

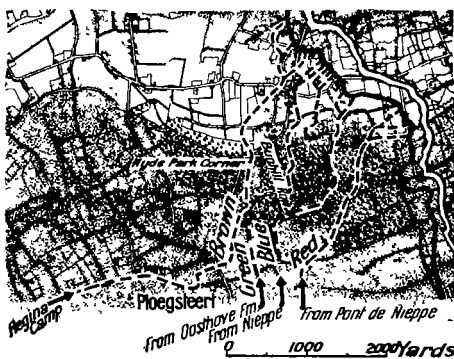
## CHAPTER XV

### THE BATTLE OF MESSINES—JUNE 7TH

BEFORE most great attacks on the Western Front, during that critical last night in which, generally, the infantry left its billets and made its way, first, in column of fours on dark roads beside moving wheel and motor traffic, then, usually in file, along tracks marked across the open, and finally into communication trenches to wind silently out in the small hours and line the "jumping-off" trenches or white tapes laid in the long wet grass of open No-Man's Land, where for an hour or two it must await the signal to assault—during these critical hours one thought was usually uppermost in the men's minds: does the enemy know?

With the tactics of 1917, involving tremendous preparatory bombardments, which entailed months of preliminary railway and road construction, G.H.Q. had been forced to give up the notion of keeping an attack secret until it was delivered. Enemy airmen could not fail to observe these works and also the new camps, supply centres, casualty clearing stations, hangars for aeroplanes. Reference has been made to the Commander-in-Chief's desire to impart the impression, in April, of a serious attack, and, in May, of a feint. But the final week's bombardment had given sure notice of the operation, and the most that could be hoped for was that the enemy might be deceived as to the main stroke that would come after, and might continue to expect it at Arras rather than at Ypres. As far as the Messines offensive went, the Germans must know that a great attack—whether feint or principal operation—was imminent; indeed, German prisoners spoke with certainty of it. But the enemy would not know the date and hour unless he actually detected the troops concentrating, or captured some well-informed soldier who was so imprudent or unfaithful as to speak of these matters. If the enemy had secured that information, then, while the British infantry was filing to its positions, the German artillery and machine-gunners would be waiting on some signal to crush them in No-Man's Land or to put into action some other plan for shattering their assembly.

When, shortly after 11 p.m. on June 6th, the eight attack-battalions of the 3rd Australian Division left their several camps and their billets between Romarin and Pont de Nieppe, to move by four well-marked and reconnoitred routes to Ploegsteert Wood and through it to the front, some of them heard almost at once the soft pat pat of exploding gas-shells. While waiting to start from the gate of "Regina Camp," the 40th Battalion had caught the smell of German gas, and, as the march started, these shells began to fall like the scattered



The 3rd Division's "Red," "Blue," "Green," and "Brown" assembly routes.

heavy drops before a thunder-shower. The battalion immediately put on its gas-masks,<sup>1</sup> a proceeding which gave complete immunity against gas but always caused trouble if heavy labour was undertaken. For troops in masks the mere effort of marching under the load of rifle, ammunition, tools, and rations, and the excitement of the occasion, caused heavy breathing and consequent distress. This, in addition to the half-blindness of the troops in masks, so slowed the pace that officers and N.C.O's responsible for directing the column were often forced to take the risk of pulling down their masks and retaining only the mouth-pieces between their teeth and the clips on their nostrils. Horses and mules were passed on the road gasping piteously in the poisonous air.

The other seven battalions also were meeting with steady gas-shelling, and on their entering Ploegsteert Wood, in whose stagnant air the gas lay densely, the difficulties increased. Long stoppages occurred, intervals of tense anxiety for all ranks. The Germans were shelling the wood more heavily, using high-explosive and incendiary shells as well. One of these exploded a dump near the track of the northernmost

<sup>1</sup> These were part of the very efficient anti-gas equipment known as the "small box-respirator," or "S.B.R."

column, close under Hill 63, checking the march for a moment. Two incendiary shells burst among the 40th, and a little farther on, at "Hyde Park Corner," a high-explosive shell shattered a Lewis gun team. A high-explosive shell burst in the leading platoon of the 39th as it reached "Ploegsteert Corner." Here and there officers and men were hit direct by gas-shell.<sup>2</sup> Wherever the slowly-moving columns were locally dislocated by such incidents, and excitement or haste occurred, men tended to be gassed by the steady shower of shell, and fell out by the way, retching and collapsed.<sup>3</sup>

The four parallel tracks marked through the wood were not far apart, and at one point part of a left-flank battalion (40th) was wrongly guided on to a right-flank route. But the mistake was discovered and corrected. In these extreme difficulties officers and N.C.O's—conspicuous among them Captains McVilly<sup>4</sup> (40th), Grieve<sup>5</sup> (37th), Lieutenant Stubbs<sup>6</sup> (37th), and also Sergeant Bowring<sup>7</sup> (40th), himself badly shaken—worked vehemently to set going the interrupted march. The battalions on the three western tracks—that is, the 10th Brigade and the left half of the 9th—suffered most severely; several trench-mortar and machine-gun crews were killed, wounded, or gassed; the track of the 39th Battalion (10th Brigade) through "Bunhill Row" and "Mud Lane" was strewn with officers and men who had collapsed in the effort to keep the movement going. On the eastern route Major White<sup>8</sup> (33rd), finding his way barred by the blockage of a communication avenue and other obstacles, led his company by another track through the wood. Captain Sorensen<sup>9</sup> (33rd), further north, took a similar step.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Lieutenant W. F. Robertson (Wangaratta, Vic.), a well loved officer of the 37th.

<sup>3</sup> The gas was reported to be partly phosgene with some chlorine, but largely lachrymatory. Most of the cases of gas poisoning at Messines were cured by a few days' rest.

<sup>4</sup> Capt C. L. McVilly, M.C.; 40th Bn. Commercial traveller; of Hobart, Tas., b. Hobart, 3 Aug., 1889.

<sup>5</sup> Capt R. C. Grieve, V.C.; 37th Bn. Warehouseman; of Brighton, Vic., b. Brighton, 19 June, 1889.

<sup>6</sup> Capt. R. V. J. Stubbs, 37th Bn. Accountant, of Shepparton, Vic.; b. Shepparton 23 Oct., 1883.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt. J. E. P. Bowring (No. 548, 40th Bn). Draper, of Latrobe, Tas.; b. Hawthorn, Vic., 1876. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

<sup>8</sup> Lieut.-Col. H. F. White, C.M.G., D.S.O. Commanded 35th Bn., 1918/19. Pastoralist, of Guyra, N.S.W., b. Armidale, N.S.W. 13 June, 1883.

<sup>9</sup> Major S. F. Sorensen, 33rd Bn. Member of Aust. Permanent Forces, of Haberfield, N.S.W.; b. Ribe, Denmark, 21 March, 1875.

Throughout the night the saving factor was the determination of the men themselves to reach the "jumping-off" position in time. The result of their efforts was that—although at 2 a.m., when the tails of the four columns should have been deploying for the attack, their heads were only just working out of the wood—the troops soon afterwards began to get clear of its edges into fresher air. The northern columns reaching Hill 63 came out into a practically clear atmosphere and with intense relief the men took off their masks. Some were half-exhausted, but on reaching their assembly trenches—mostly parts of the existing front-line system—they took a long drink of the water which had been specially stored there, and lay down and many immediately fell asleep. At least 500 men,<sup>10</sup> most of them gassed, had been put out of action in the wood, and others had temporarily lost their direction. Twenty minutes before zero-time only 120 of the 360 men who were to carry out the assault in the sector of the 39th Battalion<sup>11</sup> had reached their assembly trenches north of "Anton's Farm." The officer in charge, Major Tucker,<sup>12</sup> was gassed, but Captain Paterson<sup>13</sup> reorganised the battalion in a single wave, so that, despite its reduced numbers, it would cover its full front. Of the parties of the 40th to attack north of the Douve, one was reduced to an officer and one man, and others were nearly as short. Nevertheless the organisation for the attack remained. It is telling evidence of the training and spirit of this comparatively untried division that, during the forty minutes before "zero" hour, its eight battalions, after the nightmare of that approach, emerged to their proper assembly positions and with their organisation and efficiency for attack practically unimpaired.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Some estimates put the number as high as 1,000.

<sup>11</sup> One company of the 39th was held back as 10th Brigade reserve, and one platoon as battalion reserve

<sup>12</sup> Lieut.-Col. S. E. Tucker, 39th Bn. Masseur; of Ballarat, Vic; b. Ballarat, 18 Apr., 1878.

<sup>13</sup> Lieut.-Col. A. T. Paterson, D.S.O., M.C., V.D. Commanded 39th Bn., 1918/19. Insurance broker; of East Malvern, Vic.; b. Footscray, Vic., 26 Sept., 1886

<sup>14</sup> The admirable persistence of numbers of the gassed men is shown by numerous instances. Private J. D. Jeffrey (Lower Barrington, Tas.), 40th Battalion, who became unconscious and was carried to the advanced dressing station and told to remain quiet, went to the front line at noon carrying ten Lewis gun magazines. He carried two wounded men to the dressing station. When wounded next day, he refused to leave, saying that he could still carry ammunition. Lance-Corporal F. J. Cunningham (Dunorlan, Tas.), 40th Battalion, though he collapsed through gas before the start, led his men to the objective; he collapsed again, but stayed on until wounded at 5 p.m. He was killed in action on 13th Oct., 1917. Private W. G. Gale (Elliott, Tas.), also of the 40th, after collapse carried messages until he fainted.

The rain of gas-shells that descended all night long south of Hill 63<sup>15</sup> might indicate that the enemy knew the date of the attack, or it might signify merely an attempt to harass the general preparations. Artillery and other observers on the hill watched all night long the Messines Ridge opposite, black and lifeless under the bright moon.<sup>16</sup> Occasionally, in the valley between, a trail of sparks soared to burst into a white flare, which gracefully fell, the only sign that a German garrison existed. The assembling troops were not likely to be seen by the enemy, or the tanks heard, until about 2 o'clock when both would be nearing the front. At 2.10 a white parachute flare floated high over the southern flank and an aeroplane was heard overhead—British onlookers were expecting it and knew that its presence was solely intended to drown the noise of the approaching tanks.

Still the enemy gave no sign of alarm. In an hour's time the great mines beneath him would be exploded. At 2.52 in the distance, behind the northern rim of the ridge,<sup>17</sup> green and yellow flares, German calls for artillery-fire, went up, and within five minutes a barrage had broken out there. The gas-shelling in the south immediately stopped, but presently continued. At 3.5 the first tinge of dawn appeared over Messines,<sup>18</sup> and an Australian observer noted:

Last 5 minutes. Things must be right now. One feels as if it were a won battle.

A minute later from the valley immediately in front of the New Zealanders a flare burst into two green stars. A machine-gun broke out; then another. A second green flare followed. A rifle flashed. It seemed certain that the New Zealanders, some of whose assembly trenches had been dug in No-Man's Land, had been detected. But the two machine-guns, after chattering for three minutes, fell silent. At 3.9 there was unbroken silence. At 3.10 a number of big guns began to fire and then the trench-walls rocked; to the left, near Wyttschaete, a huge bubble was swelling, mushroom-shaped, from the earth, and then burst to cast a molten, rosy glow on the under-surface of some dense cloud low above it.

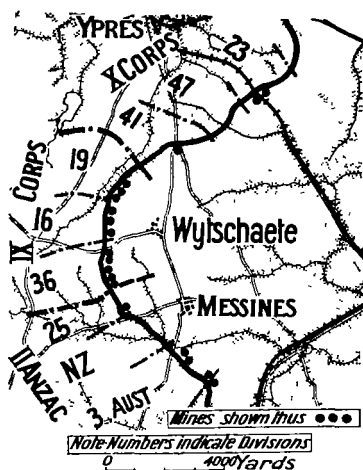
<sup>15</sup> The edge of this shower extended to the New Zealand reserves on the northern slope of the hill

<sup>16</sup> The moon, just past the full, rose at 10.20 p.m. and shone all night.

<sup>17</sup> Probably on the southern side of the Ypres Salient, six miles away.

<sup>18</sup> The sun would rise at 4.41.

As its brilliance faded two more bubbles burst beside it. During twenty seconds the same thing happened again and again, from the right to the far left. The nineteen great mines<sup>19</sup> had been exploded. With a roar the machine-gun barrage broke out. The massed artillery was already firing. The ridge faded from view, and for two hours nothing could be seen of it from Hill 63 through a fog of smoke and dust.



