which they occasioned the reasons for the decision to undertake them merit careful consideration.

At a meeting of French and British military leaders held in Paris on the day preceding the inter-Allied conference of 4-5 May (above, p. 278), Field-Marshal Haig had reached agreement with the French Chief of the General Staff, General Pétain, that the Allies could not hope to break through on the Western Front until the Germans had been further worn down. To this end the French were to continue their present offensive on the Aisne, if possible, while the British (who were then engaged in the Third Battle of the Scarpe) prepared to attack towards Cambrai. Should a lack of manpower compel Pétain to abandon the offensive, he would strive to contain the enemy by attacking elsewhere on a smaller scale and Haig would strike “in the north”. In either event the French were to relieve six British divisions. That evening, however, Lloyd George expressed his doubts to Haig that the French would put forth a serious effort; and indeed at the first formal meeting next day the French C.G.S. revealed that the army’s confidence in its leaders and in the Government was undermined. Pétain’s statement had a dampening effect on the proceedings, though at the time its full significance was not realized.²

The larger strategical picture was far from clear. The Entente had lost a minor ally in December 1916 with the crushing of Rumania. It is true that on 6 April the United States had entered the war, brought in by Germany’s having embarked upon a ruthless policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. But though American destroyers were already in European waters, there was little hope of

effective military intervention before 1918. The Russian Revolution in mid-March had introduced a new complication. Despite the new socialist government's announced determination to go on fighting, British Intelligence foresaw the probability of a Russian secession from the war.³ Fearing that Germany would strike on the Eastern Front while Russia was still disorganized, the Western Allies felt constrained to keep their own front active. Furthermore, maintaining pressure in the West would encourage the Italians to attack the Austrians, and thereby forestall an Austro-German counter-offensive. Above all it was important to prevent a German counter-offensive on the Western Front. In short, the enemy must not be allowed to rest his armies or to score a land victory anywhere while awaiting the results of his submarine campaign.

The Paris Conference closed with official unanimity that the Allies could not end the war in 1917. At the same time it was thought possible to ward off any German attempt at a decisive counter-offensive by launching a series of attacks with limited objectives. Such efforts could be covered by an overwhelming artillery barrage - a form of tactics strongly urged by Pétain as a result of the Nivelle debacle. Allied strength would thus be conserved for an all-out effort with American aid in 1918.⁴ Privately, however, most of the delegates were inclined to interpret the new policy in their own way. The French had grave misgivings about any form of attrition that might further reduce their strength. The British Prime Minister, unaware of the serious weakness of the French Army, insisted that it was no good putting the full strength of the British Army into the attack "unless the French did the same".⁵

The First Sea Lord, Admiral Jellicoe, was obsessed with the notion that the enemy must be deprived of his submarine bases on the Belgian coast that summer. Despite the emphasis that had been placed on limited attacks, Jellicoe's concern was promptly seized on by Haig as a major consideration, even while the Nivelle offensive was still in progress. "I feel sure that you realize the great importance to all the Allies of making a great effort to clear the Belgian coast this summer", Sir Douglas wrote Nivelle on 5 May, in urging that the French take over a portion of his front. Brushing aside the black day of failures on 3 May, Haig outlined his plan to continue to wear out the enemy on the Arras-Vimy battlefield by local thrusts. These efforts would be preliminary to a well-mounted attack by sixteen divisions with adequate artillery against the Messines-Wytschaete ridge early in June. Capture of the high ground here would secure the right flank and prepare the way "for the undertaking of larger operations at a subsequent date directed towards the clearance of the Belgian coast".⁶

By the middle of May, as we have seen, the French attacks on the Aisne had ceased. Yet though the Arras battles had been planned only as subsidiary to the Nivelle offensive, the Paris decisions made it necessary to continue them at least until the British launched their attack on Messines Ridge. But, as already noted (above, p. 243), the French forces were unreliable because of virtual mutiny in their ranks. Fortunately the Germans were ignorant of the true situation, and thus missed an opportunity of taking advantage of the French

weakness by launching a strong counter-attack across the Aisne opposite Paris.* The Crown Prince proposed such action, but the German High Command estimated that to attack here would require 30 divisions, and only 23 were available. Indeed eight of these were then on their way to Flanders, where already a British offensive was expected.⁹

Haig's Early Plans

Despite all efforts by French and British military leaders to conceal the state of the French forces, some word of the mutinies appears to have reached the British War Cabinet before 12 May. This prompted Lloyd George to remind Haig that the War Cabinet's support of his policy was only "on express condition that the French also play their full part as agreed upon at our Conference".¹⁰ But Sir Douglas, engrossed in plans for his long-cherished northern offensive, does not appear to have been greatly concerned about French capabilities. At a private meeting with Haig at Amiens on 18 May, General Pétain objected to the distant aims of the British plan as contrary to the policy of attacks with limited objectives. The British Commander-in-Chief thereupon restated his intention in terms of successive limited attacks, adding that "as the wearing-down process continues, advanced guards and cavalry will be able to progress for much longer distances profiting by the enemy's demoralization until a real decision is reached".¹¹

Pétain did not share Haig's optimism.¹ He would have preferred the British to take over more line, but he regarded as Sir Douglas' own business how the latter chose to implement the policy of limited objectives, providing that the French line was not further stretched as a result.¹³ He refused to extend the French front to within a suggested eighteen miles south-east of Arras; instead, six French divisions would work with the British and Belgian forces in the main offensive while French local attacks at Malmaison (in Champagne), Verdun and elsewhere would serve a diversionary purpose. That evening Sir Douglas wired the War Cabinet that the necessary French support for his offensive was assured.¹⁴

Since January 1916, when Haig had first ordered planning to begin on operations to clear the Flemish coast, the scheme for an offensive north of the river Lys had undergone many revisions. The version that was officially adopted

* The French War Minister, Paul Painlevé, later revealed that for a time there were between Soissons (on the Aisne) and Paris only two divisions which he considered reliable.⁷ Painlevé was responsible for maintaining order in the capital, and he probably had in mind the necessity of using for this purpose two cavalry divisions stationed northeast of the city. These had not taken part in the offensive of 16 April and their morale was therefore relatively unimpaired.⁸

† Two days later Pétain expressed to the British liaison officer at his headquarters, General Sir Henry Wilson, the opinion that "Haig's attack towards Ostend was certain to fail". And on 2 June General Foch, Pétain's successor as C.G.S., asked Wilson who it was who wanted Haig to go on "a duck's march through the inundations to Ostend and Zeebrugge" - a plan which he denounced as "futile, fantastic and dangerous". "So Foch is entirely opposed to this enterprise," Sir Henry noted in his diary, "Jellicoe notwithstanding."¹²

and used until the first week of May 1917 as a basis for detailed planning was produced in February of that year. The nature of the terrain dictated that the main effort must be made north-eastward from the Ypres area; for south of a two-mile-wide belt of sand dunes along the coast the way was blocked by an inundated area extending along the lower Yser from Nieuport to Steenstraat - the work of Belgian engineers who had let in the sea in seeking to stem the German advance in 1914. The Germans had to be expelled from their prolonged tenure of the ridge which stretched from Gheluvelt northward through Passchendaele to Staden (on the Elverdinghe-Thourout railway). Once this had been cleared, Haig foresaw "opportunities for the employment of cavalry in masses".¹⁵

A prerequisite to pursuing the enemy off the high ground east of Ypres, however, was the capture of the spur which extended to the south - the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge. The original pattern of Haig's projected operations was thus an initial assault against this ridge by the Second Army on a front of nearly ten miles from St. Yves (adjoining Ploegsteert Wood) to Mount Sorrel; with a simultaneous attack by the Second and Fifth Armies east and north-east from the front Mount Sorrel-Steenstraat, following the direction of the Ypres-Roulers and the Elverdinghe-Thourout railways. To avoid dissipating artillery over so wide a frontage, Haig assigned the capture of the high ground immediately opposite Ypres to massed tanks, attacking without gun support. When the offensive had advanced about ten miles (or sooner if the enemy were demoralized), a corps of the Fourth Army would launch an attack along the coast from Nieuport, coordinated with a landing at three points in the Middelkerke area by a specially trained division embarked at Dunkirk.

The decisions reached at Paris on 4-5 May modified these plans. On the 7th, Haig announced to his Army Commanders that the operations would be split into two phases. The attack on the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge would take place on the conclusion of the Arras battle, about 7 June, and the "Northern Operation", to clear the Belgian coast, some weeks later.¹⁶

The preliminary bombardment of Messines began on 21 May.* On 2 June, five days before the attack, Haig received from a French liaison officer the first clear intimation of the French mutinies. What with the disturbances themselves and the granting of long-overdue leave as a measure to restore good order and morale, Pétain's forces would be unable to attack either as soon as promised or in the same strength. Concerned that the War Cabinet might oppose his plans in these circumstances, Haig decided to treat the matter as a military secret and proceed at least with the Messines operation without further consulting London.¹⁸

* Strong recommendations made by General von Kuhl, Crown Prince Rupprecht's Chief of Staff, that the Germans should withdraw from their exposed positions on the forward slope to a more readily defended switch-line behind the ridge were not insisted upon by Rupprecht because of the unanimous opposition of the local commanders. General von Kuhl charged later that Rupprecht's adherence to army custom instead of ordering a withdrawal was a mistake and the cause of one of the worst tragedies to befall German armies.¹⁷

The battle opened at 3:10 am. on 7 June with the explosion of the nineteen great mines (above, p. 282) on a frontage of some eight and a half miles.* These mines - some 465 tons of explosive²⁰ - had been placed under the German front line, mainly during 1916, by British and Dominion sappers. As the crest of the ridge blew skyward, nine divisions of the Second Army assaulted, supported by a powerful barrage which employed all the Army's field and medium guns. Demoralized by the long preparatory bombardment, stunned by the mine explosions and further shaken by the barrage, the surviving Germans were at first helpless. Practically the whole ridge was in British hands by nine o'clock that morning. The enemy then rallied, but was unable to redeem his losses. By 5:30 a.m. on the 11th all but one of the Second Army's original objectives had fallen.²¹

The successful termination of the battle on 14 June underlined the need for an early decision on the next step to be taken. General Plumer's Second Army now occupied a position overlooking the southern end of the German-held Passchendaele Ridge, which in turn commanded the ground across which Haig planned to launch his main offensive. Plumer wanted to exploit his recent success by immediately attacking with two corps towards the Gheluvelt plateau. But General Gough, to whose Fifth Army Haig had assigned the main role in the coming offensive, advised against any such preliminary operation, preferring to include it in his own tasks. Haig thereupon approved postponement of the attack and transferred the two corps to Gough's command. A great opportunity for exploitation was thus lost; had it been seized upon, the indescribable miseries experienced later at Passchendaele might well have been avoided.

After Messines the views of the War Cabinet and General Headquarters in the field steadily diverged. The successful outcome of the battle encouraged Haig to press for the "Northern Operation". In an appreciation to the War Cabinet dated 12 June he warned of the depressing effect that any relaxation of effort would have on the French, who "at the moment are living a good deal on the hope of further British successes". German discontent had "already assumed formidable proportions", and would grow worse as the failure of the submarine campaign became realized. If the War Cabinet provided him with "sufficient force" (a term which Haig defined as bringing up to and maintaining at establishment divisions then at his disposal), and if there was no extensive transfer of German troops from the Russian front, he thought it probable that the Belgian coast could be cleared that summer and "the defeats on the German troops entailed in doing so might quite possibly lead to their collapse".²²

Haig appended to his appreciation an estimate of German resources prepared by his Intelligence Section, G.H.Q. (whose head, Brig.-Gen. John Charteris, was prone to under-estimate enemy strengths and over-estimate enemy losses).²³ The 400,000 casualties which the enemy was stated to have suffered on

* One mine was fired by the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company and four by the 3rd.¹⁹ The operations of Canadian tunnellers are dealt with further in Chapter XVI.

the Western Front during April and May* were believed to have reduced the strength of 104 of the 157 German divisions in that theatre by an average of 40 per cent. It was estimated that even in the event of a Russian collapse not more than 20 divisions could be moved from East to West. From these and other “definite facts” it was deduced that “given a continuance of the existing circumstances . . . and . . . of the effort of the Allies” Germany might well be forced to conclude a peace on Allied terms before the end of 1917.²⁵

A less optimistic view was taken by the Director of Military Intelligence at the War Office, Brig.-Gen. G. M. W. Macdonogh, who held that the enemy’s divisions had not suffered any serious decrease in fighting power, and that a Russian secession would indeed allow Germany to outmatch Allied rifle and gun strength on the Western Front. From his Intelligence the C.I.G.S. had advised the War Cabinet “that offensive operations on our front would offer no chance of success; and our best course would be to remain on the defensive, strengthen our positions, economize our reserves in manpower and material, and hope that the balance would be eventually redressed by American assistance.”²⁶

On 19 June Haig, accompanied by the C.I.G.S. (General Robertson), presented his case to a special Cabinet Committee on Policy which the Prime Minister had formed on 8 June.¹ Using a large relief map he demonstrated that an advance of only 25 miles along the coast would achieve the capture of Ostend and Zeebrugge. Once British troops reached the Scheldt there was a hope that the Netherlands might come into the war and join in a drive eastward to expel the Germans from Belgium. But Lloyd George, alarmed that the British would be fighting virtually single-handed at the outset, gloomily forecast no more than a small initial success. To him the immediate aim was simply to keep the enemy occupied while the Allies prepared for a victorious advance in 1918. As an “Easterner” he saw two possible courses - either a series of local wearing-down attacks on the Western Front, or a strong offensive on the Italian front designed at knocking Austria out of the war.²⁷

The discussions continued on the 20th. Admiral Jellicoe, called in for his opinion, “dropped a bombshell” by declaring that because of the shipping losses inflicted by the enemy’s submarines,^{††} Britain must either capture Zeebrugge before the end of the year or accept defeat!²⁹ Haig, for one, could not have been too much surprised. On the way over from France on 17 June he had travelled with the commander of the Dover anti-submarine patrol, Vice-Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, whom he found “wholeheartedly with us”, having “urged in writing to the Admiralty the absolute necessity of clearing the Belgian Coast before winter”.³⁰ “No one present shared Jellicoe’s view,” Sir Douglas noted,

* The German Official History gives 384,000 casualties on the Western Front (not including lightly wounded) in the months April, May and June 1917.²⁴

† It was composed of the Prime Minister, Lord Curzon (Lord President of the Council), Lord Milner (Minister without Portfolio), Mr. Bonar Law (Chancellor of the Exchequer) and General Smuts. The secretary was Colonel Hankey, Secretary of the War Cabinet.