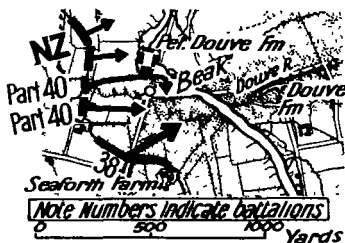
When the mines went up, the last companies of both brigades of the 3rd Australian Division were just reaching their assembly positions. In the 10th Brigade these were companies for the afternoon attack, but in the 9th they formed part of the main assaulting force. Major White, commanding the extreme right-flank company of the 33rd, had just seen his last man into position; Captain Douglas<sup>20</sup> with the support company was just arriving. Both led their men straight on across No-Man's Land. The mine explosions and the tremendous barrage—whose churning dust-cloud on that dry day served as a perfect screen and had a strong moral effect on the enemy—caused this great assault in its early stages to be easier than any in which Australians had been involved. The local German garrison, already overstrained by the week's bombardment, was entirely unstrung. Even some of the Australians closest to the mines suffered a momentary scare—these mines were fired seven seconds before they were expected, and so great was the shock that for an instant men thought the enemy must have obtained word of the operation and exploded a mine of his own.

<sup>19</sup> The other four near Le Pélerin (The Birdcage), south of the front of attack, were not fired.

<sup>20</sup> Lieut.-Col. W. H. Douglas, V.D.; 33rd Bn. Engineer; of Rockdale, N.S.W.; b. Leichhardt, N.S.W., 10 Aug., 1895.

The mines blew vast craters,<sup>21</sup> as much as 300 feet in width and 50 to 70 in depth, and each shattered or buried beneath its heaped-up rim the garrison of some 150 yards of trench. At three points on the 3rd Australian Division's mile-long front<sup>22</sup> lay the huge resultant ant-heaps and saucers, splitting the advance in those parts of the front.<sup>23</sup> The dust haze caused by them and by the churning fog of the British barrage increased the difficulty of keeping direction and organisation, and in some sectors successive waves and lines became amalgamated as one dense wave.

But enemy resistance was almost absent. Although much the greater part of the German front-line garrison was outside the physical danger-zone of the mines, the moral shock was naturally terrific. The Australians, stumbling into the German trenches, still recognisable in the shell-torn ground, found a sprinkling of the enemy cowering there, mostly in the numerous rectangular concrete shelters which had formerly lain beneath the parapets but had been partly unearthed by the bombardment. A few Germans were in shell-holes in No-Man's Land, and a larger number behind their line, having lain there for several days to escape the shells. Many others had fled, a litter of accoutrements, rifles, ammunition, cigars, and scraps of food in the shell-holes showing where their line had been. At the "Beak," a small salient immediately north of the Douve stream, some German machine-gunner, despite the shocks of mines and the barrage and the panic around him, had remained true to the tradition of his splendid corps, and kept his head sufficiently to open fire on the Tasmanians advancing with their bridges. But Lieutenant Crosby<sup>24</sup> and six men ran round and without the



<sup>21</sup> See Vol. XII, plates 328, 329.

<sup>22</sup> The fourth mine in this sector lay, as already explained, 200 yards south of the southern flank of the attack.

<sup>23</sup> Several commanders afterwards expressed the opinion that the difficulties created by the mines outweighed the advantages.

<sup>24</sup> Lieut W. T. Crosby, 40th Bn. Bank clerk, of Hobart, Tas. b Campbell Town, Tas., 1 March, 1897.

least difficulty bombed the position from behind, whereupon the gunner's determination gave way. Elsewhere, after firing a few scattered shots,<sup>25</sup> the Germans surrendered as the troops approached. Men went along the trenches bombing the shelters, whose occupants then came out, some of them cringing like beaten animals. They "made many fruitless attempts to embrace us," reported Lieutenant Garrard<sup>26</sup> of the 40th. "I have never seen men so demoralised."

Except for a short tussle, presently to be described, on the extreme right, the German front and support lines were easily passed, the task proving child's play compared with the nightmare of the approach march. At this stage in each brigade, 9th and 10th, the left battalion halted to let a supporting battalion pass through,<sup>27</sup> and this, together with the right battalion of its brigade, then continued the advance to the position for the second halt. On the left the 38th had crossed the bridges that had been duly laid across the Douve by the 40th,<sup>28</sup> although this precaution was found to be needless, the stream proving easily fordable at any point. The tail of the supporting battalions was well clear of the old British line before the German barrage fell; but indeed the German artillery-fire at this stage was almost everywhere negligible. On the opening of the British barrage the rain of gas-shells had instantly stopped, and during the first stage of the battle the German field-guns



*Dotted line shows approximate position of troops forming up for second phase*

<sup>25</sup> In the sector of the 33rd Battalion on the extreme right a few Germans fought. Private John Carroll (Kurrawang and Kalgoorlie, W. Aust.) rescued a comrade from them, and captured a machine-gun after killing its crew. For this, and for his subsequent bravery during the German bombardments, he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

<sup>26</sup> Lieut. W. L. Garrard, M.C., 40th Bn. Schoolmaster; of Launceston, Tas., b. Launceston, 27 June, 1883.

<sup>27</sup> The 35th and 40th halted, and the 34th and 38th passed through and went on with the 33rd and 39th respectively, as shown in the marginal sketch.

<sup>28</sup> The 38th also carried six bridges of its own, and placed four of them in position. A platoon of the 40th under Sergeant L. K. Swann (Keyneton, S. Aust.; killed in 1918 as an officer of the A.F.C.) remained in the old German front line to keep the bridges in order.



did not seem to open again. Some fire from medium and heavy howitzers quickly descended on a few important points in the old British line, and almost the only casualties from shell-fire at this stage were suffered by the 37th Battalion, waiting there for the afternoon attack.

For the troops, following the dust cloud lit up by the lurid flashes of that tremendous barrage, it was almost difficult to realise that danger from the enemy could be present.

\* Kindly convey to the artillery and machine-guns (wrote Captain Chisholm<sup>29</sup> of the 40th to his colonel) our hearty appreciation of their magnificent barrages. Some of our men kept within twenty yards of it, and I had to order them back in some cases.

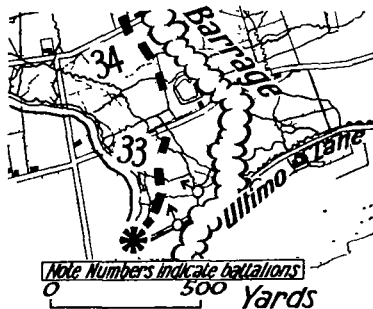
In some units indeed most of the casualties at this stage were caused by men pressing forward too eagerly and coming under their own shells. But so well did officers and men know their tasks that, in spite of some disorganisation, and whether they went forward in waves or as a crowd, they made their way to their proper objectives. In some cases they were sorted out and re-formed as they advanced. As the light increased, the tawny, rolling cloud was easier to follow. Without the slightest check the line reached the position of the second halt, where, close in front of the German second line, the Australians must wait for slightly over an hour while the New Zealand centre worked through Messines.<sup>30</sup>

So far the only point at which resistance worthy of the name had been felt was, as had been expected, on the extreme right. The 33rd Battalion, an especially fine unit commanded by a young veteran of Gallipoli, Lieutenant-Colonel Morshead, had been picked for this position, and its advancing troops were from the first under the fire of distant Germans, who took long shots at them from safe trenches many hundred yards beyond the flank. Almost immediately also a party of the enemy at a local headquarters in the support trench, just beyond the edge of the attack but closer than the barrage, turned a machine-gun upon the nearest men of the 33rd as they were "mopping-up." Three were hit, but another, Private

<sup>29</sup> Col. J. D. W. Chisholm, V.D.; 40th Bn. Accountant; of Hobart, Tas.; b. Forcett, Tas., 5 March, 1873.

<sup>30</sup> As in many other fights, troops charged with attacking the first line did not always stay on their proper objective, and, when the 38th took "Schnitzel Farm" close in front of this second line, some of the 40th, who should have been back near the German support line, were with them and spent hours vainly endeavouring to free the entrances of a big concrete blockhouse near by.

Spence,<sup>31</sup> obtained the help of four additional men, and, setting two to fire on the machine-gun with rifle-grenades, worked round behind it, killed the crew, and captured the gun. Still farther to the right, where the flank rested on the northernmost of the two great flanking mine-craters, another German machine-gun presently opened from a concrete shelter 100 yards up a communication trench, "Ultimo Lane,"<sup>32</sup> whose end was obliterated by the crater. Its fire had to be kept under by sniping until 4 a.m., when a Stokes mortar of the 9th Light Trench Mortar Battery with twelve shots drove these Germans again to shelter.



Not only the men digging the new front line on the right, but those at work a few hundred yards back on the new support line across the old No-Man's Land, and carriers coming up with supplies, came under heavy fire from Germans beyond this flank. There was especial danger that the Germans might occupy the southern of the two flank craters which lay 150 yards within their territory. The northern crater had a good command, but was so exposed to fire that the platoon told off to fortify it was quickly shot down, and the work had to be postponed until nightfall. The southern crater was too close for safe shooting by the artillery. Major White of the flank company had therefore to trust mainly to his snipers, who—chief among them one named Partridge<sup>33</sup>—prevented almost all enemy movement in that corner. After half-a-dozen Germans had been shot trying to creep to the southern crater, the enemy abandoned the attempt.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Pte (T/Cpl.) J. Spence, D.C.M. (No. 1244; 33rd Bn.). Labourer; of Tamworth district, N.S.W.; b. Niangala, N.S.W., 13 June, 1886.

<sup>32</sup> On the British maps the German trenches opposite a great part of the Second Army's front were given names commencing with the letter denoting the map square in which they lay. Thus, for 6,000 yards south and east of Messines all names began with "U." For the same distance north and east they began with "O."

<sup>33</sup> L/Cpl H. H. Partridge (No. 1232; 33rd Bn.). Farmer, of Niangala, N.S.W.; b. Niangala, 1890.

<sup>34</sup> The Australian flank rested on the headquarters captured by Private Spence, which afforded a good look-out and was held as a listening-post, with a hidden machine-gun emplaced near by.

Thus the first stage of the 3rd Division's advance was complete. Its right settled to the task of fortification; on the left, while the dawn broke and the countryside gradually became visible, the troops waited for the second stage.

The veil must now be lifted from the German side of the operations. The front on which this offensive fell had long been held by parts of two German army corps, the XIX (Wytschaete Group) north of the Douve, and the II Bavarian (Lille Group) south of it. The northern corps belonged to the Fourth German Army, which held the Ypres front, and the southern, until lately, to the Sixth Army—the same that fought at Arras. From the Battle of the Somme, in 1916, until April 1917 the XIX Corps had held its portion of the threatened front with three divisions, and the II Bavarian with part of one.

It is now known that as early as January, 1917, the Germans detected signs of a coming attack against the Messines salient. In February they remarked British batteries in new positions. When the Battle of Arras broke out, the German commander of this group of armies (Crown Prince Rupprecht) regarded a side-stroke against Messines as a possible accompaniment, and the anticipation caused him anxiety, since it would be difficult to find reserves to meet both attacks. The staff of the Fourth German Army, however, on inquiry being made of it, stated that the British seemed to be preparing not for an early attack, but possibly for a later offensive. Subsequently, reports of air-patrols in the bright weather about April 25 indicated that the British system of roads and railways opposite Messines was even more extensive than that prepared for the Arras offensive, and Crown Prince Rupprecht on April 27 rightly concluded that the British would be in a position to attack there as soon as they could spare the troops. But he believed that, so long as they continued to thrust at Arras, they would not have men enough to attack Messines.

The question, therefore, which had exercised the minds of German commanders responsible for the Messines front was—did the British seriously intend to break through at Arras? On April 29 a spy sent information that, in the event of the British forces being unable to break through at Arras, the British command intended to transfer its offensive within a fortnight to Flanders. This report, which indeed was very near the truth, deeply impressed the German High Command; and, although Crown Prince Rupprecht, and the subordinate staffs of the Fourth Army and II Bavarian Corps, retained some doubts until the intense bombardment at Messines had actually begun, Ludendorff on April 29 ordered that the necessary measures for preventing a breakthrough there must be taken. The 24th Division was accordingly inserted in the front north of Wytschaete, and the 3rd Bavarian Division, which had lost over 2,000 men at Arras, was brought up in rear of the southern end of the salient to act as counter-attack division. At the same time, for the sake of unity of control, the Lille Group (II Bavarian Corps) was placed under the Fourth Army, and its northernmost division, the 4th Bavarian, closed up to the north so as to strengthen the garrison south of the Douve.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The 16th Bavarian Division took over part of the 4th Division's front north of the Lys.