†† In the first five months of 1917 the British Merchant Navy had lost 572 ships grossing 1,718,201 tons.²⁸

“and all seemed satisfied that the food reserves in Great Britain are adequate.”³¹ Nevertheless the First Sea Lord’s pronouncements carried considerable weight - undue weight, for soon the convoy system belatedly adopted by the Admiralty, was to reduce Allied shipping losses considerably.

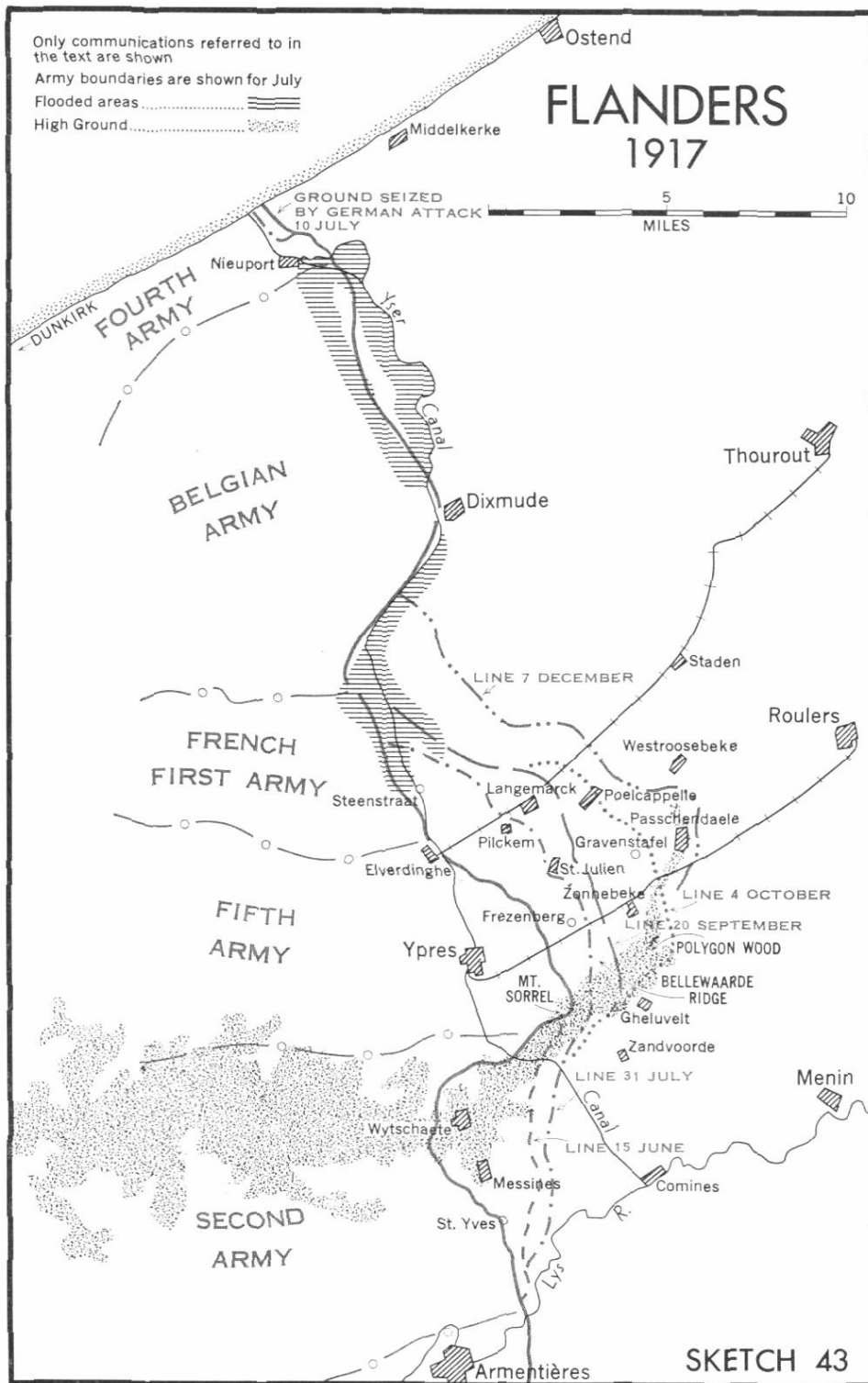
On the 21st the Prime Minister read a 5000-word statement setting forth the War Committee’s attitude towards Haig’s proposals. “His object”, recorded Haig in his diary that day, “was to induce Robertson and myself to agree to an expedition being sent to support the Italians. It was a regular lawyer’s effort to make black white!” In reply both Haig and Robertson submitted detailed memoranda refuting point by point the arguments raised by the Prime Minister. Finally the War Committee reached a partial decision. Though Lloyd George, Bonar Law and Lord Miner remained hostile to the project, they hesitated to overrule the Generals on a matter of strategy. The Prime Minister expressed the Committee’s misgivings, but allowed preparations for the offensive to go on.³²

It was not until 21 July, when the preliminary bombardment for the “Northern Operation” had been in progress for five days, that the War Cabinet gave formal approval for the Commander-in-Chief to carry out the plan which he had presented to the War Policy Committee. This sanction carried a proviso, however, that should the Flanders project not succeed Haig must be ready to send guns and troops to Italy for an offensive against Austria.³³ Haig protested the lack of confidence shown in this qualified approval, and on 25 July was assured of the War Cabinet’s “whole-hearted support”.³⁴

The Summer Operations in Flanders

The long delay between the success at Messines and the opening of the Flanders offensive arose largely from Haig’s transfer of the principal role to the Fifth Army. During 1916 and early 1917 planning for the operation had been in the hands of General Sir Henry Rawlinson, Commander of the Fourth Army, and General Plumer, whose Second Army had been defending the Ypres Salient for two and a half years. But at the end of April, as we have seen, Haig had given command of the northern offensive, including the landing force, to General Sir Hubert Gough, a cavalryman who was imbued with “the cavalry spirit” that favoured pushing forward at all costs. He was thus more in sympathy with the C.-in-C.’s tactical views than were the other army commanders, who felt that the advance should be made by a succession of infantry battles. Unfortunately the change meant that Plumer’s extensive knowledge of the Ypres sector was not to be utilized, and valuable time was to be used up as Gough familiarized himself with the situation and redrew the plans for the venture.

The elaborate programme of regrouping and concentration for the offensive began at the end of May, when General Gough relinquished to the Third Army the Bullecourt sector south of Arras and moved north to take over a front of six and a half miles which included Boesinghe in the north and Mount Sorrel in the south. With the transfer of the Second Army’s two left corps (the



2nd and 8th) to Gough's command, the Fifth Army by late July numbered six army corps of seventeen divisions. There was a wholesale shifting of artillery as the entire British front was combed for guns for the Fifth Army. The Second Army gave up more than half of its heavy howitzers and concentrated almost half of its remaining pieces on its northern flank in order to support the right of the main offensive. Gough received three tank brigades, each of 72 tanks, and together with the Second Army could count on air support from 406 aircraft and eighteen kite balloon sections. On the Fifth Army's left, between Boesinghe and Nieuport, the offensive would be covered (from south to north) by the French First Army with six divisions, and six Belgian divisions under King Albert. Although Gough's responsibilities had originally included the operations along the coast, a modification in plan placed this sector, between Nieuport and the sea, under General Rawlinson's Fourth Army, which was to mount its offensive with the 15th Corps, of five divisions.³⁵

The concentration in Flanders considerably weakened the remainder of the British front, as other armies contributed formations to the Fifth Army. By the end of July the Second Army on Gough's right had been reduced to twelve divisions; General Sir Henry Home's First Army had the same number to hold 34 miles of front from the Lys to the Scarpe; and in the southern sector the Third Army, under General Sir Julian Byng, had only fifteen divisions (including two in G.H.Q. reserve) to guard 37 miles of front.³⁶

But this reduction in strength outside of Flanders was matched by a general thinning out of the opposing forces. The deliberate Allied preparations had made it obvious to the enemy that large-scale operations were pending. Since the end of May Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht had reckoned with the possibility that these would not take the form of a mere subsidiary attack in the Ypres-Wytschaete area, but rather of a major offensive against the entire front in Flanders.³⁷ As we have noted (above, p. 282,n.), the feint attacks towards Lens and Lille failed to divert the enemy's attention from the northern scene. The German Fourth Army in Flanders was reinforced - the Sixth Army sending ten divisions north in June alone. Five days after the Messines battle Colonel von Lossberg, who was now recognized as the leading exponent of the defensive battle, was appointed the Fourth Army's Chief of Staff. He brought with him his system of a deep defence, which dispensed with deep dug-outs and relied on counter-attack by special "intervention divisions" (*Eingreif-Divisionen*), each echeloned back some two to four thousand yards in readiness "to strike the enemy in the midst of his assault".³⁸

Twice during July Haig was compelled unwillingly to postpone the opening of the offensive for three days - at the request first of General Gough, because of losses in guns and the late arrival of heavy artillery, and then of General Anthoine, the Commander of the French First Army, who demanded more time to complete his counter-battery preparation. The delay, besides giving the enemy more time to reinforce and to strengthen his defences, prolonged the bombardment which had begun on 16 July. The ground was therefore more

cratered than it need have been, so that the tanks were fatally obstructed, and later, when the rains came, the shattered soil more readily disintegrated into mud.

The long-heralded assault was finally launched at sunrise on 31 July. The Fifth Army attacked with nine divisions forward, flanked by two French divisions on the left, and five divisions of the Second Army on the right. At first things went well, and by 1:00 p.m. the formations attacking between the railways had advanced some two miles across Pilckem Ridge and retaken much of the ground lost in the spring of 1915, including the ruins of Frezenberg and St. Julien - names deeply engraved in Canadian military history. But having overrun the German forward zone with relative ease, capturing more than 6000 prisoners, the assaulting divisions were forced to ground by heavy observed artillery and machine-gun fire. Casualties mounted steadily, and during the afternoon German counter-attacks drove the centre back 2000 yards. On the right the Second Corps, advancing astride the Menin Road towards the strongly defended Gheluvelt Plateau, had reached Bellewaarde Ridge, but elsewhere was far short of even its first objective.³⁹

Heavy rain which began falling on the evening of the 31st continued for four days and brought operations to a standstill. By 2 August the Battle of Pilckem Ridge was over. Sir Douglas Haig's report to the War Cabinet of "highly satisfactory" fighting and losses "slight for so great a battle" was using the standard of the Somme rather than Vimy or Messines. It had cost 31,850 casualties to advance the front line to a maximum depth of 3000 yards. The nine assaulting divisions, by nightfall of the 31st less than half way to the first day's objectives, had lost from 30 to 60 per cent of their fighting strength and were in no condition to continue the planned advance to the Passchendaele Ridge.⁴⁰ Much had been expected of the tanks, which were fighting their first action since being organized as the Tank Corps.* Small detachments had given the infantry useful support, but long before any opportunity had arisen for their main role of a break-through on to the Gheluvelt Plateau, nearly half the tanks available had been knocked out or ditched.

The Battle of Pilckem Ridge was followed on August 16-18 by the Battle of Langemarck, which produced slight ground gains from St. Julien north, but virtually nothing in the vital central sector. August proved to be the wettest in four years. By the end of the month Sir Douglas could report advances of up to three miles. "I am well satisfied . . ." he wrote to the War Cabinet on the 21st, "although the gain of ground would have been much more considerable but for the adverse weather conditions." Yet the enemy was being worn down, and the C.-in-C.'s purpose of drawing German strength to the Flanders front was being effected. How great was the requirement for divisions at the battle front in Flanders may be seen from the fact that in the first three weeks of the battle (31 July to 20 August) seventeen German divisions were used up.⁴¹ "Our wastage had been so high", wrote Ludendorff later, "as to cause grave misgivings, and

* The Heavy Branch Machine Gun Corps became the Tank Corps on 27 July 1917.

exceeded all expectation.”⁴² At the beginning of September Haig noted with satisfaction in his diary that the result of the pressure at Ypres had appeared in the slackening of the German efforts on the Chemin des Dames, and the weak resistance to a French attack at Verdun towards the end of August. “The French Army has consequently had the quiet time desired by General Pétain in which to recover from the Nivelle offensive.”⁴³

Haig Revises his Plans

The situation was, however, by no means as satisfactory as Haig’s reassuring reports would seem to convey. The first four weeks of the offensive had cost the British 68,000 casualties, more than 3400 of them officers. Against the C.-in-C.’s report of the excellent spirits of his troops⁴⁴ must be set the statement of the British Official Historian that “apart from actual losses, the discomfort of the living conditions in the forward areas and the strain of fighting with indifferent success had overwrought and discouraged all ranks more than any other operation ... in the War.... Discontent was general.”⁴⁵ In view of the Fifth Army’s failure to make any appreciable headway Haig decided on 25 August to transfer the weight of his effort from the unprofitable low ground on the left to the ridges bounding the salient to the south-east. This involved switching the main offensive to the Second Army and giving back to General Plumer’s command the sector held by the 2nd Corps between the Ypres-Roulers railway and the Ypres-Comines Canal. From this frontage the Second Army, abandoning the tactics of an attempted major break-through, would launch a succession of attacks, each with strictly limited objectives, to capture the southern half of the Passchendaele Ridge. Plumer was given three weeks to make his preparations.⁴⁶ The coastal operation* was postponed until the suitable October tides, and was subsequently abandoned.⁴⁸

The Flanders campaign on which Haig had set such high hopes had declined, in effect, into a “step by step” affair.