A much bolder precaution was suggested by Crown Prince Rupprecht's chief-of-staff, Lieutenant-Général von Kuhl. Till now preparations for attack had chiefly been detected north-west and west of the Messines salient. Now they began to be suspected also south of it—that is, in the II Anzac sector. To the apprehensions of Crown Prince Rupprecht that Wytschaete might be cut off by a blow from this direction, General von Kuhl replied with the suggestion: "Then evacuate the salient and withdraw behind the Lys." His chief was attracted by it; but two conferences with the subordinate commanders showed that all of them were strongly opposed to the suggested course. None of them believed the attack to be immediately impending; all thought that the Messines-Wytschaete ridge, with its fine command of the country around, could be held; and all disliked the notion of falling back on the Oosttaverne Line—a position overlooked from the ridge and itself commanding no view. Von Kuhl did not himself attach much importance to so-called "commanding" positions. In this war they frequently proved vulnerable; low-lying positions were often more secure. But the opinions of the two corps commanders held. General von Stetten of the II Bavarian Corps maintained that his position on the south of the salient favoured counter-attack. He could take the British artillery on his front under flanking fire, and suppress it with gas-shells.

Thus, the one step that Haig feared was rejected. Crown Prince Rupprecht, misled by reports from corps commanders at Arras and Bullecourt, who were afraid of losing part of their artillery, did not quickly detect the northward movement of troops and guns from Arras on about May 15,<sup>36</sup> and, when a fortnight later the Messines bombardment began, it was too late to think of withdrawal there. The system of tenure in depth also had to go by the board. The front line and the two strong-points of Messines and Wytschaete were to be held at all costs.<sup>37</sup> "These strong-points," said an order of the XIX Army Corps on June 1, "must not fall even temporarily into the enemy's hands. . . . They must be held to the last man even if the enemy has taken them off on both sides and threatens them from the rear."

The German command, therefore, was for more than five weeks sufficiently aware of the danger to induce it to make preparations. It was totally unaware, however, of the existence of the great mines. It knew that the British had once tunnelled at certain points, but the German miners in most of those places had long since reported that active mining had been abandoned. At Hill 60, where the British miners were known to be still aggressive, the German officer in charge claimed that his men had them beaten.<sup>38</sup> Thus, although the vast labour expended on the British mines could have been rendered useless by a slight withdrawal, this reason for retirement does not seem to have been suggested. The capacity of the British miners was disastrously underrated.

From more than one British soldier captured at the end of May the Germans received information, accurate to within a few days, of the

<sup>36</sup> On May 17 he noted that "everything evidenced" a probable continuance of the Arras attack; and, on May 25, that neither against the Arras nor against the Quéant Group did British artillery seem to have decreased. By May 13 the German staff received from a spy in Paris an accurate outline of some of the chief decisions of the Paris conference on May 4. But such reports had often proved to be wrong, and it was impossible correctly to sift the false from the true.

<sup>37</sup> Orders of the 40th Division and other formations to this effect were captured

<sup>38</sup> See p. 954

date of the attack; one, captured on May 29, said that it would take place on June 7 after eight days' bombardment.<sup>39</sup> The German artillery, especially on the flanks, was strengthened and forthwith began its counter-operations. The British feint-barrages, although they failed to give the impression of an actual attack, may have made the operation appear imminent, for on June 3 the Fourth German Army anticipated that it would be attacked next morning, and General von Stetten's plan was therefore put into operation: to suppress the British batteries, 13,000 gas-shells were poured into Ploegsteert Wood that night. On June 6, in accurate anticipation of attack next day, this step was repeated, heavy *minenwerfer* throwing in addition 620 huge gas-bombs into the wood. Yet this prearranged measure entirely failed to dislocate either the programme of the British artillery or the approach march of the 3rd Australian Division.

The German artillery staffs must by that time have realised, even if the higher commanders did not, that the power of their opponents had been under-estimated. There had been concentrated on their front a mass of artillery and air force against which their corresponding units were almost powerless. In answer to the Fourth Army's appeal, more artillery, air force, pioneers, and machine-guns were being brought up, but its batteries were being alarmingly overwhelmed. Many British observers<sup>40</sup> during those days received the impression that the German artillery was withdrawing to safer positions. It is now known that this was not so—its comparative silence was due to another cause. Under the concentration of British counter-battery fire, directed by airmen, the German artillery, especially the central part of it, thrust forward into the Messines salient, was crumbling. Half of its heavy howitzers behind that front, a third of its medium and light howitzers, a fifth of its field-guns, and practically all the captured Russian guns in use there, were destroyed. In the sector of the 3rd Bavarian Division there were by June 7 only 7 heavy and 12 field-pieces ready for use.<sup>41</sup> Farther north, of 18 heavy and medium howitzers, the 2nd Division had only 3 in action. The artillery on the flanks, however, was in much better condition.

The support that this artillery could give to its infantry, especially in the centre, was negligible. Its answer to the British, according to the historian of the 18th Bavarian I.R., "made a pitiful impression." The British barrage, on the other hand, prevented the German supply staff from bringing forward any except cold food, and the troops received too little of that. On the night of June 6 a lucky British shell set fire to a great ammunition dump at Coucou, near Menin.<sup>42</sup> The gassing

<sup>39</sup> At the time of this statement, the orders were for five days' bombardment. Such information was given to the enemy sometimes in replies to direct examination, sometimes through unwise conversation between prisoners who did not realise that they were overheard.

<sup>40</sup> And also the German infantry, as the statements of prisoners showed.

<sup>41</sup> Report of General von Wenninger, quoted by Crown Prince Rupprecht, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, Vol. III, p. 169. It is strange that the high command seems to have been unaware of the destruction of German artillery until after the attack.

<sup>42</sup> The gas from the exploded shells of this dump drifted to Menin and caused many deaths among the civil population which then still inhabited that village (*History of the 204th German Infantry Division*, p. 42). The shelling of Comines, lately, had become so severe that even the surrounding huts and parade grounds had to be avoided by the troops, and "the friendly inhabitants" (who, according to the *History of the 18th Bav I.R.*, "for more than two years shared joy and adversity with the German garrison") were forced to leave.

of the low-lying areas during the last nights of the bombardment had its intended effect of robbing the German headquarters, artillery, and reserves in those areas of their sleep.<sup>43</sup> The strong-point in Messines, from which so much was hoped, proved such a shell-trap<sup>44</sup> that one of the two companies of the 18th Bavarian I.R. stationed there had to be shifted to trenches in the open. "In the firing line," says the regimental historian, "the fire was supportable, since there the dugouts (concrete chambers) gave some shelter." Early in the bombardment the 24th Division north of Wyttschaete had to be replaced by the 35th, and by June 4 the 40th (Saxon) Division, holding Messines, also reached the limit of its endurance. It was accordingly relieved by the 3rd Bavarian, which for a month had been practising the rôle of counter-attack division. This relief north of the Douve was in its final stages when the attack began. South of the Douve the 4th Bavarian Division had on the nights of June 3 and 4 relieved its right flank regiment, the 5th Bav. R.I.R., by the 9th Bav. I.R.

The physical destruction caused by the mines is naturally exaggerated in German accounts; but, together with the barrage, they would have caused a panic in any army. The 3rd Bavarian Division was just finishing the relief of the 40th (Saxon). Its 17th and 18th Regiments, holding

the Messines-North and Messines-South sectors respectively, each had one battalion in the firing line, one in the second-line area on the ridge, and one in and behind the Oosttaverne Line; its 23rd Regiment held the next sector on the north, opposite the IX British Corps.<sup>45</sup> In each sector numerous machine-gun posts were scattered, chess-board fashion, over



the ground behind the trenches.<sup>46</sup> The 9th Bavarian I.R. (4th Bav. Division) south of the Douve was somewhat similarly disposed, its support battalion lying in the Oosttaverne Line (which was there much closer to the front) and half the reserve battalion in rear near Warneton. The other half lay on the Douve to act as a special "contact detachment" to keep touch between the flanks of the two divisions.

<sup>43</sup> By forcing them to put on their gas-masks. If a man neglected to do this, three or four breaths of gas might be fatal.

<sup>44</sup> For example, at midday on June 6 a heavy shell burst in the cellar of Messines monastery, killing 2 medical officers of the 18th Bav. I.R. and 8 stretcher-bearers.

<sup>45</sup> In the sector of that regiment, apparently, lay the Spanbroekmolen and Kruisstraat Cabaret mines—four in all.

<sup>46</sup> This was part of the practice, enjoyed by the high command, of holding the line "in depth." In the sector of the 18th Bav. I.R. were 34 such machine-gun "nests."

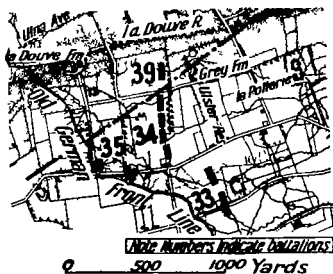
German accounts state that, at the first stroke, the three front-line battalions—and, in the sector of the 17th, half of the support battalion also—were shattered.<sup>47</sup>

When at 5.3 the long halt ended the sun was already up. The Germans had evidently regained some sort of organisation, and opposition was immediately felt at certain points.

#### **The Second stage**

The New Zealanders could be seen passing round the edge of Messines; their central battalions had fought through the village and established themselves beyond it, despite the fact that one or two groups of the enemy were still firing from concrete shelters or cellars.

In this stage of the action the 10th (Victoria) Brigade of the 3rd Division continued its attack up the southern shoulder of Messines ridge, north of the Douve, with its 39th Battalion still advancing immediately south of the Douve. The 9th Brigade, pushing forward along the top of the low rise south of the stream, expected strong opposition at one point, the ruins of "Grey Farm"<sup>48</sup> in the German second line. This ruin, a few low piles of bricks splashed with white mortar dust, was known to contain German shelters. It lay immediately behind the front trench of the second line ("Ulster Reserve") and was screened by a thin hedge. During the hour's pause the company commanders of the 34th Battalion, which had passed through the 35th to assemble for this attack, were able to check precisely the position of their men, and, while the barrage still lay on the second line and the farm, their troops pushed forward close to their own shell-bursts.



The officers knew by their watches the moment when the barrage would lift from these places, and the lift, which

<sup>47</sup> The regimental histories naturally imply that they were destroyed by the mines. The "Ontario Farm" mine apparently caught the I/17th Bav. I.R., just as it was being relieved from the front line by its sister, the II/17th, and half the relieved troops as well as those relieving are said by the regimental historian to have been "as good as annihilated" by the explosion. No mine, however, exploded in the sector of the 18th Bav. I.R., which had 6 officers and 392 men missing and lost 16 machine-guns. The III/9th Bav. I.R. had four mines in its sector.

<sup>48</sup> See Vol XII, plate 333.

occurred punctually, was instantly recognised. The 34th—and, on its left, the 39th, now reduced to about 100 under Captain Paterson, but still occupying the full battalion front in the valley—advanced; but, as the 34th reached the hedge, machine-gun fire was already streaming through it from undetected positions close beyond. Presently the troops located one of the guns, and some of them crept forward along a ditch, and through the hedge towards it. One of the two Germans working it was shot by Private Gray;<sup>49</sup> others lay dead about the gun, and the last gunner surrendered. The line worked forward and, after some fighting, the crews of the other machine-guns were shot down or bolted, with the troops firing at them as they ran.<sup>50</sup> A few were found in a shelter with steel doors, and were killed. Four machine-guns were captured, two in the trench and two in the farm, as well as an automatic “pom-pom” gun. The 39th attacking the defences immediately north of Grey Farm had also been met by the fire of a machine-gun emplaced on the roof of a concrete shelter. This forced the troops in that area to ground, and for a time the check seemed likely to become dangerous. In this crisis Captain Paterson himself managed to suppress with a rifle the fire of the machine-gun, and, during its silence, rushed forward with the men nearest to him, and seized the post, capturing two machine-guns.<sup>51</sup> The 34th and 39th dug in on their final objective, 100 yards beyond the alignment of Grey Farm; 500 yards ahead, beyond a slight dip of the plateau, lay the Oosttaverne Line.

On this side of the Douve the Oosttaverne Line was not to be attacked. It was from this line, therefore, that a counter-attack in that sector was expected to come. Everyone knew that the new German system of defence depended upon powerful early counter-attacks, and, when once the final objective had been reached, the troops concentrated their efforts upon digging in before the counter-attack came. At

<sup>49</sup> Pte. M. Gray, D.C.M. (No. 77; 34th Bn.). Miner; of Greta, N.S.W., and East Wemyss, Fife, Scotland; b. Gallatown, Fife, 28 March, 1881. Killed in action, 12 Oct., 1917.

<sup>50</sup> Sgt. W. H. Wilkinson (East Greta, N.S.W.; killed in action two days later) shot two of these machine-gunners and captured their gun. It is recorded that Private H. R. Sternbeck (Glen William, N.S.W.), 35th Battalion, at some point of the advance did the same. Sternbeck was only 16 at the time, having enlisted at the age of 15½ years.

<sup>51</sup> Lieut. Palstra also was active in the operations at this post. (Lieut. W. Palstra, M.C. Accountant; of Northcote and Surrey Hills, Vic.; b. Zwolle, Holland, 8 Oct., 1891. Afterwards joined No. 3 Squadron, Aust. Flying Corps. He was killed in the wreck of the British airship R.101, 5 Oct., 1930.)



Grey Farm for half-an-hour this work was entirely undisturbed. The troops made use of shell-holes and old trenches, and at 5.35 Captain Stewart,<sup>52</sup> whose company had taken the farm, reported that his men had now pretty good cover. To deal with German snipers who had just begun to fire from the direction of the Oosttaverne Line, he placed snipers of his company out in front. An hour later, about 6.30, three machine-guns opened from the Oosttaverne Line immediately north of the "Potterie Farm." They were seen to be firing from the top of the concrete shelter, and upon their position being reported the heavy artillery fired on the place and for the time being suppressed them. About this time five or six enterprising men of the 34th, "prospecting" on their own account, made their way through ditches into the Oosttaverne Line at the Potterie, although a slow British barrage was on it, and bombed several shelters there. The trench could easily have been taken, had this been in the plan: as it was, the prospectors, having thrown their bombs, withdrew, and shortly afterwards German reserves were seen moving into the place.

The advance of the 10th Brigade also, north of the Douve, had met opposition at a point where it was expected, near Bethléem Farm. Here during the long halt the second and third waves<sup>53</sup> of the 38th Battalion had formed up immediately facing the second German line ("Ungodly Trench"), their task being to capture this and Bethléem Farm, whose ruins, surrounded by several tree-lined hedgerows,<sup>54</sup> lay 300 yards beyond. The second wave, under Captain Trebilcock,<sup>55</sup> would move straight on to Bethléem Farm and the Black Line, the third under Captain Fairweather<sup>56</sup> following to mop up and form a strong-point in the Douve valley. The few Germans in Ungodly Trench ran back a little way and settled in shell-holes beyond a hedge. As Fairweather's company approached, they opened fire, covered by a machine-gun shooting from

<sup>52</sup> Major R. J. Stewart, M.C.; 34th Bn. Civil engineer; of Parkes, N.S.W.; b. Peak Hill, N.S.W., 11 April, 1894.

<sup>53</sup> Its first wave had already taken "Ulcer Reserve Trench" and "Schnitzel Farm." This wave was commanded by Major A. J. A. Maudsley; but, when he established the forward command post of the 38th, Captain E. W. Latchford took charge of the first wave troops.

<sup>54</sup> See Vol. XII, plate 332.

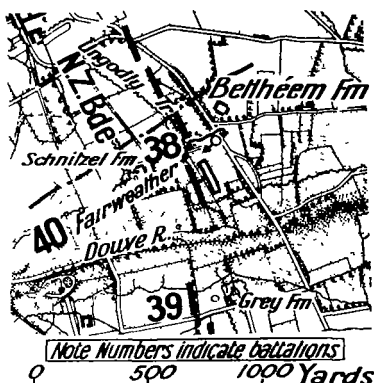
<sup>55</sup> Capt. R. E. Trebilcock, M.C.; 38th Bn. Solicitor; of Kerang, Vic.; b. Ballarat, Vic., 30 June, 1880.

<sup>56</sup> Capt. F. E. Fairweather, M.C.; 38th Bn. Accountant; of Rockhampton, Q'land and Heidelberg, Vic.; b. Moonee Ponds, Vic., 20 Sept., 1891. Killed in action 29 Sept., 1918.

some point which could not immediately be located. It held up the right, but to the left front was a hedge and row of trees lining a cart-track to the farm. Behind the trees lay a concrete shelter, and near this, beside the last tree in the avenue, Fairweather presently noticed a slight flurry of smoke.

It was the gun. Taking a sergeant and two signallers, he crept over some shell-holes to the hedge, scrambled through it, and ran forward behind it until he was in rear of the blockhouse. Half-a-dozen

men bolted as he got there. On a concrete emplacement beside the blockhouse stood the gun, steaming, with a belt of unexpended cartridges beside it. In the shelter a German officer and soldier were calling "Kamerad!" Fairweather and his companions, lifting the gun from its emplacement, fired it at the fugitives who sank into shell-holes 150 yards farther on. The



German infantry who had been holding up Fairweather's troops, and who had lost heavily through their rifle-fire, then began to run, and the Victorians pushed on through several hedges and across a road, and almost immediately came upon a German field-gun in a small hedged field. They shot two of its crew and captured the gun complete. A little beyond Bethéem Farm the troops captured another gun abandoned by a party of the enemy who had tried to drag it away.<sup>67</sup>

The 10th Brigade here reached its sector of the Black Line, the main defensive line to be held along the captured ridge.<sup>68</sup> Fairweather's company began to dig a strong-post

<sup>67</sup> Its sights were missing, but were presently found in the overcoat of a German who was shot in a shell-hole near by.

<sup>68</sup> On its right in the Douve valley the 38th went slightly farther than the line prescribed, Corporal A. E. Pegler's platoon pushing on to where the Messines-Basse Ville road crosses the stream by a small bridge. Here they shot a few Germans running up the road, and began to dig in. Fairweather afterwards stated that across the valley they could see machine-guns holding up the 39th near Grey Farm. Pegler (who belonged to Mildura, Vic.) accordingly worked forward, and, by firing from the flank, endeavoured to dislodge the gunners. Pegler's men, finding themselves afterwards on the line of their own barrage, fell back on the redoubt which their company was digging.

between Betlhéem Farm and the Douve, and Trebilcock's and Latchford's<sup>59</sup> a trench east of Betlhéem Farm joining that of the New Zealanders between "White Spot Cottages" and a small hedged field known as the "Zareeba." The line here chosen was slightly in advance of the intended position of the Black Line and connected with the New Zealand posts subsequently placed on the Black Dotted Line. From the German dump at Betlhéem the 38th obtained extra shovels and other stores and all the wire required for the work.

From German records it appears probable that the troops that opposed Fairweather were the two companies of the 9th Bavarian I.R. entrusted with keeping contact between the 3rd and 4th Bavarian Divisions. These were the first in the whole area to counter-attack. At the outbreak of the storm their leader, Captain Fuchsel, had advanced towards Betlhéem Farm, hoping to support the left flank of the 18th Bavarian I.R. The field-guns were two which had been dragged by their crews to near Fuchsel's position apparently in order to bring direct fire upon the Australians. The German account states that Fuchsel's force was outflanked by the advance on the north, and was almost wiped out.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, having quickly fought down slight opposition, the 3rd Division completed by 5.15, or soon afterwards, its part of the main phase of General Plumer's plan. The New Zealanders farther north were through and round Messines,<sup>61</sup> and the 25th Division was on the New Zealanders' flank with its left duly thrown back, to be swung up as the IX Corps came into the line. So far as the II Anzac Corps was concerned, the main objective of the offensive had been captured. The crest of the Messines Ridge had been seized, and the duty of the troops who captured it was now to entrench themselves so strongly that the enemy could not retake the ridge, no matter how vehement his efforts.

**The pause in the attack**

<sup>59</sup> Capt. E. W. Latchford, M.B.E., M.C., M.S.M.; 38th Bn. Member of Aust. Permanent Forces; of Ascot Vale and Armadale, Vic.; b. Goulburn Weir, Vic., 24 Jan., 1889.

<sup>60</sup> It is possible that part of the 4th company of the reserve battalion of the 18th Bav. I.R. from the Oosttaverne Line also took part in this counter-attack.

<sup>61</sup> It was in this advance of the New Zealanders that there occurred the only opportunity for action by tanks in this stage of the II Anzac attack. The pace of the New Zealanders' advance over the crater-field was too fast for the company of tanks allotted to assist; but one of two tanks which passed round the village was in time to help by knocking in the walls and roof of a farm close on the northern flank, from which fire was being directed on the New Zealanders as they dug in; 30 Germans at once came out of the place and surrendered.

The question of the time for the separate attack to be made in the afternoon—to capture most of the Oostaverne Line and the batteries supposed to lie west of it—had at the last moment, on June 6th, been reopened. That advance would now occur at 1.10 p.m., *or later*, the army commander withholding the decision as to the new “zero” hour until the progress of the main attack was known. But the afternoon operation was to be carried out by entirely different troops, and was purely subsidiary. The main object would have been fully attained when the Black Line was rendered impregnable.

In most battles the troops who took part were on the look-out for some display of the enemy's most recent and dreaded devices. At Pozières reports had been received of the formidable German “barrages” and plans were made (without much success) to avoid their dreaded effects. At Messines every man had heard of the new German system of counter-attacking, and all attention was concentrated on preparation to meet the expected blow. The urgency for these measures had become almost an obsession. Work on the Black Line, and on the support line behind it, was carried out with the particular care that was to become a recognised characteristic of the 3rd Australian—as it already was of the New Zealand—Division. In the 34th Battalion, for example, the sections (7 or 8 men) first dug their separate posts; next these trenches were linked into platoon posts; later the platoons of each company linked theirs. By 7.30 a.m. the sections had dug down to two-thirds of the necessary depth, and were linking up. By 9.30 only short gaps remained between the companies. Some 150 yards in rear was a support line<sup>62</sup> not quite so continuous, bent back on the right across the old No-Man's Land. The work on the communication trenches across the old No-Man's Land was rendered difficult and dangerous by the barrage of the German artillery, feeble though it was and laid down only by the heavier guns. The Russian sap on the extreme right, being on the southern slope and therefore exposed also to enemy rifles at 500 yards' range, or less, could not be opened by the pioneers and Canadian

<sup>62</sup> Behind the 34th Battalion this line was dug by the 35th. The 33rd dug its own support line. The 36th was carrying, its men being fitted for the purpose with carriers made from sandbags, a device invented by Sergeant-Major A. R. Horwood (Newcastle, N.S.W., and Melbourne).

tunnellers until after nightfall. On this flank any party of the "carrying" battalion, the 36th, which strayed to the right was liable to find itself under direct fire of German machine-guns at medium range.

From the blindness of the German heavy artillery-fire, it was evident that not until late in the morning was the enemy staff sure of the situation. The sky at dawn was seen to be swarming with British aircraft. One observer noted that he could see twenty-three. Near the II Anzac area only one German balloon was visible, and that was low down and distant, east of Messines. But about 6 o'clock a single German aeroplane managed to get through, flying low down over the right flank, and an hour later 5.9-inch shells began to arrive from some enfilading battery near Deulemont, a mile and a half from that flank. This fired only single shots, but was evidently directed by observers, and, continuing steadily day and night, is said to have been responsible for more than half the casualties on that flank.<sup>63</sup>

At 7 o'clock evidence of an impending counter-attack was detected along the 9th Brigade's front. The men of the 34th digging beyond Grey Farm saw, as already mentioned, troops moving northwards up the third German line ("Uncertain Trench") at Potterie Farm. Later, about 8.30, these were observed dribbling forward into the slight dip, 400 yards east of the 34th's new trench, where they were lost to view. The 33rd on the extreme right observed men flooding similarly into the area 300 yards south-east of the right flank. At Grey Farm Captain Stewart obtained the help of some of the 9th Brigade's Stokes mortars under Lieutenant Chapman.<sup>64</sup> On their bombs exploding in the dip, the Germans were seen to run back to the third line, the 34th shooting at their backs. The German movement had also been reported to the artillery by a forward observing officer, who at 8.38, judging this advance to be a definite counter-attack, asked for an S.O.S. barrage. Airmen also reported that between 7 and 8 o'clock German troops were massing on the roads near Warneton,

<sup>63</sup> Major White's headquarters, a concrete shelter in the old German firing-line, was hit, 3 signallers being killed and 2 wounded.

<sup>64</sup> Lieut. H. W. Chapman, 36th Bn. Bank manager, of Coogee, N.S.W.; b. Kiama, N.S.W., 29 Aug., 1887. Killed in action, 16 July, 1917.

a mile and a quarter to the east. The artillery and machine-guns opened on the artillery observer's call,<sup>66</sup> and all signs of counter-attack quickly ceased.