The break in hostilities and the campaign’s conspicuous lack of success so far gave the Cabinet Committee an opportunity of reviewing the situation. Called to London for a conference on 4 September, Sir Douglas Haig heard a proposal from the Prime Minister to limit operations on the Western Front for the rest of 1917 and to support the Italian offensive against Austria, which (according to General Cadorna, the Chief of the Italian General Staff) could not be continued without more heavy artillery. Earlier in the year the Italians had received thirteen British and twelve French heavy batteries.⁴⁹ General Foch had come to London to negotiate the transfer of 100 heavy guns from the French First Army in Flanders, to Italy-“the political effect of a success there”, Haig quotes him, “would be greater. . . than one in Flanders”.⁵⁰

* On 10 July a “spoiling attack” by the German 3rd Marine Division between Nieuport and the sea had wiped out the small British bridgehead over the Yser. It was the first use by the enemy of shells containing dichloroethyl sulphide (“Yellow Cross”) mustard gas.⁴⁷

Haig was anxious to have adequate French artillery support on his flank in the forthcoming operations, but on 7 September he agreed with Pétain to send some 100 guns to Italy immediately and replace them with other French artillery in time for Plumer's offensive, scheduled to begin on 20 September.⁵¹ On the eve of this attack Sir Douglas was moved to write in his diary, ". . . the French Army has not only ceased to be able to take the offensive on a large scale, but, according to Pétain's opinion, its discipline is so bad that it could not withstand a determined German offensive."⁵² These remarks, interpreted out of context, have prompted an official reconstruction of a supposed visit that day by General Pétain to ask that the Flanders offensive be continued.* The only visit recorded in the relevant entry in Haig's diary, however, is one by the British Secretary of State for War, Lord Derby, who mentioned a revival of the idea of an Allied headquarters in France (above, p. 238). "It seems to be an effort of the French to retain control of operations", the British Commander-in-Chief wrote - and then went on to discuss the condition of the French forces.

There is no contemporary evidence of the Pétain visit. An examination of the complete Haig diary reveals that nowhere after 7 June 1917 does the C.-in-C. record having received a request from the French to continue the Flanders offensive. It is true that on 30 June 1917 General Anthoine, Commander of the French First Army, had brought Haig a message from Pétain which declared that "*les facteurs moraux du moment actuel*" made it imperative that the Flanders offensive be assured of complete success; and Anthoine had reiterated the point when Haig returned his visit on 2 July.⁵⁴ The consideration so important to French morale was not that there must be offensive action (whether for its own sake or to forestall a German offensive), but that the proposed attack, *if mounted*, must succeed. In other words, what Pétain wrote to Haig - and French experience of unsuccessful offensives surely justified his so doing - was an appeal not for action but for caution. On the day after his letter was delivered to Haig, Pétain, as recorded by the British C.-in-C. in his diary entry for 1 July, "told Robertson that he is in full agreement with me regarding my proposed operations in France and Belgium".⁵⁵ It would seem reasonable to believe that if on 30 June Pétain had deemed it necessary to goad Haig into action, he would not next day find himself merely "in full agreement" with him.

Pétain himself has denied making any such appeal in September,⁵⁶ and no record of any such action is to be found in French official historical sources.⁵⁷ Indeed there was little need at this stage for Pétain to insist on further British action, for he had seen Haig on 7 September and had been told that the battle would be renewed on the 20th.⁵⁸ The French Army had recovered from the moral crisis through which it had passed at the end of May and early in June. It had attacked brilliantly at Verdun on 20 August, inflicting on the Germans what their

* The British Official Historian has recorded: "On the 19th September, the French Commander-in-Chief was again imploring that the offensive in Flanders should be continued without further delay. During this special visit to British Headquarters he assured Sir Douglas Haig that he had not a man on whom he could rely"

Official History termed “a very severe setback”.⁵⁹ It was now preparing for a second offensive at Malmaison in order to secure a better position on the Chemin des Dames, and, as we shall see, this was also to be successful.

Pétain did not again visit Haig until 6 October.* Two days later in a long appreciation to the C.I.G.S. as to the future British role, Sir Douglas spoke confidently of the contribution that French forces might be expected to make. “Despite the comparative inactivity of the French”, he wrote, “the enemy has so far shown that he does not consider it safe to weaken himself to any considerable extent in front of them.” Haig estimated the 100 French divisions expected to be available by the spring as being “fully equal to an equivalent number of German divisions”. The existing French formations were staunch in defence and would carry out useful local offensives, though, in Haig’s opinion, they “would not respond to a call for more than that”.⁶¹ The appreciation noted that Germany and her allies relied “practically entirely on the invincibility of the German armies to secure for them favourable terms of peace”. It therefore rejected the idea that Germany could be defeated by operations against her allies in other theatres, and concluded by urging “unhesitatingly the continuance of the offensive on the Western Front, with all our strength, as the correct role of the British forces”.⁶²

September brought a period of cloudless skies, and on the higher ground dust replaced the mud of late August. But General Plumer was busy regrouping, and three weeks of excellent campaigning weather were lost. The offensive was resumed on the 20th with the Second Army’s attack against the Gheluvelt Plateau, the Fifth Army advancing on the left. The keynote of Plumer’s well planned tactics was concentration. After an unusually heavy artillery bombardment lasting seven days two Australian and two British divisions attacked astride the Menin Road behind a tremendous barrage, each on a narrow frontage of 1000 yards. The objective was only 1500 yards away, and the depth of the reserves gave the attack double the weight used by the Second Army on 31 July. The Battle of the Menin Road Ridge, as it was named, was completely successful. It was followed by the successes of Polygon Wood (midway between Zonnebeke and Gheluvelt), launched on 26 September,[†] and Broodseinde (half a mile east of Zonnebeke), on 4 October. The latter, a triumph for Australian and New Zealand forces, included the capture of Gravenstafel Ridge, where Canadians had fought in April 1915. An advance of 4000 yards in two weeks produced a salient which extended to 10,000 yards east of Ypres. But the Second Army was still seven miles from Roulers and the Fifth more than eleven miles from Thourout.

* A memorandum written by the French General Staff for the Minister of War concerning the state of the French Army at the end of September 1917 expressed concern that a reverse might provoke anew the dangerous crisis through which the army had passed in May and June ⁶⁰. There is no evidence that Haig was informed of the contents of this memorandum.

† In this battle a Canadian, Lt.-Col. P. E. Bent, D.S.O., who had enlisted in the British Army in 1914, fell while leading dements of the 9th Leicestershire in a counter-attack near Polygon Wood on 1 October. He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.⁶³

Objectives that were to have been captured on July 31, the opening day of the offensive, were still untaken. One of General Gough's divisions had a foothold in Poelcappelle at the foot of the ridge, but the village of Passchendaele on the crest was still a mile from Plumer's foremost troops. Rain began falling on the night of 4 October and continued intermittently for the next three days. In the low ground west of the Passchendaele Ridge three months of constant shelling had blocked the watercourses that normally provided drainage, and the myriad shell-holes held water like the pores of some great sponge. To cross the valley of the upper Steenbeek and its tributaries was to proceed through "a porridge of mud".⁶⁴

Haig's plans called for another series of three successive blows, to begin about 10 October, but on the evening of the 7th his two army commanders told him that because of the change in the weather they favoured closing down the campaign. Yet the C.-in-C. was impressed with the importance of gaining the Passchendaele-Westroosebeke sector of the main ridge in order that his men might winter on the more easily drained high ground, and his determination to secure this objective was fortified by his conviction of the need to divert German reserves from the French front, as well as from the Russian and Italian theatres.⁶⁵ So the struggle continued in ground conditions so bad as to be previously equalled only at the battles of the Somme. An attack on 9 October (the Battle of Poelcappelle) gained hardly any ground and cost the three assaulting divisions (the 2nd Australian, 66th and 49th) nearly 7000 casualties.⁶⁶ General Plumer however believed that the day's fighting had secured a sufficiently good jumping-off line for a successful attack on Passchendaele, at the conclusion of which the ridge would be handed over to the Canadian Corps, due to arrive from the Lens sector.

The assault through the mud was made on 12 October by the 2nd Anzac Corps. Hitherto undisclosed belts of wire that were discovered too late for destruction by artillery presented a formidable barrier to the attackers. In heavy rain - "our most effective ally", noted Crown Prince Rupprecht in his diary⁶⁷ - the 3rd Australian and New Zealand Divisions made a limited and costly advance to within 2500 yards of Passchendaele. One isolated Australian party, which subsequently withdrew, actually reached what remained of the village and found it temporarily abandoned.⁶⁸

The First Battle of Passchendaele had petered out in the mud. Next day a G.H.Q. Conference at Cassel decided that further attacks should be postponed until an improvement in the weather permitted the construction of roads to bring forward artillery for a prolonged bombardment.

The Canadians at Passchendaele

Of a total of sixty British and Dominion divisions on the Western Front at the end of October, all but nine were sooner or later engaged in the Flanders offensive.⁶⁹ The first intimation that Canadian troops would be employed there

came on 2 October 1917, when Field-Marshal Haig ordered the First Army to withdraw two Canadian divisions into G.H.Q. reserve;⁷⁰ and next day General Currie noted in his diary that two divisions which had just come out of the line “might go north”. By 5 October the C.-in-C. had reached a decision to employ the full Canadian Corps of four divisions; on the 9th he issued orders for its transfer from the First to the Second Army.⁷¹

An entry in Haig’s diary suggests that he had contemplated assigning the Corps to the Fifth Army, the change to the Second Army being made on the recommendation of his Chief of Staff, Lieut.-General Kiggell, “because the Canadians do not work kindly” with General Gough.⁷² Currie had, in fact, expressed the hope that his Corps would not be required to fight with the Fifth Army. He later reported having told General Home that several of Gough’s divisional commanders had expressed to him their dissatisfaction with their Army Commander’s conduct of the Third Battle of Ypres up to that time, and that his own lack of confidence arose from his experiences with Gough* at the Somme in 1916.⁷⁴ Contrary to an impression conveyed by General Currie the assignment of the Corps to the Second Army did not pose any problem of boundaries.⁷⁵ It will be recalled (above, p. 308) that the inter-army boundary had been moved north late in August when General Plumer took over responsibility for the main offensive action. The 2nd Anzac Corps, which Currie relieved, was already in the Second Army’s sector, having fought all its October battles under General Plumer’s command.

A Second Army directive of 13 October ordered the G.O.C. Canadian Corps to “submit plans for the capture of Passchendaele as soon as possible”⁷⁶ General Currie little relished committing his Corps in an attempt to resuscitate a campaign that was already played out.⁷⁷ Only three reasons for continuing the offensive could now be considered at all valid - to give indirect assistance to the forthcoming French attack in Champagne, to keep the enemy occupied during the preparations for Cambrai (below, p. 333), and to establish a suitable winter line on the 165-foot high Passchendaele-Westroosebeke ridge.

The front line which the Canadians took over from the 2nd Anzac Corps on 18 October ran along the valley of the Stroombeek between Gravenstafel Ridge and the heights about Passchendaele. It was virtually the same front as that which they had held in April 1915 before the gas attack. The right hand boundary was the Ypres-Roulers railway, from which the line slanted north-westward for 3000 yards, crossing the main Ypres-Zonnebeke-Passchendaele road about a mile south west of Passchendaele. This road, and the parallel one to the north passing through Gravenstafel, were the only landmarks by which the relieving Canadians who had fought at Ypres in 1915 could orient themselves. Hardly a trace remained of the villages of St. Jean, Wieltje and Fortuin; and the disappearance of remembered woods and farm-houses had reduced the country-

* Later that year Haig was to draw Gough’s attention to the number of divisions which “had hoped that they would not be sent to the Fifth Army to fight”. This attitude Haig blamed on Gough’s staff rather than on the Army Commander himself.⁷³

side to an unrecognizable waste of ridge and hollow. Opposite the left half of the Corps sector a spur of high ground extended south-eastward from the main ridge through the hamlet of Bellevue, carrying the road from Gravenstafel forward to Mosselmarkt (1000 yards north-west of Passchendaele). This route and the Zonnebeke road, which followed the crest of the main ridge, provided the only practical approaches to Passchendaele; between these two defiles the Canadian front was split by the valley of the Ravebeek, which from the outskirts of Passchendaele ran down into the Stroombeek. Disrupted by shellfire, the water course was now a bog, in places half a mile wide, and without bridging impassable even to infantry. Altogether nearly half the area in front of Passchendaele was covered with water or deep mud. The continuous shelling by both sides had prevented any clearing up of additions made by the recent operations to the rotting debris of three years of war. "Battlefield looks bad", noted General Currie in his diary on the 17th. "No salvaging has been done and very few of the dead buried."