This movement was due to an attempt by half the support battalion of the 9th Bavarian I.R. in the Oostaverne Line, reinforced by the reserve half-battalion from near Warneton, to get into position to launch a counter-attack. The attempt, says the regimental historian, "broke up in strong enemy fire."<sup>66</sup>

By this time throughout the area behind the British line there was keen elation at the news that the whole attack was going successfully. At 6.35 II Anzac ordered the advance of certain batteries, previously selected for the purpose. At 8.20 cavalry, who were to patrol the far slope of the ridge for the IX Corps, were seen winding their way to the crest north of Messines. Although this and other attempts to employ mounted troops at such a stage was due to a groundless anticipation of open warfare, the spectacle increased the general cheerfulness. The divisions for the afternoon attack were marching along their roads towards the battlefield undisturbed by shell-fire. Shortly before 11 the two brigades of the 4th Australian Division destined for the afternoon attack reached the neighbourhood of the old British front in the valley below Messines, and the two attack-battalions of each, together with the carriers from their third battalions, moved to their assembly positions at the foot of Messines hill. The reserve battalions, taking up position in the old Subsidiary Line on the green slope of Hill 63, enjoyed such a spectacle as they had never known, looking out, as it were, from "gallery" seats upon the Messines Ridge opposite and on the whole scene: the aeroplanes wheeling and fighting in the brilliant sky; the German shells punching roan-coloured dust plumes from the ruins on the summit; lined-out working parties of New Zealanders furiously digging communication trenches up the slope;<sup>67</sup> the Australians for the afternoon attack lining up on their flags, which, like those on a football ground, marked with each battalion's colours the line on which

<sup>66</sup> The guns protected the 9th Brigade's front with an intense barrage for four minutes, and with a diminishing one until 9 o'clock.

<sup>66</sup> *History of the 9th Bav. I.R.*, p. 104. All German accounts dealing with this sector imply that the Potterie Farm section of Oostaverne Line was attacked this day, some even state that it was lost and recaptured. It was, of course, not attacked except by "prospectors" in search of souvenirs or adventure.

<sup>67</sup> It is recorded that one party, understood to be Maoris of the N.Z. Pioneers, in less than an hour's vehement effort dug themselves out of sight below the surface.

The black and black dotted lines had been captured, and in the II Anzac sector the assembly for the afternoon attack was beginning. The 13th and 13th Brigades (4th Division) were ready to move forward, and the 37th Battalion (3rd Division) was moving.

it was to assemble; tanks marshalling in the meadows; batteries of artillery racing up through the long grass, unlimbering, the teams trotting back with a jingle of chains, and the gun-crews later opening fire. The new starting-time for the afternoon attack was not yet known to the battalion headquarters; and as the original order, to attack at 1.10, was to stand good unless changed, the troops, if no word came, must at about 11.30 move to their forward assembly positions.

Their intelligence officers and scouts had long since gone over the ridge to tape out the actual jumping-off lines. Up there the New Zealanders, digging since 5.30 a.m. the Black Line beyond Messines, had looked out, through the now diminished barrage, over the green Flemish lowlands thickly screened with tree-lined hedgerows, with here and there a sign of some sheltered farmhouse, and, near the horizon, the twin spires of Comines and the more distant steeple of Menin. The scene at the Black Line, as an officer of the 37th Battalion<sup>68</sup> has stated, was at this stage "more like a picnic than a battle." Except for the bursts of the protective barrage in the foreground and on the Oostaverne Line, 1,000 yards down the slope, the landscape seemed to drowse under a bright sun that promised an exceptionally hot day. The ground on which the Australian scouts were to place their flags and tapes lay well down the slope ahead of the Black Line, in full view of the enemy but behind the posts of the Black Dotted Line.

The posts of the Black Dotted Line in the II Anzac sector were to be formed by parties of New Zealanders and of the 11th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment (25th Division), advancing under an increased barrage at 8.40. But, finding the foreground so peaceful and the protective barrage so light, one of the 4th Division's taping parties—Lieutenant Hallam<sup>69</sup> and 14 scouts of the 49th (Queensland) Battalion—did not wait for this advance, but went straight out beyond the Black Line to the 49th's jumping-off position, on which its own barrage then lay. There, behind a hedge, Hallam and his scouts found four abandoned field-guns, which they claimed for their battalion, and then they wandered on into "Despaigne Farm," 250 yards beyond, and found a 5.9-inch howitzer. At

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<sup>68</sup> Capt. R. C. Grieve.

<sup>69</sup> Capt. F. Hallam, M.C.; 49th Bn. Draper; of South Brisbane; b. Carnforth, Lancs., Eng., 19 May, 1888.

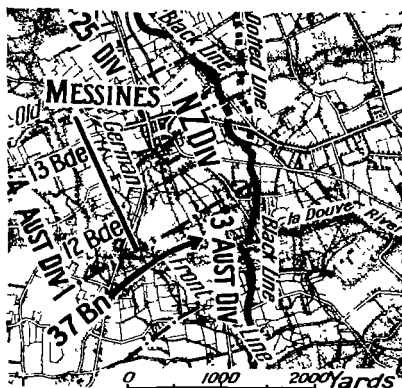


this stage they bethought themselves of their return. But the barrage which they had ignored had suddenly become terribly dense, and was rolling down on them, covering the 8.40 advance. There was nothing to be done but to let it pass over them, which it did, killing 4 and wounding 5.

Nevertheless the tapes of the 49th were accurately laid. Farther south, near Huns' Walk, where the German line was much closer, the task had to be carried out under direct sniping-fire at moderate range, but the work was excellently done. In the sector of the 45th Battalion Lieutenant Murray<sup>70</sup> was shot through the head as he finished it.<sup>71</sup> On the northern flank Lieutenant York<sup>72</sup> of the 52nd was wounded as he made his way back to his battalion.

Meanwhile the four battalions of the 4th Division destined for the afternoon attack, and the 37th Battalion (3rd Division), which was to take its part on their right, had been waiting west of Messines Ridge for word as to the new hour for launching that assault, but at 11.30 no message had arrived. The 37th had already moved off down the Douve valley, and the right (12th) brigade of the 4th Division now also went forward, with its two battalions in eight waves, that is to say, in the precise order for their attack except that the sections moved in file until they topped the crest.<sup>73</sup>

It was just then that the character of the German shell-fire changed. For the second time a German aeroplane had succeeded in penetrating the guard kept by British airmen



<sup>70</sup> Lieut. R. A. M. Murray, M.C., 45th Bn. Medical student, son of a former commander in the Orient Line, of Wentworth Falls and Sydney, N.S.W.; b. Ryde, N.S.W., 11 Jan., 1893. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

<sup>71</sup> Corpl. C. H. Kelly (Eugowra, N.S.W.) carried on and guided the 45th to its tapes.

<sup>72</sup> Lieut. H. P. York, 52nd Bn. Electrician; of Waverley, N.S.W.; b. Sydney, 6 Oct., 1886.

<sup>73</sup> Each battalion had two companies in front and two in support. Each company advanced on a platoon front, its four successive platoons forming the waves. On crossing the crest, the sections shook out into line.

and made a survey of the right shoulder of Messines Ridge. The new trenches—Black Line, support line, and communications—and the troops at work on them, were evidently detected, for at about 11.30 most of the heavy German artillery on the southern flank ceased its hitherto scattered fire and laid a sharp barrage on the southern shoulder of the ridge, especially on the Black Line near Bethléem Farm. It is possible that the advance of the 12th Brigade round the southern edge of Messines was also observed. At all events, as the two battalions climbed the shell-pitted ridge they found themselves approaching the burst and dust-haze of a fairly fierce barrage. "I think most men were of the idea that we would not attempt to penetrate this," wrote a man of the 47th (Private Gallwey<sup>74</sup>) afterwards, but their officers led them straight through it. Shells stamped out one or two sections, especially in the carrying parties supplied by the 46th Battalion, which marched throughout at the tail of the attack; but the brigade passed through with surprisingly slight loss.

On cresting the ridge it came into sight of the lowlands beyond, and was immediately fired on by distant rifles and machine-guns, as well as by a few cannon. Close in front there ran forward the Messines-Korentje road (known as "Huns' Walk"), whose avenue of trees along the crest of an easterly finger of the ridge was the main feature of this landscape. On either side of this, beyond the digging New Zealanders, were the tapes and flags of the brigade's jumping-off line. As the troops were being led on to them, word arrived from the rear that the afternoon attack had been postponed for two hours and would take place at 3.10. For these two extra hours, therefore, the advanced troops must wait in sight of the enemy. They were ordered to lie down, still roughly in the order of their attack, in shell-holes, the front companies close in front of the main New Zealand line, some of the rear ones behind it. The enemy sprayed them with distant fire of small arms and shelled them, killing Captain Davy<sup>75</sup> of the 47th as he stood superintending his men. Lieutenant Campbell<sup>76</sup> and some of the waiting men

<sup>74</sup> Cpl. W. D. Gallwey (No. 2430; 47th Bn.). Bank clerk; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 28 March, 1898.

<sup>75</sup> Capt. F. L. Davy, 47th Bn. Farmer; of Hobart, Tas; b. 20 March, 1887. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

<sup>76</sup> Lieut. F. F. Campbell, 47th Bn. Orchardist; of Cygnet, Tas.; b. Bognor, Sussex, Eng., 13 July, 1887. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

also were killed, and Lieutenant Goode<sup>77</sup> mortally wounded. Later some of the forward companies and the New Zealand posts beside them found themselves under fire of their own guns as well—an experience which, partly through great difficulties of communication, frequently recurred during this battle—and had to shift their position temporarily.<sup>78</sup> Many men, tired out by the heat of the march, slept until wakened for the attack. On the right the 37th Battalion (3rd Division) waited in rear of the Black Line. On the other flank the left attacking brigade of the 4th Division, the 13th, which was to advance by the north of Messines, had received notice of the new “zero” hour just in time to stop its advance from the first assembly position, and was accordingly held back there for two hours in comparative safety.

The two hours’ postponement of the afternoon’s attack had been decided upon by the commander of the Second Army (General Plumer) at about 10 o’clock on the strength of his information as to the progress of the operation. He had to consider not only the time necessary for the reserve division of the IX Corps to pass over the captured ground near Wytschaete and get into position for the attack, and for 40 field- and several heavy-batteries to take up their new positions to cover it, but also the progress of the attack on the flanks. Actually there had been a check on the northern flank, at the “Spoil Bank” on the Ypres-Comines canal, where the 47th Division had not penetrated as deeply as the others. This was not yet known, but the two hours’ delay was a safe course, and should enable the force for the afternoon advance to be assembled and launched without confusion. Word of the decision reached the several corps commanders between 10.15 and 10.40.

On the IX Corps front the afternoon attack was to be made by only one brigade (33rd) of the 11th Division.<sup>79</sup> This brigade had marched during the night to “Butterfly Farm” behind Mount Kemmel, three miles from the front line, where it came under control of the 16th Division. By

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<sup>77</sup> Lieut. G. N. M. Goode, 47th Bn. Grazier; of Orange, N.S.W., and Southport, Tas., b. Camden, N.S.W., 20 Dec., 1884. Died of wounds, 12 June, 1917.

<sup>78</sup> The result was a gap in the New Zealand Dotted Line.

<sup>79</sup> This was the division which had recently been employed under I Anzac south of Bullecourt.

no fault of the brigade, its orders to advance from there were not received until 10.45 a.m.—at which time the Australian battalions for the same attack were already about to form up in the old No-Man's Land. The two hours' postponement gave an opportunity for the 33rd—otherwise certain to be late—to reach in time its jumping-off line, five miles away. It was, however, ordered thither, not direct, but by several stages.<sup>80</sup> The day was hot and the troops were greatly distressed by the fatigue of the march. Possibly for that reason the corps commander, Lieutenant-General Hamilton Gordon,<sup>81</sup> taking with him Major-General Hickie,<sup>82</sup> commanding the 16th Division, visited Major-General Shute<sup>83</sup> of the 19th Division, which was next on the left, and arranged that the northern half of the 33rd Brigade's objective should be attacked by the foremost brigade (57th) of the 19th Division. This precaution, which proved of the utmost value, was rendered possible by the almost complete absence of German artillery-fire, which had left practically intact several of the battalions allotted for the earlier objectives. General Gordon decided to advance some of these to the Black Dotted Line<sup>84</sup> with orders to establish there not merely outposts, but a main line of defence.

The commander of the 19th Division, receiving this order at 12.30, warned the corps commander that the time for distributing orders was short, and the 57th Brigade might be late, and he afterwards asked for a postponement. On receiving the reply that he must do the best he could, he ordered that brigade to advance under the barrage, even if there was not time to instruct company and platoon commanders as to their objectives.<sup>85</sup>

On the 4th Australian Division's front, the 13th Brigade which had been held back in safety, sent forward its two

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<sup>80</sup> First to "Vierstraat Switch," and later to "Chinese Wall."

<sup>81</sup> Lieut.-Gen. Sir A. Hamilton Gordon, K.C.B., p.s.c. Commanded IX Corps, 1916/18. Officer of British Regular Army; of Chalfont St. Giles, Bucks, Eng.; b. 6 July, 1859.

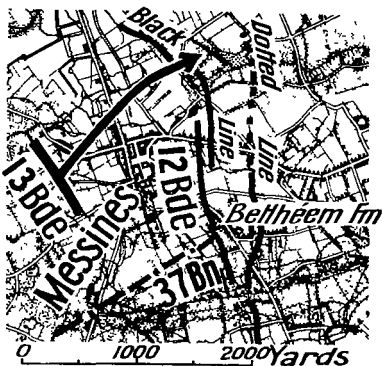
<sup>82</sup> Major-Gen. Sir W. B. Hickie, K.C.B., p.s.c. Commanded 16th Div., 1915/18. Officer of British Regular Army; of Dublin, Ireland, b. 21 May, 1865.

<sup>83</sup> Gen. Sir C. D. Shute, K.C.B., K.C.M.G., p.s.c. Commanded 59th Inf. Bde., 1915/16. 63rd Div., 1916/17; 32nd Div., 1917, 19th Div., 1917; 32nd Div., 1917/18, V Corps, 1918/19. Officer of British Regular Army; of London; b. Dorking, Surrey, Eng., 15 March, 1866. Died 25 Jan., 1936.

<sup>84</sup> Known in the IX Corps area as the "Mauve Line."

<sup>85</sup> The 33rd Brigade was warned that the 57th might be late, and was instructed in that case to look to the safety of its own left flank.

attacking battalions to their jumping-off lines at 1.40 p.m. Although they were completely hidden from the enemy until they reached the crest north of Messines, these—as the 12th Brigade had done two hours earlier—ran into a sharp barrage of heavy shell when near the crest. One of the two battalion commanders, Colonel Pope<sup>86</sup> of the 52nd, was seriously wounded, as was Captain Christophers,<sup>87</sup> commanding a company of the same battalion. Captain Stubbings<sup>88</sup> took charge of the 52nd, and both battalions were led straight on to their tapes, the southern flank of their lines joining those of the 12th Brigade near the mound of Blauwenmolen windmill. Here, lying down, they were sheltered from view of the Germans to the south-east whence the shell-fire came.



The commander of the 3rd Bavarian Division afterwards told Crown Prince Rupprecht that his 4.1-inch guns, having been reduced to two by the British counter-battery fire, could not adequately deal with the tempting targets offered by the columns passing over Messines Ridge. Only where the columns came within range of the 4th Bavarian Division's artillery in the south were material losses caused (*i.e.*, in the 12th Brigade and 3rd and New Zealand Divisions).

The bombardment at this juncture was due to the commencement of an extensive German counter-attack. The British patrols, whose task was to seize enemy guns and examine the wire of the Oosttaverne Line, were out in front of the Black Dotted

#### **The Counter-attack**

<sup>86</sup> The same who commanded the 16th Battalion at Pope's Hill in Gallipoli, and later the 14th Brigade. Some time after his return to Australia in 1916, he had obtained leave to return to England in charge of a transport, and had then been appointed to the vacant command of the 52nd. He quickly gained the confidence and affection of the battalion—not fortunate in all its original staff. His thigh was now too badly broken to permit of further service, and his loss was keenly felt.

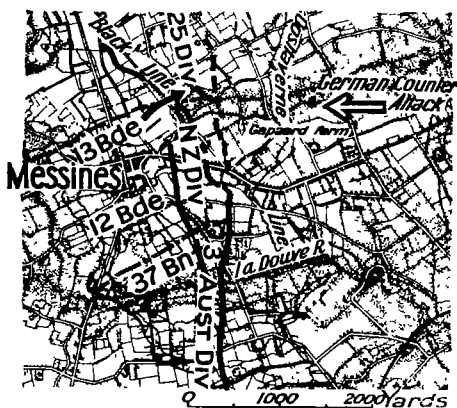
<sup>87</sup> Maj. W. H. Christophers, 50th Bn. Civil servant, of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 11 Nov., 1894.

<sup>88</sup> Capt. C. H. Stubbings, M.C.; 52nd Bn Clerk; of Zeehan, Tasmania; b. Zeehan, 13 Jan., 1892.

Line, the New Zealanders, as would be expected with troops of their mettle, taking particular pains to secure information which might assist the 4th Australian Division's attack in the afternoon. Patrols of the corps cavalry, who tried to move into the same area, suffered sharply, horses and men being at once hit,<sup>89</sup> but the New Zealand patrols moved to "Oxygen Trench," an outlier of the Oosttaverne Line, north of Huns' Walk, and to the Oosttaverne wire which, where they saw it, was well cut.

During the hour before noon, however, not only the patrols but the troops digging on the ridge saw German reinforcements two and a half miles east of Messines, coming along Huns' Walk. By 1 o'clock the head of this movement was close to the Oosttaverne Line at the foot of the ridge, near Deconinck Farm, north of the trees of Gapaard.

Shortly afterwards the first waves were seen moving across the fields to the Oosttaverne Line on the left and centre of the II Anzac front—the very position that was presently to be attacked by the 4th Australian Division, the 37th Battalion, and the 33rd British Brigade. At 1.30 the



German artillery laid a sharp bombardment on both sides of Messines ridge, and at the same time headquarters as far back as corps were informed that the Germans were advancing to counter-attack. Since 9.55 the British artillery had been steadily bombarding the Oosttaverne Line in preparation for the afternoon attack. It now thickened its fire, which about 2.10 p.m. was further intensified by an order for the S.O.S. barrage. The massed

<sup>89</sup> The II Anzac Mounted Regiment lost this day 7 killed and 12 wounded. Cavalry patrols of the IX Corps also found it impossible to carry out their task on horseback.

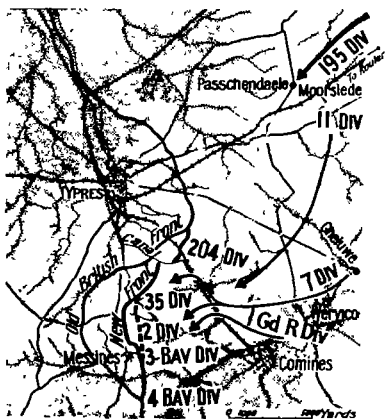
machine-guns behind the ridge joined in. The forward posts of the New Zealand and 25th Divisions opened with heavy rifle and machine-gun fire, and, although in the valley of the Blauwepoortbeek due east of Messines some Germans crossed the Oosttaverne Line, the Black Dotted Line was nowhere reached or approached. By 2.30 the effort was completely spent. Whatever Germans had passed the Oosttaverne Line fell back upon it.

German accounts show that the effort so easily repelled was the main German counter-attack in this battle.

Minor local counter-attacks had already been attempted; although the front-line and support battalions of each of the three regiments of the 3rd Bavarian Division had practically been wiped out in the first and second lines, their reserve battalions in the Oosttaverne Line had made certain efforts to retake the lost ground. About the time when the New Zealanders were emerging from Messines a company of the reserve battalion of the 17th Bavarian I.R. is said to have advanced "to Blauwenmolen," and at 5.45 two more companies followed it. They came into heavy artillery-fire and went to ground. The weakness of this effort may be judged by the fact that it was through, or close in front of, the area of this advance that Lieutenant Hallam of the 49th Battalion led his 14 scouts to Despagne Farm. At 8 o'clock, the artillery-fire being too heavy to be endured in the open, the companies of the 17th Bavarian I.R. had fallen back on the Oosttaverne Line. In the next sector to the south the reserve battalion of the 18th Bavarian I.R. had early sent forward part of one company, which had met the attacking troops and been captured. The rest of the battalion had manned the Oosttaverne Line at Huns' Walk in full strength, and fired at their opponents whom they could see digging in 800 yards away (on the Black Line). Their fire (according to the regimental historian—so is history written) "compelled the English to dig in; this the English did, meanwhile taking off their coats and unsophisticatedly offering their white shirts as a beautiful target for our machine-gun crews." Their "unsophisticated" enemy was the New Zealand Division, possibly the most formidable opponent met by German infantry in the war. These Germans noted that, after its early crippling through the British gas, their own artillery had appeared to revive somewhat, but that its effort did not last; and, when the British bombardment of the Oosttaverne Line began, their own position there also had become precarious. The 17th Bavarian I.R. had sought cover in shell-holes outside the actual trenches, only to be shot at by British airmen as it lay there. Meanwhile the Germans had detected the movement of masses of British troops to renew the attack, and the artillery of the 4th Bavarian Division in the south had been turned upon these, the German infantry also firing at them.

At this highly critical time, about noon, the first troops of the special counter-attack divisions arrived. Three divisions had early been set in motion—the 1st Guard Reserve Division, from Comines, towards the

southern half of the front; and the 7th and 11th Divisions to the central and northern sectors. In addition, the 195th Division of the Ypres Group was ordered to Passchendaele,<sup>90</sup> so as to be nearer, if required. Of these reserves, the 1st Guard Reserve Division was allotted to the commander of the 3rd Bavarian Division (General von Wenninger), responsible for Messines, and he was also given the resting regiment (5th Bavarian R.I.R.) of the 4th Bavarian Division. The 7th Division was given to the commander (General von Hahn) of the 35th Division, north of Wytschaete. By 11 o'clock it was known that both Messines and Wytschaete had been lost, and orders were issued that the 7th and 1st Guard Reserve Divisions should be immediately thrown in to retake them. Crown Prince Rupprecht noted that Wytschaete must "at all costs" be recaptured as the "commanding point."



The forces destined for the southern half of this counter-attack were much the closest to the battlefield,<sup>91</sup> and were the first to arrive. It was the leading troops of the 1st Guard Reserve Division that were seen near Gapaard Farm, and their advent was exceedingly welcome to the remnant of the 17th Bav. I.R. holding on in shell-holes about the Oosttaverne Line. As nothing could be heard of the 7th Division, von Wenninger decided to order the Guard Reserve to attack at once. About 1 o'clock the 1st Guard Reserve Regiment moved to cross the Oosttaverne Line, but so untrained were its troops in open warfare that the brigade commander himself had to point out to company after company the direction he wished them to follow. The reinforcements for the 18th Bavarian I.R. at Huns' Walk were very late in moving to the attack, but at Gapaard the III Battalion, reinforcing the 17th Bavarian I.R., crossed the Oosttaverne Line under protection of fire from the 12th Bavarian Field Artillery Regiment, which, with part of the 1st Guard Reserve Division's own artillery, had come into position.<sup>92</sup>

The reports which afterwards reached the German commanders concerning this attack were extraordinarily inaccurate. It was said to

<sup>90</sup> Then a billeting area, 4½ miles behind the German front in the Ypres sector.

<sup>91</sup> The 1st Guard Reserve Division was about Roncq, between Tourcoing and Wervicq, and the 5th Bav. R.I.R. near Warneton and le Pacau. The 1st G.R.D. had already faced Australian troops this year at Malt Trench and Grevillers.

<sup>92</sup> The Bavarian Official History states that part of the 12th Bav. F.A.R. moved forward with the 1st Guard Reserve Division. The II Abteilung, 1st Guard Reserve F.A.R., opened fire at 1.30 p.m., covering the 1st Guard Reserve Regiment. Through the dust curtain of the British barrage, however, observation was almost impossible.



have reached the eastern edge of Messines, whereas, in fact, it barely crossed the Oostaverne Line, and even the advanced posts on the Black Dotted Line, 1,000 yards east of Messines, were hardly threatened.<sup>93</sup>

Between 2.45 and 3—a little late, owing to the necessity of beating off this counter-attack—the British batteries passed to their rôle of protecting the 3.10 attack on the “Green Line.”

**The afternoon  
attack—(1) at  
Huns' Walk**

South of Huns' Walk they merely intensified their fire, but north of it they brought back their barrage, which screened with its dust the jumping-off line. Behind the dust-curtain the companies of the 12th Brigade that had been temporarily withdrawn,<sup>94</sup> and the 37th Battalion on their right, went forward to their jumping-off positions. The order—which always stirred a suppressed excitement—to “fix bayonets” was given. At the same time over the southern shoulder of Messines Ridge to Huns' Walk came three of the four tanks that were to assist the 12th Brigade.<sup>95</sup> Those to assist the 13th Brigade north of Messines were late, and one became ditched at the crest.

At 3.10 the barrage advanced at the rate of 100 yards in three minutes. The Australians went forward behind it; those of the 47th Battalion, eager as ever to investigate the war's “side-shows,” fell in behind the 12th Brigade's tanks which, they also believed, would rout out the Germans for them to bayonet. Australian infantrymen were always keen for the experience of plunging a bayonet into an enemy; it was the only one of their weapons which, like the sword and spear, gave the power of direct killing; and its use carried a terror of which history, fiction, and army instructors had given them vivid impressions. The tanks at Messines<sup>96</sup> were of a somewhat later model than those whose complete breakdown had wrecked this division at Bullecourt. The more exposed

<sup>93</sup> The retirement of the British and New Zealand patrols then out in front of the Black Dotted Line, or possibly the withdrawal, through artillery-fire, of some post in that line, furnish the only recognisable grounds for the totally inaccurate statement of the Bavarian Official History (*Die Bayern im Grossen Kriege*, p. 388) that the British would not face this attack and left the field in flight.