There was much to be accomplished, Sir Douglas Haig having impressed upon the Commander of the Second Army that the attack should not start until General Currie was satisfied that his preparations were complete.⁷⁸ The problem of artillery was serious. Currie's G.O.C. Royal Artillery, Brig.-Gen. E. W. B. Morrison, "had a rude awakening" when a personal reconnaissance prior to taking over the Corps front revealed extensive gun shortages. Of 250 "heavies" to be taken over *in situ* from the Australians he could find only 227, and of these 89 were out of action.⁷⁹ Even worse was the condition of the field artillery. Of 306 18-pounders on paper, less than half were in action, and many of these were "dotted about in the mud wherever they happened to get bogged". The guns, probably because of the extreme problems of mobility, were badly bunched, being sited mainly in two clusters of heavies and two of 18-pounders, thereby furnishing the enemy with irresistible targets. Nor had the Australians been able to send their disabled pieces back for repair, for their provost authorities had ordered that no guns could use the roads for fear of blocking traffic. Morrison's aim was to push three brigades of field artillery forward of the line Zonnebeke-St. Julien and to bring up 6-inch howitzers and 60-pounders for counter-battery work against the more distant German guns which were at present out of range. He wanted also to get the heavy guns forward, including some super-howitzers "which were useless back near Ypres".⁸⁰

To effect these moves required an extensive programme of road building. The sodden ground offered little foundation for roads, defence work or gun platforms. Haig had noted in his diary on 13 October that light engines on the 60-centimetre railways had sunk half-way up the boilers in the mud, the track having completely disappeared. Beginning 17 October, Canadian sappers and the four Canadian Pioneer Battalions in France (2nd, 107th, 123rd and 124th) joined the Royal Engineers with the Second Army. Henceforth there was a daily average of ten field companies, seven tunnelling companies and four army troops companies, assisted by two infantry and seven pioneer battalions, at work setting

up battery positions and repairing and extending existing plank roads* for moving the guns and supplying the batteries and ammunition dumps.⁸² While this was going on Brig.-Gen. Morrison obtained permission to use the roads to the rear for getting disabled guns back for repair.⁸³ An improvement in the weather made for better working conditions, but allowed the enemy to hinder progress with night bombing and shelling, which included the firing of shells containing “Yellow Cross” gas (above p. 308,n.) and “Blue Cross” (diphenyl chlorarsine) sneezing gas.⁸⁴ The latter penetrated respirators, which the resulting sneezing and vomiting compelled the men to remove, thereby bringing exposure to the more harmful vesicant.

It was Haig’s intention that the Canadian Corps should gain possession of the area about Passchendaele village by three attacks with limited objectives, delivered at intervals of three or more days. The Fifth Army would mount subsidiary operations on General Currie’s left, with the 1st Anzac Corps advancing to protect the Canadian right flank. When Currie submitted his provisional outline plan on 16 October, he felt that the necessary engineer and artillery preparations could be completed in time to launch the first attack on the 24th; but next day, as it became apparent that getting sufficient artillery forward would take longer than expected, he recommended a postponement to the 29th. But the C.-in-C. was anxious to avoid unnecessary delay, particularly as the French attack at Malmaison was due to start on the 23rd. After Plumer had re-examined the situation with Currie, the initial Canadian attack was reset for the 26th, a prior demonstration by the French First and British Fifth Armies being timed to assist the French effort. The dates for the subsequent phases were tentatively given as 30 October and 6 November.⁸⁵

There is ample evidence of Currie’s skilled and forceful generalship and the efficiency of his well organized staff in the smoothness and despatch with which the preparations for the Canadian assault were carried to completion. A good start on the necessary liaison and reconnaissance had been made by Canadian representatives at Australian corps and divisional headquarters and by advance parties from Canadian brigade and battalion headquarters. As early as the 17th the assaulting units had all available details of the German defences. As intelligence officers and infantry and artillery observers working in joint observation posts recorded new enemy work, or work that had previously escaped notice, the gunners carried out the required destructive shoots. “. . . I am convinced that this reconnaissance and close liaison between the artillery, the infantry units, and the staff”, General Currie stressed in his report on the action, “is vital to the success of any operation.”⁸⁶

Indeed, the forthcoming operations of the Canadian Corps were to demonstrate forcefully the effective use which from Vimy onward was made of

* Between two draining trenches planks of elm or beech, nine feet long, one foot wide and 2 1/2 inches thick, were laid across “runners” (four or five planks placed lengthwise to form the base of the track) and spiked in position, with a protecting curb of half-mound pine logs. From the middle of October to mid-November a total of two miles of double plank road and more than 4000 yards of heavy tramline were constructed in the Canadian Corps area-at a cost of more than 1500 casualties.⁸¹

the artillery in providing the massive support needed by the infantry, whether in attack or in defence, in order to assure success in battle and the avoidance of undue casualties. By September 1917 the arrival of the 5th Canadian Divisional Artillery in France had brought the strength of the Canadian Corps Artillery to a total of some 350 field and heavy guns and about 20,000 men. Not all these were available for Passchendaele. The artillery of the 5th Division received a more gradual battle inoculation in the Lens area by providing relief for the artillery of British divisions. Remaining fire power, nonetheless, was formidable.

The method of employing the fire power which the Corps Commander had at his disposal had been brought to a high standard of efficiency; and in the large-scale offensive operations to which the Canadians were committed in the last two years of the war, the work of the artillery was to be the framework on which each battle was planned. The ultimate object of the gunners was at all times to help the attacking infantry and tanks get forward. The barrages fired for this purpose had to be supplemented by other tasks - destroying the enemy's wire, harassing his defences, and neutralizing his artillery fire by an effective counter-battery programme. In these activities British artillery enjoyed a decided advantage over the enemy because of superior organization: British artillery fought on a corps level, while the German artillery was organized on a divisional basis. This centralization of control at the higher level made possible considerable flexibility in delivering a heavy weight of fire on any desired portion of the front and then quickly switching to some other section.⁸⁷

Artillery plans provided for a continuing service of support to the infantry throughout the entire operation. For the initial barrage it was customary for all the field and part of the heavy batteries to fire their tasks in accordance with a plan issued by the G.O.C. Royal Artillery (the senior artillery officer in the corps) and coordinated with the fire of flanking corps. Detailed planning and close liaison between artillery and infantry were required to ensure that the advancing lines - or "lifts" - of the barrage were kept just ahead of the attacking troops. Heavy artillery not engaged in this work was usually employed in harassing the enemy's lines of retreat, his reserves and other targets selected by the intelligence section of Heavy Artillery Headquarters. As the attack progressed and the final line of the barrage was reached it was customary for a portion of the field artillery to revert to the control of the division and move forward in direct support of its infantry. The remainder of the field artillery would come into corps reserve while the "heavies" which had been employed in the barrage would also move forward to a position from which they could deal with the enemy's artillery as soon as it again came into action.⁸⁸

As the method of employing artillery underwent continual development, the principle of massive, closely coordinated support for the infantry was the constant goal of General Currie, who, in the words of a subsequent commander of the Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery, "consistently sought to pay the price of victory in shells and not in the lives of men".⁸⁹

The Defender's Changed Tactics

Facing the Canadians were three regiments of the 11th Bavarian Division, of "Group Ypres". Each had one battalion forward, a second in support and a third in reserve.⁹⁰ Their disposition was in accordance with a concept of defence not previously employed by the enemy.

It will be recalled that the weight of Allied artillery fire on the German forward areas at the Somme in 1916 had forced the enemy to abandon the defence of fixed lines in favour of a more elastic battle procedure (above, p. 239). Under this new doctrine the front line and the entire zone forward of the main line of resistance were relatively lightly held by independent groups and machine-guns disposed in chequered patterns. These were expected to survive even the fiercest bombardment and subsequently decide the issue by pinning down or crippling the attack at the critical moment. Moreover, as long as the Allies concentrated their heavy fire on the forward zone, the German supporting elements and reserves were able to move up almost unscathed to deliver an effective counter-blow.⁹¹

By September 1917, however, the British had developed appropriate counter tactics. Their big attacks were no longer planned to be executed in one continuous sweep towards a distant goal, but rather as a quick succession of limited advances, followed by immediate consolidation while fresh troops moved through towards the next objective. At the same time artillery fire drenched the German zone of approach, so that the German supporting elements could no longer strike while the assaulting forces were still off balance. Nor could German reserve divisions arrive in time to be effective, since it was impossible for them to organize their attack within range of the bombardment without suffering damaging casualties. The British successes achieved by these methods at Menin Road Ridge and Polygon Wood in September convinced the enemy that it was again his turn to introduce new tactics.

At German high-level conferences on 27 and 29 September it was decided to return to a denser occupation and firmer defence of the forward area, holding back the reserve divisions for a deliberate counter-attack on the second or third day. The machine-guns of the support and reserve battalions were taken to the forward zone and grouped in 4 and 8-gun batteries with the purpose of smothering the attack as early as possible. To assume quick intervention, the support and reserve battalions were moved closer to the front, and in order to free more men for fighting in the forward zone the protection of the artillery positions of each regiment in the line was taken over by an infantry battalion moved up from the reserve division. The changes were seen primarily as a matter of timing, the first counter-attack being advanced, the deliberate counter-attack set back in time. Overlooked in the stress of the moment was the fact that these revisions inherently were a return to the tactics which had failed at the Somme.

Several divisional commanders had protested in vain against this massing of strength in the forward zone, and the desperate difficulties

experienced in the Broodseinde battle on 4 October proved them might. With their best weapons deployed and quickly destroyed in the forward zone, the supporting elements could not fight effectively, and being closer to the front than heretofore they were hit heavily by British artillery fire. Moreover, it had not been possible to hold back the reserve divisions, which from sheer necessity had been committed prematurely and piecemeal.

New tactics were needed. As early as June 1917, when it was becoming increasingly difficult to replace the casualties of the big battles, General Ludendorff had suggested the introduction of a "Forefield". It was not until 7 October, however, that the Fourth Army issued orders in that sense. Henceforth the foremost line of craters would be covered only by scattered outposts and a few light machine-guns. From 500 to 1000 metres farther back - depending on the ground - would be the forward edge of a main line of resistance.* German guns were to be registered on the foremost line of craters; and when a large-scale attack was imminent the outposts might be withdrawn, allowing the artillery fire to move forward and backward in accordance with the movements of the assaulting forces.

This was the pattern of defence awaiting the Canadian attack. The Germans were satisfied that the use of a "forefield" furnished a solution to their defence problems.⁹² Subsequent operations seemed to show that short of attack this was the best possible method of defence, and they made no further changes of consequence.

At Passchendaele most of the German machine-gun crews in the "forefield" had their weapons in small lengths of trench sheltered from the weather by canvas or corrugated iron, and moved them to the nearest shell-hole for firing; others were in inter-supporting circular shelters of reinforced concrete, each of which could accommodate 30 men. Because the wet ground made dug-outs impossible these shelters were built above the ground. Their appearance after shellfire had shaken off the earthen camouflage or destroyed the farm buildings inside which they had been constructed gave them the name "pillboxes". From the Canadian lines dozens of these could be seen dotted across the muddy fields and on the crests of the ridges. Shellfire had overturned some and caused others to tilt drunkenly, but nothing less than a direct hit from an eight-inch howitzer could smash their five-foot-thick walls.⁹³ Behind the main line of resistance battalion and regimental reserves had little or no cover; but farther to the rear the counter-attack divisions, one behind each front-line division, with which it was interchanged every four to six days, were more fortunate in finding some accommodation in iron or concrete shelters.⁹⁴

The changes in the German defence system posed special problems for the artillery supporting the attackers. Not only would the conventional preliminary bombardment be extremely wasteful, and make the ground even

* Called by the Germans the "Flanders Line I", it ran almost due north from Broodseinde to Staden. The sector south of the Ravebeek had been breached by the Australian attack on 4 October but opposite the Canadian left it was still in German hands, linking together strongpoints at Laamkeek, Bellevue and Wolf Copse.

more difficult than it already was, but by sacrificing surprise it would invite retaliation. Yet to reduce the preparatory fire would benefit the enemy more than the attacking troops. From the experience of the Second Army a compromise emerged. It was decided to expose the entire front to harassing fire combined with feint barrages, while paying special attention to all pillboxes and identified wire. Like all compromise policies this one had its drawbacks, but it was adhered to with variations for the remainder of the offensive.⁹⁵

The Attack of 26 October

The interposition of the Ravebeek swamp meant that General Currie had to plan a two-pronged attack for 26 October. He assigned to the 3rd Canadian Division the wider sector on the left, which included the sharply rising ground of the Bellevue spur. The main objective, designated the "Red Line", was 1200 yards distant. From Friesland, at the edge of the swamp, it ran almost due north to Vapour Farm at the corps boundary. The advancing troops would halt for one hour at an intermediate "Dotted Red Line". Securing this line would involve the reduction of several German pillboxes about Bellevue, on the crest of the spur. The 3rd Division's advance would be made on a two-brigade frontage—the assaulting battalions being the 4th C.M.R. of the 8th Brigade, and the 43rd and 58th Battalions of the 9th. In the more restricted ground south of the Ravebeek the 4th Division would attack with the 10th Brigade's 46th Battalion, which, by occupying advanced positions before the start of the offensive, would have to fight forward less than 600 yards to its part of the Red Line. Its principal initial target was Decline Copse, which straddled the Ypres-Roulers railway. This tangle of shattered tree trunks was strongly held by Bavarians, who had good protection in shelters and dug-outs in the deep railway cutting.⁹⁶

General Currie had assured the Corps attack sufficient depth by allotting the remaining units of the 8th, 9th and 10th Brigades in support, while the 7th and 11th Brigades were being held in divisional and the 12th in corps reserve. In army reserve were the 1st and 2nd Divisions. The arrival of Canadian divisional artilleries had considerably brightened the picture for Brig.-Gen. Morrison. He now had at his disposal 210 18-pounders, 190 howitzers and 26 heavy guns. These included the 3rd, 4th, 9th and 10th Field Brigades C.F.A., the 1st and 2nd Canadian Heavy Batteries, and the 2nd, 5th and 9th Canadian Siege Batteries. There were two New Zealand field brigades; the remaining nine field brigades and 47 heavy or siege batteries were British.⁹⁷

Getting the assaulting troops up to the front line was in itself an exacting task. No communication trenches could cross the swampy ground, and the only means of approach forward of the roads and light railways were narrow duckwalks which wound between the shell-holes and were in places submerged knee-deep in mud. Men and pack animals slipping off these tracks were in danger of drowning.⁹⁸ Because of the harsh physical demands of such a trip, in order that the soldiers might be as fresh as possible for the attack, and to give the Officers some knowledge of the ground over which the attack would go, the leading

battalions entered the support line four days before the battle, the 3rd Division units spending half of this time in the front line. The weather had unexpectedly turned fine on the 15th, but nowhere save in a few captured pillboxes was life comfortable. The majority of the troops huddled in shell-holes covered with their rubber groundsheets.