<sup>94</sup> See p. 613. The photographs of the barrage given in Vol. XII, plates 334-5, were probably taken about this time or during the German counter-attack. (The time given in the captions, “6 p.m.,” is probably wrong.)

<sup>95</sup> The fourth had broken down near Schnitzel Farm

<sup>96</sup> See Vol. XII, plate 338. The tank personnel with the 12th Brigade were 5th Section, 5th Company. The tanks were named “H.M.S. Lucifer,” “Our Emma,” and “Rumblebelly;” “2005” broke down at Schnitzel Farm.

portions of their sides had been made impervious to armour-piercing bullets, and the Queenslanders were satisfied with the way they advanced. The tank officers found only one fault in the Queenslanders—they were apt to get in front of the tanks.

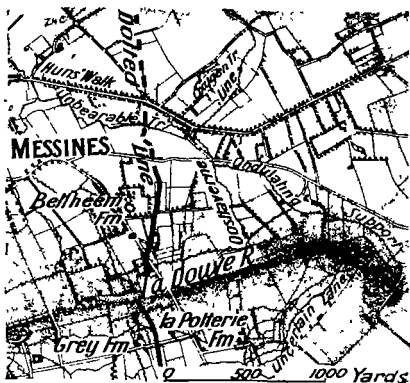
The Oosttaverne Line had probably been barely garrisoned during the morning, but it was certainly well held now along the whole II Anzac front. The advancing lines immediately met a hot rifle and machine-gun fire. Through the dust of the barrage it was impossible as yet to see where this came from, but men were continually hit both in the 37th Battalion south of Huns' Walk, and in the 47th and 45th (12th Brigade) advancing astride and north of that road. Through the dust about 100 Germans were observed advancing from the Oosttaverne Line to its outlier, Oxygen Trench, just north of Huns' Walk. Here the barrage passed over them. A tank came across from Huns' Walk, shelled the trench, and returned. The Germans were cowed by it, and the inner flanks of the 47th and 45th then easily seized the trench, took 120 prisoners, and continued their advance on the Oosttaverne Line.



From German accounts it seems probable that the 45th had here run into the leading waves of the main German counter-attack in the sector of the 18th Bavarian I.R. "At the decisive moment," says the historian of that regiment, "there arrived behind the trenches of the 18th two battalions of the 1st Guard Reserve Regiment and one of the 5th Bavarian R.I.R." Their orders were to recapture Messines. When their counter-attack failed, these troops—the bulk of whom must have been still moving up from the rear—reinforced the 18th in the Oosttaverne Line and behind it.

The sections of the Oosttaverne Line north and south of the Douve formed a particularly complicated system. The German garrisons of Messines and of the sector south of the Douve had been accustomed to use the Douve valley as their avenue of approach for both men and supplies moving to

the front from Warneton. From a point in the valley about half-a-mile on the Warneton side of the Oosttaverne Line, two main communication trenches led up to this line, and through it to the intermediate and front lines: the communication trench on the southern side of the valley ("Uncertain Lane") ran into the Oosttaverne Line at the Potterie Farm; that on the northern side ("Undulating Support") crossed the Oosttaverne Line just south of Huns' Walk.<sup>97</sup> According to the British maps, the Oosttaverne Line north of this communication trench was a double one along the whole front of the 4th Division's attack. Actually, the only parts



of the support trench that had been dug were some 200 yards astride of Huns' Walk, and one or two isolated lengths a mile farther north. The rest had been little more than marked out for digging, or, in some parts, not even marked.

Yet it was this supposed support trench that was the objective for the companies in the second line of the attack. The first-line companies were to take only the front trench. The barrage was to lie on the front trench till 3.30, when the leading companies would seize that trench. The barrage would then fall on the support trench until 3.45, when the second-line companies would capture it. For half-an-hour the guns would throw their fire 300 yards beyond, to protect the troops while they consolidated the position.<sup>98</sup> The artillery would then cease fire in order to allow mounted patrols to go forward. The non-existence of most of the support trench had been noted from air-photographs; and some of the company commanders studying these photographs had also remarked that, although the maps showed hardly a tree in this area, the ground south of Huns' Walk was crossed by

<sup>97</sup> West of the Oosttaverne Line this trench was known as "Unbearable Trench."

<sup>98</sup> The barrage of massed machine-guns would last from 3.10 to 3.30.

many tree-lined hedges. So thick were these that the angle formed by the junctions of the northern communication trench and the Oostaverne Line seemed to be filled by a small wood. In this "scrub" the German garrison and reinforcements were largely screened, but throughout the afternoon there could constantly be seen signs of the German reserves still advancing or being marshalled in the more distant copses.

As the Australians approached the Oostaverne Line, the fire from hedges, trenches, and certain concrete blockhouses became exceedingly severe, and on the left of the 12th Brigade the men had to fling themselves down under fire from machine-guns close ahead. At least four of these blockhouses stood actually in or beside this section of the front Oostaverne trench<sup>99</sup>—one 100 yards south of Huns' Walk, a second at the Walk, and two at wide intervals north of it. Some of them had been visible during the wait on the jumping-off position, and the opposition was not unexpected.

Nevertheless, this was the first experience that Australians had of a new form of fighting, which was henceforth to mark all battles in Flanders. Ludendorff and Hindenburg, seeing that deep dugouts were too often mere traps for their men, had enjoined reliance on superficial concrete shelters (afterwards known among British troops as "pillboxes"<sup>100</sup>). In Flanders the waterlogged nature of the ground also rendered these preferable, and they had been constructed thickly throughout the German lines at Messines and Ypres. Those covered with soil or camouflage had by now been exposed by the bombardment, and on this battlefield, as at Ypres later in the year, most of them lay as bare as toy bricks, scattered over the crater-fields. But, though fairly obvious targets, often easily visible to observers or on air-photographs, they would withstand the direct hit of all but the heaviest shells. Thus the garrison had a good chance of surviving even the heaviest bombardment, and of emerging with its machine-guns as soon as the barrage passed. Some blockhouses were loop-holed so that machine-guns could fire from within; but most

<sup>99</sup> Opposite the 37th Battalion, on the right, this trench was called "Uncanny"; farther north it was known as "Owl" (see *Vol XII, plate 341*).

<sup>100</sup> In the I Anzac records this name appears first on 5 Sept., 1917, in the form "pillar boxes"

were simply rectangular boxes of concrete, blind except for an exit at the rear. At such posts the machine-gunners had to hurry out with their gun, and mount it on the trench parapet, or on a concrete platform beside the blockhouse, or sometimes on the blockhouse roof. If they were quick, their action might hold up the advance in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, the new British platoon organisation was specially devised for fighting such obstacles—the rifle-grenadiers and Lewis gunners being present to cover the riflemen and bombers while these worked round the blockhouse and took it in rear. This method, however, became impossible if the enemy held out in other supporting positions in rear and on the flanks.

The tension accompanying the struggles around these blockhouses—the murderous fire from a sheltered position, followed by the sudden giving-in of the surrounded garrison—caused this year's fighting in Flanders to be marked by a ferocity that renders the reading of any true narrative peculiarly unpleasant. Where such tension exists in battle, the rules of "civilised" war are powerless. Most men are temporarily half-mad, their pulses pounding at their ears, their mouths dry. The noblest among them are straining their wills to keep cool heads and even voices; the less self-controlled are for the time being governed by reckless, primitive impulse. With death singing about their ears, they will kill until they grow tired of killing. When they have been racked with machine-gun fire, the routing out of enemy groups from behind several feet of concrete is almost inevitably the signal for a butchery at least of the first few who emerge, and sometimes even the helplessly wounded may not be spared. It is idle for the reader to cry shame upon such incidents, unless he cries out upon the whole system of war, for this frenzy is an inevitable condition in desperate fighting. The nobler the leaders the more they endeavour to mitigate futile ruthlessness, but ruthlessness is a quality essential in hand-to-hand fighting, and soldiers were deliberately trained to it.

In this, their first introduction to blockhouse fighting, the Australians were not assisted by artillery preparation as elaborate as in the earlier phase of the battle; the Germans, freshly reinforced, were able to stand and fight, and the struggle was especially fierce. When the 47th Battalion was first held up by a blockhouse near Huns' Walk, two Lewis



29. A "PILLBOX" AT MESSINES, SHOWING TWO ENTRANCES (AT GROUND LEVEL), AND THE  
POCKETS ABOVE FOR HOLDING REVOLVER AND OTHER AMMUNITION AND BOMBS

The roof has been camouflaged with netting

*Just II or Memorial Official Photo No E552.  
Taken on 31st July, 1917*



30. HUNS' WALK AND A PILLBOX IN THE OOSTAVERNE LINE NEAR SEPTIÈME BARN, WHERE  
THE 47TH BATTALION ATTACKED ON 7TH JUNE, 1917

*Aust War Memorial Official Photo No E1295.  
Taken on 20th November, 1917*

*To face p 625.*

gunners, each firing from a flank (on the order of Lieutenant Schulz,<sup>101</sup> who had succeeded Captain Davy) ripped the concrete sides of the loop-hole until the machine-gun inside ceased to fire. Some Queenslanders crept past the flanks, and then from the rear poured shot after shot into the garrison huddled inside, so that the shrieking men melted into a groaning heap which gradually fell silent. To make sure that no one was left in the place, the bodies were dragged into the light and lay for days afterwards piled outside.<sup>102</sup>

A second "pillbox" was captured by Lieutenant Bird<sup>103</sup> leading a party round its flank and rushing it from the rear. Farther south, while the barrage was still on the German front line, the left company of the 37th (Victoria),<sup>104</sup> on filing through a gap in some wire half-way to the German trench, had found itself suddenly under machine-gun fire which quickly struck down half the men and all the officers except the company commander, Captain Grieve.<sup>105</sup> To save the company from extermination, Grieve, who could see the machine-gun firing from a loop-holed blockhouse in the trench, signalled to his men to wait in shell-holes while he sought for a Vickers machine-gun and a Stokes mortar which were to have advanced with his company.<sup>106</sup> He found that the trench-mortar crew had been shattered by a heavy German shell which had fallen among them early in the advance, and that the machine-gun and its crew had been hit by the German fire when in the entanglement. The officer in charge of this gun, however, Lieutenant Fraser,<sup>107</sup> himself repaired it with wire cut from the entanglement, but, on his mounting it and trying himself to suppress the German fire, both he and the gun were quickly hit.

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<sup>101</sup> Lieut. J. Schulz, M.C.; 47th Bn. Station hand; of Rockhampton and Aramac, Q'land; b. Rockhampton, 3 Feb., 1894.

<sup>102</sup> The narrative of this fighting is largely based on the exceedingly vivid and detailed diary of Private Galloway, 47th Battalion, who took part. This diary forms an interesting exhibit in the Australian War Memorial.

<sup>103</sup> Lieut. B. R. Bird, M.C.; 47th Bn. Machinist; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 12 Dec., 1891.

<sup>104</sup> According to Colonel Smith's orders, this company should have advanced in the second line, to capture the German support line, but it found itself advancing on the left of the other companies.

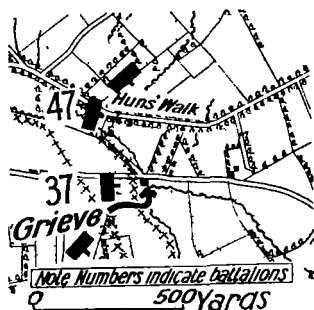
<sup>105</sup> Lieutenants R. K. McDougall and W. B. King were wounded. Lieutenant L. P. Little had been badly gassed in the morning, and had to be sent back before this attack began. (McDougall belonged to Kew, Vic.; King to Abbotsford, Vic.; Little to Melbourne.)

<sup>106</sup> Grieve was to have placed these in a strong-post just behind his objective.

<sup>107</sup> Lieut. A. J. Fraser, M.C.; 10th M.G. Coy. Dairy student; of Kyneton, Vic.; b. Melbourne, 20 Aug., 1892.



Grieve thereupon decided himself to attack the German machine-gun. Its arc of fire was limited by the loop-hole through which it was shooting. Grieve, taking with him a bag of bombs, and throwing one every now and then in the direction of the loop-hole, was able to rush forward, a few shell-holes at a time, under cover of the dust raised by the explosions. He was helped by the fact that the burst of each bomb also caused the German gunners to cease fire for a moment. Having thus safely passed through the ground covered by the gun's fire, he made his way into the German trench, which, when he entered it, was empty, all Germans in the neighbourhood being still under shelter from the British bombardment. Another bomb thrown close to the loop-hole caused the machine-gunners in the blockhouse to cease fire, and taking advantage of this silence Grieve went up to the loop-hole and rolled two more through the opening. After waiting for the bursts, he walked to the dugout entrance, and found the crew lying killed or wounded around their gun.