In an attempt to wear down the enemy and mislead him as to the actual time of the forthcoming attack, for four days previously the hostile front was swept morning and afternoon by a full barrage which employed guns of all calibres from 18-pounders to 9.2-inch howitzers.⁹⁹ Then on the night of 25-26 October, the 46th Battalion crept forward to an assembly area just behind outposts of the 50th Battalion, which was holding the right of the Corps front. North of the Ravebeek the three 3rd Division battalions girded themselves to attack from their present positions.¹⁰⁰

During the night the weather broke. The attack went in at 5:40 a.m. under a wet mist that changed to rain lasting all day. The barrage, edging forward in lifts of 50 yards every four minutes, moved slowly enough for the infantry to keep well up while negotiating the encumbering mud. South of the Ravebeek the 46th Battalion, attacking astride the Passchendaele road, captured all its objectives on the main ridge, as did an Australian battalion on its right. Between the road and the railway one of the Canadian companies even pushed 250 yards beyond its target.¹⁰¹ Across the Ravebeek, however, the 3rd Division was less fortunate. On General Lipsett's right the two battalions of the 9th Brigade found the German wire well cut by the preliminary bombardment and within an hour were clearing out the Bellevue pillboxes, sending a steady stream of prisoners to the rear. But at the Dotted Red Line they came under heavy artillery fire that the enemy was bringing down on his abandoned positions, and by nine o'clock the brigade as a whole was falling back towards its starting line.¹⁰²

There was one saving feature. When general failure in the centre of the Corps front resulted in a partial retirement on both flanks, Lieut. Robert Shankland, D.C.M., of the 43rd Battalion, who had reinforced his own platoon with elements of other companies and two detachments of the 9th Machine Gun Company, managed to maintain a small but important footing on the Bellevue spur, just north of the Mosselmarkt road. On the right the 46th Battalion had to pull in its forward posts and throw back a defensive left flank to the edge of the Ravebeek; on the far left the 4th C.M.R., which in bitter fighting had captured Wolf Copse and secured the 8th Brigade's part of the Dotted Red Line, dropped back 300 yards to link up with the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, the Fifth Army's right flanking formation.

With Shankland's party holding on grimly in captured pillboxes and shellholes, Brig .-Gen. Hill's 9th Brigade prepared a further attack. Towards noon a company of the supporting 52nd Battalion plugged the gap between his little band and the main body, while other companies went on to complete the capture of the Bellevue spur. Then working southward they successfully engaged one pillbox after another. Infantry sections created a diversion with their rifle

grenades and Lewis guns, allowing smaller parties to work their way round to the blind side to throw in their hand grenades. By these means the defences of the Flanders Line I which had stopped the 2nd Anzac Corps on 5 and 12 October were finally overcome. By mid-afternoon the 52nd had captured Bellevue and Laamkeek, thereby taking a firm grasp on the intermediate objective; by 6:20 next morning the 9th Brigade had consolidated its gains and established outposts only 300 yards short of the Red Line. Lieut. Shankland's was the first of three Victoria Crosses won by the 3rd Division that day. The other winners were Capt. C. P. J. O'Kelly, M.C., who led his company of the 52nd Battalion in capturing six German pillboxes and 100 prisoners; and Private T. W. Holmes of the 4th C.M.R., who single-handedly knocked out two machine-guns, captured a pillbox and took nineteen prisoners.¹⁰³

On the Canadian right, due to a series of misunderstandings as much as to enemy pressure - though there were counter-attacks on both sides of the Ravebeek, and the 46th Battalion's positions were under steady enfilade fire from Germans still holding out at Laamkeek - Decline Copse, the common objective of the 4th Canadian and 1st Australian Divisions, was gradually abandoned. Such was the mistake of not assigning the Copse to a single formation. Advanced posts and then company positions were withdrawn to form defensive flanks, and when relieving companies took over less than their prescribed positions, the Germans promptly moved back in. It took the 44th Battalion, attacking astride the railway under heavy machine-gun fire, to restore the situation on the night of 27-28 October. The following evening, fifty to a hundred members of the enemy's 238th Division (which had relieved the Bavarians) penetrated the Copse position, but elements of the 44th and 85th Battalions quickly joined forces and expelled the Germans with grenade and bayonet.¹⁰⁴

It had been a satisfying but costly beginning. On 26, 27 and 28 October the Canadians had suffered 2481 casualties, including 585 killed, 965 wounded and eight taken prisoner on the first day. They had killed many Germans and captured 370. Though not completely successful, the operation had placed the attackers on higher, drier, ground and in a good tactical position to deliver the next blow. But first a major job of housekeeping was required. To ensure the delivery of ammunition, rations and other supplies to the forward troops, engineers and pioneers set to building a track of planks, corduroy and fascines in each brigade sector, to carry brigade mule-trains, 250 strong. At great hazard by day and considerable exertion by night, these preparations were completed in time to strike a further blow on the 30th.

The Assault is Renewed, 30 October

In this next phase (the seventh in the series that had started on 20 September) Field-Marshal Haig hoped to complete the advance to the Red Line and to gain a base for the final assault on Passchendaele. This was the Blue Line objective, some 600-700 yards east of the Red Line. To secure it would mean

taking the strongly held Crest Farm, just north of the Passchendaele road, and in the northern sector the hamlet of Meetcheele, up the Bellevue spur, and the Goudberg area between the Mosselmarkt road and the Corps left boundary. The Corps was to link up on the left at Vapour Farm with the Fifth Army, which would be advancing with the 63rd and 58th Divisions on either side of the swamps of the Lekkerboterbeek; and on the right with the 1st Anzac Corps at the railway line south of Vienna Cottage.¹⁰⁵

The attack began at 5:50 a.m. on 30 October, in clear but very cold and windy weather which blew up rain in the afternoon. As on the 26th, some 420 guns and howitzers crashed out their support of the Canadian Corps. On the right, the 4th Division, augmenting its strength for its widening front, assaulted with three battalions of Brig.-Gen. MacBrien's 12th Brigade-the 85th, 78th and 72nd. The 3rd Division had the 7th and 8th Brigades forward, the assaulting units from right to left being Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, the 49th Battalion and the 5th C.M.R.¹⁰⁶

It took the enemy eight minutes to reply with heavy artillery and machine-gun fire, and by that time the Canadians were well on their way. On General Watson's right (where this time the railway line was included within the Canadian boundary),¹⁰⁷ the 85th Battalion, though losing half its strength in casualties, knocked out all the strongpoints in its path, turning captured machine-guns on the fleeing Germans.¹⁰⁸ The 78th Battalion quickly gained its objectives east of the Passchendaele road and settled down to some effective sniping of small parties of Germans attempting to reorganize a line of defended shell-holes. On the divisional left the 72nd Battalion captured Crest Farm and then sent patrols beyond the Blue Line into Passchendaele, which they found the Germans evacuating. Later these were pulled back to assist in reorganization. By 8:30 a.m. General Watson could report all objectives taken between the railway and the Ravebeek, although north-west of Crest Farm the Blue Line was so badly flooded that consolidation had to be carried out short of the original goal. Owing to the failure of the 3rd Division's right flank to keep abreast, however, the 72nd Battalion was obliged to drop its left flank back along the Ravebeek.¹⁰⁹

North of the Ravebeek the 3rd Division's attack had got off to a good start. During the night, before the main attack opened, the P.P.C.L.I. had captured "Snipe Hall", a particularly troublesome pillbox at the edge of the swamp, which had held up the 9th Brigade on 26 October. From here their assaulting companies struggled forward through the mire to take Duck Lodge, the battalion's intermediate objective. The storm of fire that lashed the Patricias from enemy posts farther up the valley brought heavy casualties. At the end of an hour they had lost almost all their junior officers. On the left of the main road the 49th Battalion, even harder hit, kept level by capturing Furst Farm, 600 yards west of the Meetcheele crossroads, It was reported that in the advance there was little bayoneting by either side but that it was a great day for snipers. German marksmen accounted for many of the Canadian casualties, but the day's success owed much to the accuracy of Canadian riflemen in covering their comrades'

advance against German machine-gun nests and pillboxes.¹¹⁰

The best progress on the 8th Brigade's front was made by the left-hand companies of the 5th C.M.R. The Mounted Rifles had difficulty getting through the swampy ground in Woodland Plantation, north of the Bellevue ridge, but by seven o'clock brigade observers could report enemy parties in retreat, joining large numbers who were seen withdrawing in disorder and without equipment along the roads running north from Crest Farm and Mosselmarkt.¹¹¹

By mid-afternoon of the 30th the 3rd Division was well up on the Blue Line on the extreme left, but on the right flank the 465th Infantry Regiment was still holding a small salient about Graf House.* The P.P.C.L.I.'s main accomplishment had been the storming of the fortified positions guarding the Meetcheele crossroads, an achievement largely made possible by the extreme heroism of two men. When the battalion's left companies were halted in their ascent of the ridge by fire from a machine-gun sited in a pillbox beside the main road, Lieut. Hugh Mackenzie, D.C.M. (a Patricia officer who was serving with the 7th Machine Gun Company) and Sergeant G. H. Mullin, M.M., a regimental sniper, led an attack on the position. Mackenzie was killed while drawing the enemy's fire, but Mullin went on to capture the pillbox single-handed, shooting its two machine-gunners with his revolver, and forcing the garrison of ten to surrender. Both won the Victoria Cross.¹¹⁴

To the left of the Canadian Corps, the 63rd (R.N.) and 58th Divisions, operating on lower and muddier ground, made only slight progress. For a time the 8th Canadian Brigade found itself with both flanks open, but, with the timely use of 5th C.M.R. reserves and companies of the 2nd C.M.R., Brig.-Gen. Elmsley re-established contact with only minor losses of ground. The success of the Mounted Rifles was in no small measure due to the sterling leadership of a company commander, Major G. R. Pearkes, who seized and held Vapour Farm and Source Farm against a series of local counter-attacks, keeping the 5th C.M.R. battalion headquarters informed of the situation by carrier pigeon. It was difficult indeed to reinforce these key positions astride the inter-Corps boundary, isolated as they were by the swampy source of a stream that ran north-westward into the Lekkembotembeek.¹¹⁵

When, late that afternoon, the Canadian advance appeared to have reached its limit and reports of large numbers of Germans concentrating north of Mosselmarkt pointed to a major counter-attack, General Currie gave orders to Major-General Lipsett for the 3rd Division to consolidate what it had won, pushing out posts where possible, and to patrol rather than attempt to occupy the bog between the 7th and 8th Brigades. There was some question as to whether Major Pearkes' position could be maintained, for the Naval Division had been unable to reach its Source Farm objective. Reasoning that were these gains

* Facing the Canadians on 30 October were, from north to south, the 465th, 464th and 463rd Regiments of the 238th Infantry Division.¹¹² The intervention division was the 39th Infantry Division, which had replaced the exhausted 11th Bavarian Infantry Division in that role on the previous afternoon.¹¹³

relinquished they would only have to be retaken before the assault on Passchendaele, Currie with General Plumer's concurrence issued orders at 7:00 p.m. that every effort should be made to hold the line. That evening the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles, augmented by a company of the 1st, took over the 5th C.M.R.'s holdings. The night passed without further counter-attacks.* For his gallantry and leadership Major Pearkes, who already wore the M.C. and was later to win the D.S.O., was awarded the Victoria Cross - the third to go to the 3rd Canadian Division that day.¹¹⁷

The step by step battle was gradually accomplishing its purpose. In this second attack towards Passchendaele the Canadian Corps had achieved gains of up to a thousand yards on a 2800-yard front.¹¹⁸ The cost had been high. The day's casualties had been almost as many as for the previous three-day attempt - 884 killed, 1429 wounded (including 130 gassed), and eight taken prisoner.

The Capture of Passchendaele, 6 November

As early as 18 October General Currie had gained General Plumer's agreement that there should be a pause of seven days at the Blue Line, to give time for inter-divisional reliefs and to ensure that when operations were resumed the Fifth Army could help by advancing along its whole front rather than merely forming a protective flank for the Canadian attack.¹¹⁹ This latter requirement was nullified, however, on 31 October, when G.H.Q. ordered the Second Army to take over a section of General Gough's front adjoining the Canadians, so that the battle might proceed under a single command. On 2 November, Plumer relieved the 18th with the 2nd Corps - though when the battle was re-joined the latter would do no more than provide the Canadians with artillery support. On the right of the Canadian Corps the 1st Anzac, 9th and 8th Corps, all under Plumer's command, were to simulate attacks along a four-mile front extending south to Zandvoorde (which lay midway between the Menin Road and the Ypres-Comines Canal).¹²⁰

In the opening days of November the 1st and 2nd Divisions moved forward by rail from their reserve area east of Cassel to take over from the 3rd and 4th Divisions respectively. An uncomfortable three-hour train journey brought them to the ruined station of Ypres, whence they marched to battalion areas in the desolated salient. These reliefs were completed by the morning of 5 November. During the night of the 5th-6th, the assault units moved into their jumping-off positions. All were in place by 4:00 a.m.

General Currie's plan called for an attack in two stages (the eighth and ninth phases of the autumn battle) - the former to secure the village of Passchendaele, and the latter, four days later, to seize the crest of the main ridge

* Corps Intelligence counted four battalion counter-attacks on the Canadian front during the morning of 30th. In the main, all were broken up by artillery and machine-gun fire a good distance from the Canadian positions.¹¹⁶

to the east. The Corps objectives for 6 November lay along the Green Line, a rough semicircle described about Graf House with a radius of 1000 yards. Besides Passchendaele it encompassed the hamlets of Mosselmarkt and Goudberg to the north-west. On the right the 2nd Division would send three battalions of the 6th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. Ketchen) - the 27th, 31st and 28th Infantry Battalions - against Passchendaele, while in the 1st Division's sector the 1st and 2nd Battalions would advance on either side of the Meetcheele-Mosselmarkt road. These 1st Brigade units would have farthest to go - about three-quarters of a mile. Covering the Corps right flank would be the 26th Battalion (5th Brigade), attacking Passchendaele from the south; on the left flank the 3rd Battalion was charged with a subsidiary operation against Vine Cottages, a strongpoint which the Germans were holding 350 yards south-east of Vapour Farm.¹²¹

The jumping-off line traversed large sections of swampy or flooded areas, especially in Major-General Macdonell's sector, where the only good footing was on the narrow Bellevue-Meetcheele spur. Farther forward, however, the ground was on the whole higher and drier than the Canadians had known in their previous attacks. On the right there were new opponents to be faced. The German 11th Division had arrived from the Champagne area only on 3 November to relieve the 39th Division between the Ypres-Roulers railway and the Mosselmarkt road. Opposite the 1st Canadian Division's left was a battalion of the 4th Division.¹²²

At 6:00 a.m. on the sixth a powerful barrage, tremendously satisfying to the assaulting infantry, exploded across the front as the attack was launched under a clear sky that later became cloudy but shed no heavy rain. So quickly did the assaulting companies break out of their starting position that the enemy's retaliatory fire, opening a few minutes later, fell mainly behind the advancing troops. Afterwards prisoners reported that the infantry followed their barrage so closely that in most cases the Germans could not man their machine-guns before the attackers were on top of them.¹²³ Almost everywhere the attack went well. The 2nd Division encountered its chief opposition from pillboxes at the north end of Passchendaele, but less than three hours after zero the village that had so long been an Allied objective was securely in Canadian hands.

The 28th Battalion on the left had the hardest time. It came under heavy machine-gun fire early in the attack when it was struggling out of the Ravebeek valley, the men, according to a 6th Brigade report, "being knee deep, and in places waist deep in mud and water". Another troublesome if not serious factor was low-flying enemy aircraft. The visibility being too limited for much aim fighting, pilots of both sides amused themselves by strafing each other's infantry. One ground target that received particular attention during the attack was the start line of the 31st Battalion, where German airmen mistook a row of greatcoats for troops.¹²⁴

It was a satisfying day for the 6th Brigade. To the honour of being first into Passchendaele the 27th Battalion, on the Brigade right, could add the laurels won by one of its men, Private J. P. Robertson. His bravery in wiping out an

enemy post cleared the way for his platoon to advance and earned him a posthumous Victoria Cross.¹²⁵

On the 1st Division's front it was not the main assault but the subsidiary action on the left flank that produced the severer fighting. Here a company of the 3rd Battalion, isolated by swamp from the rest of Brig.-Gen. Griesbach's brigade, had a stubborn struggle with the defenders of Vine Cottages. In this action a member of the battalion, Corporal C. F. Barron, won the V.C. when he rushed and overcame three enemy machine-gun posts, turning one of the guns on the retreating enemy.¹²⁶ Captured machine-guns and forty prisoners, besides many German dead and wounded, testified to the bitterness of the resistance.

Elsewhere General Macdonell's forces encountered little trouble. Mosselmarkt was surprised and from its large pillbox there emerged in surrender four officers and 50 other ranks. Garrisons of well-camouflaged shell holes nearby put up more of a resistance before being overcome, but by eight o'clock the 1st Brigade had reached and consolidated the Green Line. On its right the 2nd Division beat off the only significant counter-attack of the day. The figure of a small loss of "under 700 men", which appeared in the enthusiastic entry which Sir Douglas Haig made in his diary concerning the operation, must have referred only to fatal casualties reported to him up to that time. Total Canadian casualties sustained during the assault and in shelling on the same day numbered 2238, of which 734 were killed or died of wounds. In all 464 captured Germans were admitted to the Corps cage or casualty clearing stations on 6 November and the following day.¹²⁷

There was satisfaction for the Canadian Corps in having completed a highly successful attack in most difficult circumstances.* Classing it with the victory of Vimy Ridge, the Commander-in-Chief in his despatch referred to the accomplishment as one "by which for the second time within the year Canadian troops achieved a record of uninterrupted success".

On the day after the capture of Passchendaele General Currie gave orders for the ninth and final phase of the battle to be launched on 10 November.¹²⁹ This was to gain the remaining high ground north of the village in the vicinity of Vindictive Crossroads and Hill 52. The road junction was 1000 yards north of Passchendaele on the highway to Westroosebeke, Hill 52, half a mile beyond the crossroads, was the highest point on the northern end of the Passchendaele Ridge. With these goals in possession the Canadians would have complete observation over German positions to the north-east. The frontage of the Canadian attack was considerably narrowed, as the Second Corps on the left took over responsibility for the Goudberg spur. Currie entrusted the main thrust to the 2nd Canadian Brigade (Brig.-Gen. Loomis), with a battalion of the 4th Brigade (Brig. Gen. Rennie) cooperating on the right.

* Continuous wave wireless sets received their first practical testing in operational conditions during the attack and proved entirely satisfactory. Up to this time commanders had been dubious about relying on this method of transmitting messages, but henceforth they were "willing to consider wireless as an integral part of the general scheme of communication".¹²⁸

More German reliefs had taken place since the fighting on 6 November. Prisoners later reported that units had become so disorganized and intermingled during the recent operations that they could not identify the sectors of the line which they were holding. Opposite the Canadians now from north to south there were parts of three regiments of the 4th Division and one from the 44th Reserve Division, which had replaced the 11th Division on 9 November.¹³⁰ From the unsystematic pattern of their defences and the indifferent morale of several Germans who had already been taken prisoner, the enemy do not seem to have considered the area attacked as vital ground. This was later borne out by their generally light resistance to the attack. Officers in a group of eleven who were taken in one dug-out were obviously embarrassed when questioned as to the circumstances of their capture.

It was raining heavily when the 7th and 8th Battalions jumped off from positions north and north-east of Mosselmarkt on 10 November, shortly after six o'clock. By 7:30 a.m. both units were on the first objective, only 500 yards away; but to secure its goal the 7th Battalion on the way had to push on another 300 yards to quell troublesome German machine-guns in a nearby trench. At this stage the 10th Battalion, coming forward from brigade reserve, took over the whole of the 2nd Brigade's front, advancing the line to the final objective. On the left of the Canadians the 1st British Division's advance ran into difficulties when a German counter-attack got between two diverging battalions. Caught by the enemy's fire against their inner flanks both units suffered heavily and withdrew. As a result the 8th Canadian Battalion, which had overrun Venture Farm, capturing four 77-mm. guns, was forced to plug the gap by throwing back a left flank.¹³¹

The frontage of the Anglo-Canadian attack, narrow enough to begin with and reduced by three-fifths by the failure on the left, allowed the enemy to concentrate an unusual weight of artillery against the new line. In all, the counter batteries of five German corps were turned on the Canadian front.¹³² ". . . Almost as bad as Pozières. . .", an Australian diarist was to note. "The night is simply vile-and the day too . . . If the Canadians can hold on they are wonderful troops."¹³³ The shelling was especially heavy between nine o'clock and late afternoon; many German prisoners on the way back to the Canadian cage were killed by their own guns. Bad visibility hampered the operation of counter-battery staffs and observation aeroplanes, yet did not prevent enemy fighters from bombing and machine-gunning Canadian troops who were consolidating or bringing up supplies. During the afternoon a German counter-attack was turned back by the 20th Battalion's small-arms fire; another was broken up with artillery. But the Canadians held grimly on. To make their newly-won salient less vulnerable, they pushed forward outpost groups in shell-holes and short lengths of trenches well down the eastern slope of the ridge. Their fighting that day had cost the Canadians losses of 1094, including 420 killed.

This attack on 10 November brought to an end the long drawn-out Third Battle of Ypres. Though Haig had hoped to have the entire Passchendaele-Westroosebeke ridge as a winter position, the line was still half a mile short of

Westroosebeke village. But the Cambrai operation was only ten days off. Five British divisions had gone or were soon to go to Italy - in the face of strong protests from the C.-in-C.-and three others might be required. The extension of the line across the Somme to meet the French request would reduce the British offensive effort by four more divisions. Accordingly by 15 November the Commander-in-Chief had decided that "any further offensive on the Flanders front must be at once discontinued, though it is important to keep this fact secret as long as possible."¹³⁴ On 14 November the gradual relief of the Canadian divisions began, and on the 20th General Currie resumed command of the former Lens-Vimy front. During its stay in the north the Canadian Corps had suffered 15,654 battle casualties.

Passchendaele in Retrospect

What is the true appraisal of Passchendaele? The attempted breakthrough had failed, and Haig had been forced to settle for an advance of only four and a half miles. The enemy still held the Belgian ports; and five months later he recovered all the ground taken from him, and more. Can the Flanders 1917 campaign therefore be considered even a limited success?

The popular answer has generally been, No. In the years following the war the British High Command, and Haig in particular, became the target of violent attacks by such prominent men as David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, and in due course various military historians added their censure. "Grim, futile and bloody", are among the adjectives used by the British wartime premier in describing the Third Battle of Ypres.¹³⁵ They are matched by the Churchillian phrase labelling the venture "a forlorn expenditure of valour and life without equal in futility".¹³⁶

The main indictments against Earl Haig are that he planned his offensive on ground that adverse weather would render impassable; and that he persisted in costly fighting long after any reasonable hope of success had disappeared. Haig's supporters argue, however, that the campaign had to be fought to take pressure off the French, and that it was justified from the standpoint of attrition, the claim being made that the German casualties far outnumbered those of the Allies.

If indeed Lord Jellicoe's gloomy prognostications (above, p. 303) materially influenced the War Cabinet's decision to sanction Haig's attempted "duck's march" to Ostend and Zeebrugge, the Admiralty's shame in the responsibility for Third Ypres requires examination. There seems little doubt that the U-boat campaign of 1917 was allowed to exert a far greater influence than it should have done on the conduct of the land operations. It is true that in the first four months of unrestricted sinkings submarine flotillas based in Flanders accounted for nearly one-third of the tonnage destroyed. Yet it seems fairly obvious that had Ostend and Zeebrugge been captured, the U-boats based there would have continued to operate from German ports; the merchant sinkings could not be stopped by any land operation. Much of the blame for the success of the submarine campaign must rest with the Admiralty for its stubborn opposition

to the convoy system,* which was introduced on a general scale only in July, after Lloyd George had paid a personal visit to the Admiralty to “take peremptory action”.¹³⁸ The immediate result was a far greater reduction in shipping losses than the capture of the Flanders bases could have achieved.¹³⁹

The question of Pétain’s responsibility has already been introduced. The time of the request for Haig to exert pressure as a relief to the French was in the early summer, immediately after the French mutinies (above, p. 243). As previously noted, there is no contemporary record of a later request having been made. Yet the belief that the weakness of the French Army had brought such a demand from Pétain was to gain currency soon after the war, as Haig came under fire from critics who contended that the costly campaign had been needlessly prolonged. The Field Marshal stated to various individuals that he had been forced to attack and continue attacking in Flanders to prevent an irresistible German offensive against the demoralized French. In 1930 Sir Arthur Currie, writing to a correspondent who had drawn his attention to an article about the Passchendaele fighting in the French newspaper, *Le Temps*,[†] recalled that at the time of the Peace Conference in 1919 Haig had told him “why Passchendaele had to be taken”. Haig gave as his first reason the need to prevent the Germans attacking the French, low spirited as they were because of the mutiny in the French army. He also wanted to secure the submarine bases on the Belgian coast. Then, referring to the existence of a peace party in France and one in England, and to the very severe fighting that the British Army had had, Haig expressed his determination to help restore both French and British morale by finishing the fighting of 1917 with a victory.¹⁴⁰

A further example of these representations is a letter Haig wrote in March 1927 to Brig.-Gen. Charteris, his former Chief of Intelligence: “. . . the possibility of the French Army breaking up in 1917 *compelled me to go on attacking*. It was impossible to change sooner from the Ypres front to Cambrai without Pétain coming to press me not to leave the Germans alone for a week, on account of the awful state of the French troops.”¹⁴¹

But explanations put forward a decade or more after that event cannot carry the conviction of entries made by Haig in his diary at the time of the battle. If indeed the C.-in-C. felt himself in the autumn of 1917 to be under French pressure to continue the offensive in Flanders, he should have been enlightened

* The Admiralty gave as its objections the difficulty of providing sufficient escort ships, the belief that merchant captains had not the necessary skill or navigational aids to manoeuvre and keep station in convoy formation, the reduction in the carrying power of vessels in convoy because of the fewer round voyages possible in a year, and above all, the greater target that the concentration of a large number of merchant ships would present to hostile submarines, particularly during the vulnerable period of dispersal from convoy.¹³⁷

† The article, dated 7 February 1930, had been prompted by a press report of an Armistice Day speech delivered by a former Canadian divisional commander who had fought at Passchendaele. It read in part:

Flanders. . . was an English battle, of which Passchendaele was the last event, It had nothing to do with the French morale. The part played in this battle by the First French Army shows, moreover, that the morale of the French soldiers was far from being, at this time, what certain Canadian generals describe in their speeches and articles . . .

by a conversation he had with President Poincaré at Lillers on the eve of the Australian attack at Passchendaele. The President dumbfounded him, he wrote in his diary, by asking “when I thought the operation would stop! He was anxious to know because of taking over more line. I said we ought to have only the one thought in our minds, namely to attack.”¹⁴²

We turn to the melancholy balance-sheet of attrition. An assessment of the casualty figures of the opposing sides should help to furnish a measure of the Allied success or failure. Unfortunately, although each side produced numerous statements of its own and estimates of the other's losses, no common basis has been found on which to make an exact comparison.* The British Official Historian, using figures submitted to the Supreme War Council in February 1918, gives the total British losses (killed, wounded, captured and missing) from 31 July to 12 November as 244,897.¹⁴³ He has adjusted (with a liberality[†] that is hard to justify) German official figures of 217,000 for the Fourth Army's losses (21 July-31 December), to arrive at the “probability that the Germans lost about 400,000”.¹⁴⁶

It is difficult to accept these figures, which in assessing the defenders considerably higher losses than the attackers run contrary to normal experience. An official compilation published by the War Office in 1922 reversed the balance-thereby providing Haig's critics with welcome ammunition. It gave the casualties on the entire Western Front in the last six months of 1917 as 448,614 British and 270,710 German. For the period 31 July to 19 November the same source shows British losses as 324,140.¹⁴⁷ If these figures are further reduced to exclude losses on the so-called “quiet” sectors outside the main battle front, the result approximates the total given to the Supreme War Council in 1918. The addition of some 15,000 to cover the ten days of the preliminary bombardment (from 21 July) would raise this to about 260,000. Comparable figures for the German Fourth Army for 21 July to 10 November issued by Supreme Headquarters set the German losses at 202,000.¹⁴⁸ These two totals would appear to reflect the comparative cost to each side as accurately as it is possible to determine.

But the true measurement of attrition lies in determining which side could worse afford the losses it sustained. From this standpoint the Germans suffered the deadlier blow. Their Official History admits that “the battle had led to an excessive expenditure of German forces. The casualties were so great that they could no longer be covered, and the already reduced battle strength of battalions sank significantly lower.”¹⁴⁹ It is here that the real reason for Haig's pertinacity may be found. Misinformed by the exaggerated reports of German losses fed to him by his Intelligence (reports which by contrast tended to

* Statistics, given generally by armies, do not conform to the exact battle front nor to exact time limits of the campaign. Furthermore, British and German returns differ in the method of accounting for wounded.

† Edmonds adds some 30 per cent to cover lightly wounded (though there is strong evidence that these were already included in the German figure)¹⁴⁴ and further increases the total to cover “several divisions [which] rendered their returns after they had left the Fourth Army” and other unspecified troops outside that Army.¹⁴⁵

minimize his own casualties), Haig was convinced that German morale, both military and civilian, was on the verge of breaking. In June he had called on his army commanders for “one more great victory” that might “turn the scale finally”¹⁵⁰ In August (assuring the C.I.G.S. that “an occasional glance at our daily intelligence summaries would convince even the most sceptical of the truth of what I write”) he contrasted “the poor state of the German troops” with the “high state of efficiency of our own men”.¹⁵¹ At the end of September he was “of the opinion that the enemy is tottering”.¹⁵² Eventually in October, when even Haig’s usually over-optimistic chief of Intelligence, Brig.-Gen. Charteris, noted in his diary (on the 10th) “There is now no chance of complete success here this year”¹⁵³ the C.-in-C. was forced to lower his sights. By the time that the Canadians entered the battle the objective had become a limited one - the capture of the Passchendaele Ridge, or (as the month ended without this being accomplished) enough of it to secure a defensible position for the winter. Indeed, by then even the name Passchendaele was an objective in itself. Yet the achievement of these limited aims was denied Haig, as the demands of the Italian front compelled him to abandon the offensive.

The controversy over Passchendaele is not likely soon to end. Placed in its best light Haig’s Flanders offensive must be regarded as a particularly intensive phase of the continuous battle in which the Allies engaged the Germans on the Western Front from the beginning of trench warfare to the end of the war. Yet though the 1917 campaign failed in the strategical concept that Haig had envisaged for it and deteriorated into a contest of exhaustion, this attrition produced important results.

The Somme, costly as it was to the Allies, began the destruction of the German army. Passchendaele carried the process a long step forward.

The Supreme War Council

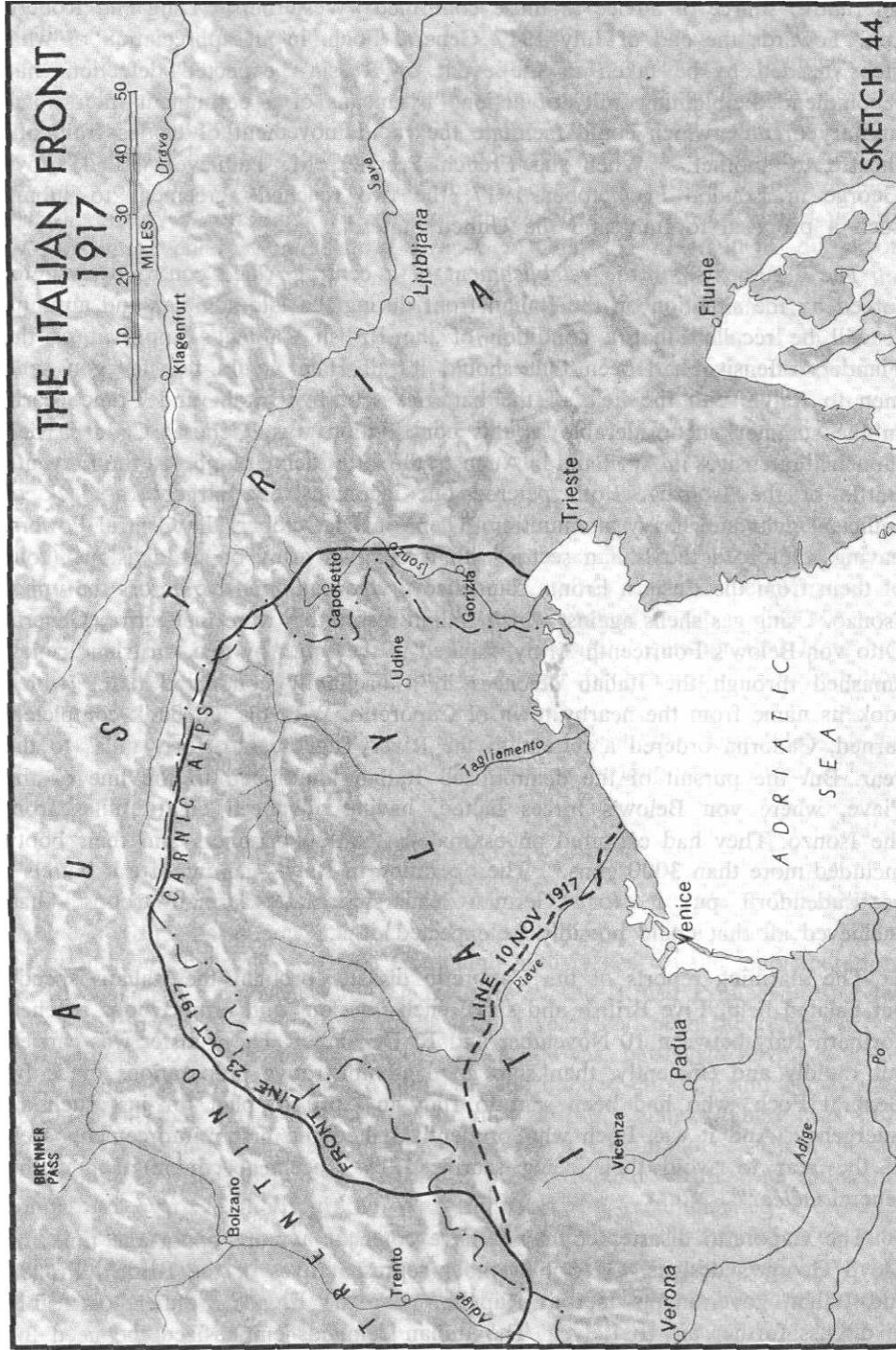
Although Lloyd George had been able to impose on the Admiralty the Cabinet’s wishes as to how the enemy should be fought at sea (above, p. 328), his attempts to overrule the High Command with respect to the land operations had been singularly unsuccessful. In the eyes of the British Prime Minister the principal cause of the failures of the last three years had been the refusal of the “Westerners” to regard all theatres of war as one vast battlefield having a single front against which, at any given moment, coordinated efforts could be directed at the point then most vital to the fortunes of the Alliance. There was little hope of achieving this recognition as long as a Commander-in-Chief in the field, imbued with the importance of his own particular sector, was influential enough to override those in the War Ministry who recommended a strategic policy contrary to his own. The solution seemed to lie in the formation of some inter-Allied body provided with a staff and an intelligence section which, “working together, would review the battlefield as a whole and select the most promising sector for concentrated action”.¹⁵⁴ The War Cabinet would thus have an

alternative source of advice to those confirmed “Westerners”, Haig and Robertson. Towards the end of July 1917 General Foch, in an appreciation of what steps needed to be taken in the event of Russia’s expected defection, had recommended obtaining unity of action “by means of a permanent inter-Allied military organ”, which could facilitate the rapid movement of troops from one theatre to another.¹⁵⁵ When the French Premier, M. Painlevé, visited Lloyd George in London in October 1917, the two reached agreement to submit such a proposal to Italy and the United States.¹⁵⁶

The arguments for the establishment of a central Allied control were reinforced by the situation on the Italian front during the late summer and autumn. It will be recalled that a condition of the British Cabinet’s approval of the Flanders offensive had been what should it fail Haig would transfer guns and men to Italy. With the help of the batteries sent by Britain and France early in the summer, inconsiderable as this contribution was, General Cadorna had launched offensives in April and in August (the latter being numbered the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo). Both petered out inconclusively, largely for lack of sufficient guns and heavy ammunition. Then, on 24 October, the Central Powers, having reinforced the Italian sector with a German army of six divisions (four of them from the Eastern Front), launched a vigorous offensive across the upper Isonzo. Using gas shells against which Italian respirators were ineffective, General Otto von Below’s Fourteenth Army, flanked to the south by two Austrian armies, smashed through the Italian defences in a brilliantly conducted battle which took its name from the nearby town of Caporetto. With his left flank completely turned, Cadorna ordered a retreat to the River Tagliamento, forty miles to the rear. But the pursuit of the demoralized Italians continued to the line of the Piave, where von Below’s forces halted, having advanced eighty miles from the Isonzo. They had captured an estimated 265,000 prisoners and their booty included more than 3000 guns.¹⁵⁷ The operation in Italy - gaining “fresh laurels”, as Ludendorff put it, for “German leadership and German troops” - had “achieved all that could possibly be expected of it.”¹⁵⁸

The alarming reports of the Caporetto disaster brought the Italians speedy but belated help. Five British and six French divisions and army troops reached northern Italy between 10 November and 12 December. The transfer was carried out rapidly and efficiently, thanks to good administrative preparations made by General Foch, who had been sent to Italy in April to plan for just such an emergency. And it was Foch who prudently halted the first reinforcements well to the rear to avoid their being sacrificed by piecemeal committal into the general *mêlée*.¹⁵⁹

The Caporetto disaster could not have come at a more opportune time for Lloyd George’s designs. On 5 November representatives of the British, French and Italian governments met at Rapallo, near the French frontier, ostensibly to discuss further aid to Italy.¹⁶⁰ The Italian demands emphasized the need for



consideration of strategic policy at an inter-Allied level. On the 7th* the conference voted the Supreme War Council into existence. It held its first session at Rapallo, subsequent meetings taking place at Versailles.

Initially the Council consisted of the leaders of the British, French and Italian Governments, or their representatives, and a general officer from each power as Permanent Military Representative. At the insistence of Lloyd George, who was determined that the new Council should be a free agent in making recommendations on Allied strategy, no country might have its Chief of Staff double as its Military Representative. He picked General Sir Henry Wilson, an "Easterner", to represent Britain. With Foch thus barred from membership on the Council, General Weygand became the French representative. By December the Council had come to include American political and military representation. While the Supreme War Council solved some of the British Prime Minister's problems of control, it fell far short of meeting the Allied need for an effective authority with power to act promptly and decisively in an emergency. At its best the Council was an organ for consultation and deliberation. It would take a tragic reverse on the Western Front in the following year to force Allied agreement on the creation of a Supreme Command.

Canadian Cavalry at Cambrai

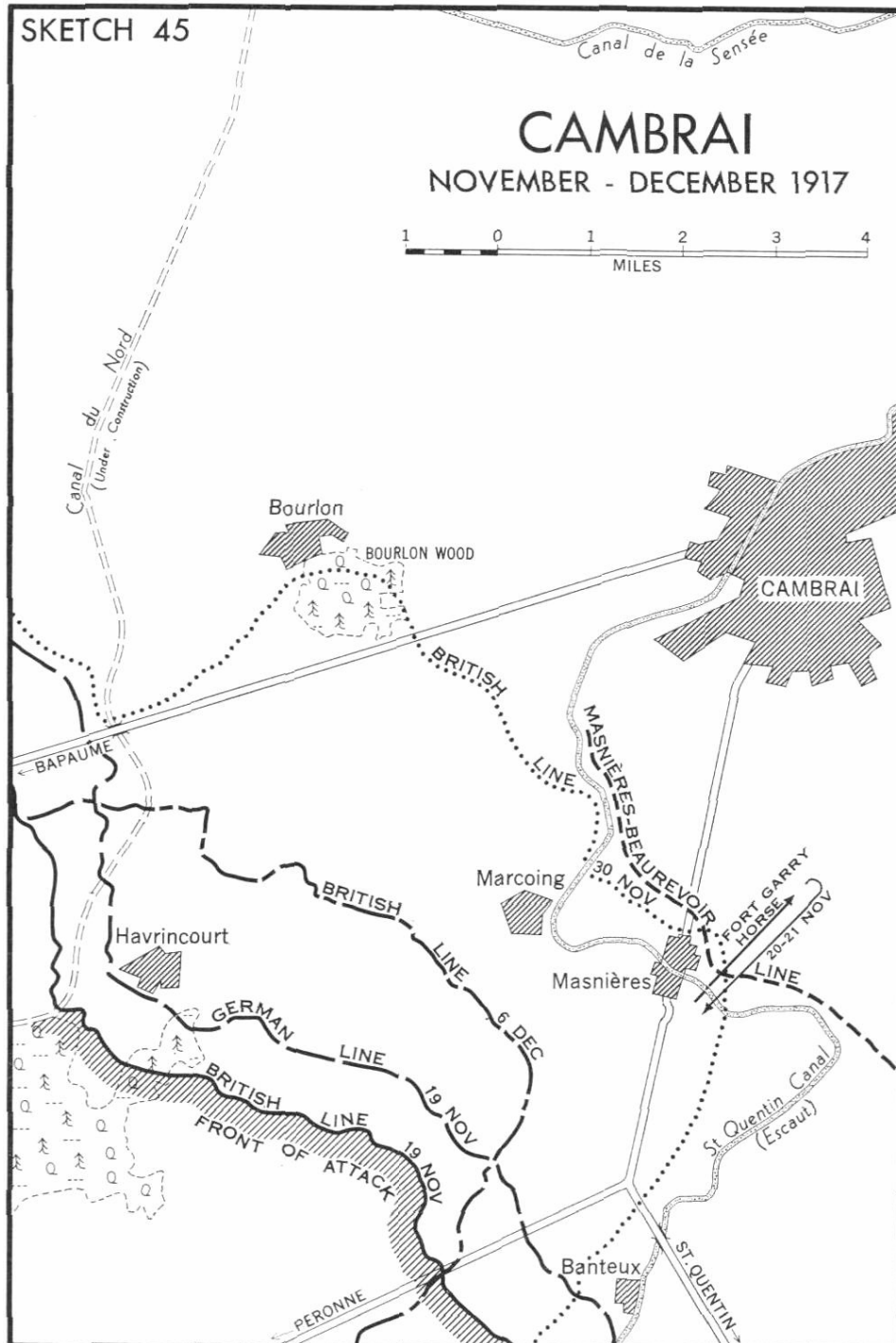
From the collapse of the Italian front we return to the western theatre. The possibility of developing operations on the Cambrai front had been considered in April 1917, when the British Commander-in-Chief had ordered the Fourth and Fifth Armies to prepare plans for an attack in that sector (above, p. 272). The subsequent relief of those armies by the Third Army had transferred responsibility for such a project to General Byng. It remained in suspense during the prolonged Flanders offensive, but in mid-October Haig gave approval for preparations to proceed and for the necessary troops to be made available to train for an operation to be launched on 20 November.¹⁶¹

The design was a bold one - no less, if fully successful, than a rupture of the German front from St. Quentin, seventeen miles south of Cambrai, to the canalized River Sensée, five miles north of the city. It was Byng's intention to gain possession of the area lying between the Canal du Nord and the St. Quentin Canal[†], bounded to the north by the Sensée. The southern end was closed by the Hindenburg Position, two strongly wired systems 500 yards or more apart, which angled north-westward for seven miles from Banteux to Havrincourt; and Byng meant to break through here. With this accomplished the whole German line west of the Canal du Nord would be endangered.¹⁶²

This area of open, unscarred ground had been chosen because it was good tank country over which, for the first time in the war, armour might be used

* Meanwhile Russia's participation in the war was nearly ended. On 8 November the Bolsheviks seized the capital, Petrograd, and two weeks later Lenin asked the Germans for an armistice.

† The St. Quentin Canal followed the course of the Escaut (Scheldt) River, and was alternatively known as the Canal de l'Escaut.



in more than “penny packets”. The Army Commander planned to employ 300 tanks and five infantry divisions to smash through the Hindenburg Position between the canals, and to seize crossings over the eastward bend of the St. Quentin Canal at Marcoing and Masnières. As soon as the enemy’s rear defences east of these places (the Masnières-Beaurevoir Line) had been breached, the Cavalry Corps, reverting to its normal role* would pass through to sweep northward and isolate Cambrai from the east and to secure the passage over the River Sensée. In the meantime infantry reserves would capture Bourlon Wood, which covered a commanding spur north of the Bapaume-Cambrai road, and seize Cambrai itself. A junction with the cavalry at the Sensée would cut off the German front line troops to the west and expose them to attack from the rear.

While Haig’s “great experiment” at Cambrai was the employment of massed armour to breach the enemy’s defences, this was not the only tactical innovation in the battle. With the tanks counted on to flatten the hostile wire, it was possible to achieve surprise by omitting the usual preliminary bombardment. The enemy would not receive even the warning normally given by artillery ranging and registration; the guns would shoot by the map, taking advantage of improved techniques of survey and calibration.¹⁶⁴

Cambrai was on the left wing of Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht, in the area of General of Cavalry von der Marwitz’s Second Army. The German formations on which the British attack would fall were the left wing of the 20th Landwehr Division, the entire 54th Division and the right wing of the 9th Reserve Division.¹⁶⁵ These divisions, however, were within easier reach of reinforcements than were the assaulting forces. The Germans little expected an offensive in this part of the theatre, which battle-weary troops brought down from the Passchendaele area called the “Flanders sanatorium”. German regimental histories are agreed that measures had been taken to deal with local attacks expected for 20 or 21 November. But the scale of the assault came as a complete strategical surprise when it went in at daybreak on 20 November.¹⁶⁶

The British Tank Corps had observed the utmost secrecy in assembling the armour at the forming-up line - in no case closer than a thousand yards from the enemy’s outposts. First there was the roar of British aircraft flying low over the German positions, and then the unprecedented and awesome sight and sound of a long line of tanks rumbling forward. Simultaneously came the crash of a thousand guns opening fire, as wave after wave of infantry followed the tanks across no man’s land. With few exceptions the defenders of the outpost zone surrendered or fled. Farther on there was opposition from isolated field batteries engaging tanks, and the infantry came under fire from machine-gun posts by-

* Towards the end of May 1917 the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th (formerly 2nd Indian) Cavalry Divisions had been dismounted and assigned to a holding role north of the Somme. Here twenty-seven members of the Fort Garry and Lord Strathcona’s Horse had won immediate awards in a 150-man raid on 8-9 July.¹⁶³

passed by the armour. But by evening the Third Army had breached both Hindenburg systems* having advanced from three to four miles on a six-mile front. German fire had knocked out 65 tanks, and 114 had broken down or become ditched. The assaulting troops had suffered about 4000 casualties.¹⁶⁸

On the first day there had been little action for the five divisions of the Cavalry Corps. The village of Marcoing was cleared by the infantry shortly after midday, but at Masnières, 3000 yards to the east on the far bank, the enemy repelled efforts of the 88th Brigade to secure a bridgehead. Two companies crossed east of the village but were almost immediately pinned down by heavy fire. On the brigade left the Newfoundland Regiment fought its way across at the western outskirts of Masnières, but without artillery or tank support could make no head-way against the well-manned Masnières -Beaurevoir Line and was forced to dig in.

Behind the armour and infantry wire-dragging tanks and pioneer parties had quickly cleared a track for the cavalry, and at 11:40 a.m. the 5th Cavalry Division, led by the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, began moving forward to the canal. Incorrect information led the Canadians' commander, Brig.-Gen. J. E. B. Seely, to believe that the 88th Brigade had gained its objective east of the canal, and accordingly about two o'clock he ordered the Fort Garry Horse forward. The road bridge in Masnières had collapsed under a tank that tried to cross, but with the assistance of local inhabitants a crossing suitable for cavalry was made at a lock 300 yards south-east of the village. By four o'clock "B" Squadron had begun riding towards a commanding ridge two miles north-east of Masnières. But by this time the early dusk of a November day was gathering, ending any prospect of passing a large body of mounted troops over the lock used by the Canadians. Orders reached Seely to halt the movement of the Fort Garry Horse across the canal and to recall those already on the north bank.

But "B" Squadron was now out of touch and fighting a battle of its own. A short distance beyond Masnières the squadron commander was killed by machine-gun fire. Under the leadership of Lieut. Marcus Strachan the Canadians pushed on, overrunning a Germany battery and cutting down disorganized parties of enemy infantry. At dusk the squadron, reduced to some forty all ranks, took up a position in a sunken road a little over a mile from the canal and beat off German patrols. Strachan then stampeded the horses to divert the enemy's attention and led his men back on foot. Skirmishes with enemy parties on the return journey resulted in the taking of sixteen prisoners. Lieut. Strachan, who already wore the M.C., was awarded the Victoria Cross.¹⁶⁹ The only other cavalry to have engaged the enemy were some squadrons of the 1st Cavalry Division employed in clearing the west bank of the canal north of Marcoing.

* To help them cross the 12-foot wide Hindenburg trenches the tanks carried long fascines of tightly bound faggots. In making these Chinese labourers used 400 tons of brushwood and 12,000 feet of chain-the latter procured from mall over England.¹⁶⁷

† According to the British Official History, previous to the battle the Third Army circulated no details of the canal crossings eastward from Masnières. As a result a road bridge still intact less than a mile from the village was ignored by the cavalry.

From the second day onward the battle deteriorated into a race with German reinforcements, which the High Command and Crown Prince Rupprecht were hurrying in from the Fourth Army in Flanders.¹⁷⁰ There was no mounted action for the Canadian cavalry, but the Royal Canadian Dragoons and Lord Strathcona's Horse were placed in defensive positions west of the canal. The British attack reached its limit of success—a maximum advance of five miles - on the 23rd, with the capture of Bourlon Wood. But the impetus was lost, and the inability of the British Third Army, short of reserves, to gain ground northward spelled doom to the venture. On the 27th the enemy retook the wood. Three days later the German Second Army launched a powerful counter-attack in a determined effort to cut off the deep British salient. Supported by low-flying aircraft in unusually large numbers,* the Germans drove the British right wing back nearly three miles. With every reserve needed, once more the three Canadian cavalry regiments were called on to hold off the enemy.¹⁷² The fighting petered out in a snowstorm in the first week of December. As Rupprecht directed the Second Army to consolidate “with a maintenance of activity”, Haig ordered a further withdrawal from the uneconomical salient. This was carried out on the night of the 4th-5th, the British retaining much of the ground gained on 20 November but leaving in German hands five miles of their original line south of the Cambrai-Péronne road. In two weeks of fighting the British had suffered more than 44,000 casualties; the Germans gave their losses as 41,000.¹⁷³

The results of the Battle of Cambrai were by no means as conclusive as the victorious ringing of church bells in Britain would seem to have implied. The British gains on the left flank did not greatly exceed the area of the ground which had been lost to the enemy on the southern flank. An official enquiry blamed the rawness and lack of training of the British infantry, and the British Official Historian extended censure to senior commanders who had failed to seize favourable opportunities for exploitation.¹⁷⁴ The Germans too had lost a great chance of annihilating the British right wing. According to Rupprecht the fault lay with the Second Army for missing its vital objectives by making its main thrust too far to the north.¹⁷⁵ Yet the Battle of Cambrai with its employment of massed tanks had set a new pattern in warfare, and its influence was to extend beyond 1918 into the operations of the Second World War.

The first day's fighting at Cambrai had cost the Fort Garry Horse eighty casualties, including a number of missing who may have later returned. At the end of November, during the main counter-attack, the enemy machine-gunned a train and shelled the lines of the 4th Battalion Canadian Railway Troops, inflicting a reported forty-five casualties (of 27 missing, the unit diarist expected that the majority would “probably turn up during the next few days”).¹⁷⁶ The Strathconas suffered more than fifty casualties on the second day of the counter-attack.

* All German fighter units in the sector were temporarily commanded by von Richthofen who, now in the rank of *Rittmeister* (Captain of Cavalry), regularly commanded *Jagdgeschwader* (Fighter Wing) No. I—four squadrons including the Baron's old unit, *Jagdstaffel* 11. Part of the responsibility of the “Circus” was to protect the strafing units.¹⁷¹

While the Germans were advancing, Brig.-Gen. Seely received an anxiously awaited “operational” helio signal - “Reference Canadian General Election now proceeding, please note your signal troop will vote as a unit and not with the Royal Canadian Dragoons”!¹⁷⁷

Winter 1917-1918

The General Election had intruded upon the scene some time earlier (see below, Chapter XI). On the eve of the final attack at Passchendaele the Commander-in-Chief received the following request from the Secretary of State for War:

Sir George Perley came to see me on behalf of the Canadians. As you know, there is to be a General Election in Canada in which the question of Conscription is the main feature and on Sir Robert Borden getting a majority for it depends practically the existence of the Canadian Divisions. Sir George knows that for the next 10 days or so you will have to employ Canadian Divisions but he asks whether they could be promised, unless some unforeseen military exigencies intervene, a rest behind the lines. It would give them time to recuperate when they could be visited and their votes secured. If you are able to make this promise Sir George Perley would very much like to come out and see the Corps Commander and tell him of your promise because he thinks it would hearten the men and do good from a conscription point of view and he will be able to inform Canada of your decision. He attaches great value to the effect that would have. . .¹⁷⁸

There is no evidence that this request affected in any way Haig’s decision to end the Passchendaele offensive when he did-after which the relief of the Canadian Corps followed automatically.

On rejoining the First Army on 20 November in the relatively quiet Lens sector, the Corps had two divisions in the line - the 1st at Lens, the 2nd at Méricourt - each with four battalions forward.¹⁷⁹ Opposing them, on the German right was the 1st Guard Reserve Division, on the left, the 17th Division. Divisional reliefs followed at regular intervals. The policy for both sides was one of active defence, which meant as far as the Germans were concerned, sending out almost nightly raids. It was the familiar pattern of previous winters. On the night of 1-2 January three parties of the 17th Division, almost 100 strong, raided the 54th Battalion’s position. They took four prisoners and left three of their own men in our hands. A fortnight later, in a 26-man raid near Lens, the 58th Battalion took eleven prisoners without a single Canadian casualty. The captives belonged to the 220th Division, which had relieved the 1st Guard Reserve on New Year’s Eve.¹⁸⁰

On the morning of 4 March the enemy attacked Aloof Trench, the 50th Battalion’s hard-won objective of the previous August (above, p. 297), now held by the 21st Battalion. The Germans, 240 to 280 strong, from the 220th Division and a Bavarian assault battalion of Sixth Army troops, gained a small footing but were quickly counter-attacked and driven out, leaving behind many dead. Of several Canadian raids carried out that month, the most successful was that on the night of the 14th-15th by 156 of the 5th C.M.R. against German positions some two miles south-west of Méricourt. At a cost of 32 casualties to themselves, the

raiders killed an estimated 35 of the enemy (12th Reserve Division) and took 19 prisoners.¹⁸¹

These operations, each in itself of minor proportions, over the winter had taken a fairly substantial toll. Between 1 December 1917 and 21 March 1918 the Canadian Expeditionary Force suffered 3552 casualties, of which 684 were fatal.