Grieve now signalled to his company, which came up and occupied the trench. To the east Germans could be seen making to the rear down their communication trench. A Lewis gunner, Private Babington,<sup>108</sup> laid his gun on this trench in enfilade and shot them down. Grieve, whose action at a crucial moment had its effect on the success of the day,<sup>109</sup> was still standing on the parapet, signalling to part of his thin line<sup>110</sup> to come up on the flank of the 47th, who could be seen 300 yards away at Huns' Walk, when he was badly wounded by a sniper. On his right Lieutenant Stubbs's company had rushed the trench as soon as the barrage lifted, and took there about 80 prisoners.<sup>111</sup> The first Oosttaverne trench, so far as

<sup>108</sup> L/Cpl. W. E. Babington (No. 228; 37th Bn.). Dairyman; of Stacey's Bridge, Vic.; b. Trentham, Vic., 22 Sept., 1891. Killed in action, 8 June, 1917.

<sup>109</sup> He was awarded the Victoria Cross.

<sup>110</sup> He had now only some 40 men to cover 250 yards

<sup>111</sup> While settling these prisoners temporarily in shell-holes for their own safety, Lieutenant Stubbs was wounded

it lay within this part of the objective, was thus captured. From the right could be seen in the distance the factories around Lille; nearer were several German batteries, limbering up their guns and retiring. To Grieve, as he made his way to the rear, it seemed as if the chance for open warfare, for which his men had so long been trained, had come at last.

The immediate task, however, according to the plans, was for the support companies to move through and seize the supposed support trench, 200 yards away, beyond another two hedges. But in the stiff fighting to gain the front trench the organisation of the 47th had been broken. Its right front company had lost all its officers killed or mortally wounded,<sup>112</sup> and it was under the leadership of surviving officers of the second company that the front trench had been taken. These officers still directed and controlled, as far as they could, the men around them, but the fight near Huns' Walk became a thorough *mêlée*. With the maddened Australians drawing closer to them from the front, and the barrage now churning the dust behind, many of the Germans still in this area became panic-stricken, and, as the troops approached, fell on their bellies with cries of "Mercy!", "Kamerad!", or flung themselves down to embrace the men's knees. Others bolted, and the sight of them was too much for the pent-up feelings of the attacking troops, who, despite their officers' attempts at restraint, every now and then rose and rushed forward after the fugitives. A few incidents are recorded. Two men of the 37th attempted to bomb a machine-gun firing from a concrete shelter.<sup>113</sup> One of the two was hit, but the other, Private McCarthy,<sup>114</sup> running behind what cover he could get, worked round the place and thrust a bomb through a loop-hole in the side. Its explosion was followed by a minute's silence, and then the gun resumed its fire. McCarthy at once put a bomb through the loop-hole in front, and destroyed the crew.

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<sup>112</sup> Captain J. W. Millar (Perth, W. Aust.), Lieutenant G. N. M. Goode (Orange, N.S.W., and Southport, Tas.), and Lieutenant W. S. Dixon (Boggabri, N.S.W., and Brisbane)

<sup>113</sup> At this point the Germans were routed from a building known as "Septieme Barn," beside Huns' Walk. Here, or in a shelter near it, was the power plant supplying electric light to the German "dugout" system.

<sup>114</sup> Cpl P. McCarthy, D.C.M. (No. 6049, 37th Bn) Miner, of Eaglehawk Vic., b Birchip, Vic., 8 June, 1893. Killed in action, 12 Oct., 1917

Making headway against such difficulties south of the Walk, the 37th and 47th rushed the enemy from hedge to hedge. A mixed force from the flanks of both battalions reached and occupied the fragment of support line astride of Huns' Walk. North of this trench the country was open, and, protected by the barrage, the left of the 47th under Captain Williams<sup>115</sup> advanced swiftly. As the rear company, which was to seize the Oosttaverne "support line," had suffered heavily, Williams took forward his whole force to that position, the Germans fleeing ahead of him. Here, although his last officer, Lieutenant C. H. King,<sup>116</sup> was now hit, Williams took position in shell-holes along the trace of the support trench. Close beyond him lay a small hedged field, screening with its trees a "pillbox."

On this side of Huns' Walk the tanks had been of much assistance in the first stage of the attack, cowing the enemy and making useful tracks through the wire; but at about 4 o'clock they began to turn back. One, commanded by Lieutenant Vans Agnew,<sup>117</sup> stayed on Huns' Walk until 4.20, and might now have greatly helped had not the camouflage packed on its roof caught fire. Agnew climbed up there and, seated on top in the open, with the admiring infantry looking on, fought the fire with a pyrene extinguisher and saved his tank.

The infantry had thenceforward to fight its way unassisted, but south of the road a whirlwind advance continued. Except at the Walk itself, practically no trace of the "support trench" here existed, but some 300 yards south-east of this the Australians reached a shrubbery in which there was wild shooting into every bush, and routing out of prisoners almost too numerous to be controlled. Some of the enemy were firing from a hedge a few yards farther on, and a machine-gun was found in action near one of the bushes. Its two gunners could not aim all ways at once, and the advancing line quickly lapped round them, yet they kept the gun firing until the Australians shot them at a yard's range. The troops now

<sup>115</sup> Capt. E. O. Williams, M.C.; 47th Bn. Farmer; of Leven, Tas.; b. Forth, Tas., 28 May, 1882.

<sup>116</sup> Of the second line company. Its commander, Lieutenant D. F. Salmon, and Lieutenants F. F. Campbell and A. R. Walker lost their lives in this battle. (King belonged to Maryborough, Q'land; Salmon to Rockhampton, Q'land; Campbell to Cygnet, Tas.; and Walker to Toowoomba, Q'land.)

<sup>117</sup> Capt. F. Vans Agnew, M.C.; 2nd Regt., King Edward's Horse, and Royal Tank Corps. Mining assayer; of Falmouth, Cornwall, Eng.; b. Chitoor, India, 28 Apr., 1868.

found themselves faced by a farm building from near which two machine-guns were firing. Both were captured, and the farm—apparently that known to the Germans as “Nesselhof,” and to the 47th afterwards as “Hun House”—was taken.<sup>118</sup>

It had served as a German battalion headquarters, and from one of its buildings fluttered the red cross flag of a German aid post. Covered by his men, an Australian officer moved to the door and beckoned to the inmates. As they began to come out he was shot through the shoulder. The Australians behind him, thinking that the shot came from the building, would have killed every



man in it, but the officer, though in much pain, stood in their way and they had to allow 30 unwounded Germans to troop out and move off unhurt as prisoners.

No active enemy could now be seen close by. But from the dense trees around “Steignast Farm,” 400 yards ahead, and from the wooded valley of the Douve further south, came machine-gun fire, and Germans were seen there re-forming. The barrage had died away.<sup>119</sup> The few surviving leaders agreed to take position along the next hedge. The troops made for it, sharply fired at from the distant trees, and there the advance near Huns’ Walk ended. The Germans had been completely routed from this important sector, but the advanced troops were out of touch on both flanks. The maps omitted many landmarks, and the officer then in charge believed that his men were on their objective, but they seem actually to have been 250 yards beyond it.

<sup>118</sup> German unit historians are obviously unaware of any fighting in this quarter, and the Australian staff did not realise that its infantry had gone so far. But the detailed description in Private Gallwey’s diary clearly applies to this farm and to no other. In other respects, his account of incidents within his actual view has been confirmed, and his evidence on this point is therefore accepted.

<sup>119</sup> It was to stop at 4.15 to allow mounted patrols to go forward. It need hardly be said that this arrangement was entirely impracticable: these patrols could not get there, and, if they had arrived, could not have gone forward on horseback.

Far to their right rear the second-line company of the 37th, under Captain Symons (of Lone Pine fame), and an attached company of the 40th under Captain Giblin,<sup>120</sup> had precisely carried out their duty of forming the flank of the Green Line, slightly withdrawn to join the flank of the 9th Brigade south of the stream. In their advance up the valley Giblin's Tasmanians had met fire from the Potterie, south of the river, and from a small two-storey blockhouse near the Douve bridge. A number, including Giblin himself, were hit, but the machine-gunners in the blockhouse ran before the troops reached them, and the 37th and 40th began to dig—as air-photographs afterwards showed—exactly on the line intended.<sup>121</sup> South of the Douve the northern flank of the 34th Battalion (9th Brigade) had already been swung up into line by Captain Whitlock.<sup>122</sup>

North of Huns' Walk the southern flank of the 45th under Captain Allen<sup>123</sup> found the first Oostaverne trench protected by thick wire, practically uncut,<sup>124</sup> and behind this a strong blockhouse held up the attack. Captain Allen's company worked round the wire, and Lieutenant Muir,<sup>125</sup> making his way

**(2) In the  
Blauwepoortbeek  
Valley**

<sup>120</sup> Major L. F. Giblin, D S O , M C ; 40th Bn. Fruit grower, of Hobart; later Acting Commonwealth Government Statistician; b. Hobart, 29 Nov., 1872.

<sup>121</sup> Close in front of them beside the rivulet lay a tree-lined enclosure from which a machine-gun fired, rendering the work exceedingly dangerous. Sergeant T. G. Cranswick (of Stanley) took forward his platoon by small parties to suppress this fire. Finding that the machine-gun was in a blockhouse on the nearer edge of the trees, he ordered his rifle-grenadiers to place a barrage around it while a party worked behind the place and rushed it, killing the crew and capturing the gun. Two other machine-guns found to be firing from the northern and southern edges of the same trees were rushed, the one near the river-bank by a party under Corporal S. J. Barrett (of Beaconsfield; killed in action, 12 Oct., 1917), and the other by Private T. Davidson (of Campbell Town). Davidson, though seen by the enemy and wounded, made his way into the sunken road from which the gun was firing and shot down its crew.

<sup>122</sup> Whitlock had not been punctually informed of the two hours' postponement, and, after waiting until 1.40 for the barrage to fall, had gone forward without it. The message as to the new "zero" hour reached him as his men were digging in on their objective. He asked that the artillery should be warned not to fire on his line. Whether or not his message arrived in time, his company maintained its line. (Capt. A. S. Whitlock, 34th Bn. Member of Aust. Permanent Forces; of Camperdown, N.S.W.; b. Wandsworth, Surrey, Eng., 3 July, 1880. Killed in action, 8 June, 1917.)

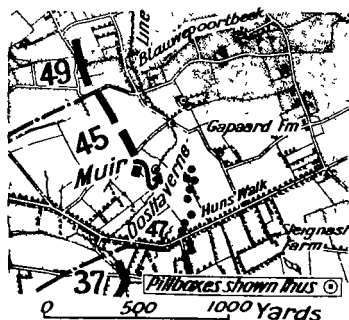
In the available German accounts, Whitlock's advance is interpreted as an attack on the Oostaverne Line south of the Douve, including the Potterie "Until late at night," according to the Bavarian Official History (*Die Bayern im Grossen Kriege*, p. 388), "the fight flowed hither and thither." Crown Prince Rupprecht is under the impression that the Potterie Farm had been lost and was retaken. The fact is that the Oostaverne Line south of the Douve and for 500 yards north of it was not, and was not intended to be, attacked.

<sup>123</sup> Brigadier A. S. Allen, D S O , V.D.; 45th Bn. Commands 16th Inf. Bde., A.I.F., 1939. Audit Clerk, of Hurstville, N.S.W.; b. Hurstville, 10 March, 1894.

<sup>124</sup> Even a week later, when the position was well behind the British line, Captain R. W. Jones of the 14th asked that this obstacle should be cut.

<sup>125</sup> Lieut. A. R. Muir, M.C., 45th Bn. Engineering student, of Stanmore, N.S.W.; b. Homebush, N.S.W., 4 March, 1895. Killed in action, 13 Oct., 1917.

along the trench from the south, flung bombs into the blockhouse door and routed the enemy out.<sup>126</sup> Allen then pushed on to the "support trench" on the flank of the 47th. But opposite the northern flank of the 45th the line dipped into the first of a series of small gullies that ran down the eastern slope of Messines Ridge. Low in this valley (that of the Blauwepoortbeek), and invisible from Allen's position, were the ruins of a farm which, like other scattered buildings along the Oosttaerne Line, had been used by the German artillery for gun-positions. In this homestead and orchard were several concrete shelters for gun-crews, and another for a field-gun. Beside the same trench on the northern side of the valley was a row of four concrete shelters for guns as well as several for men.



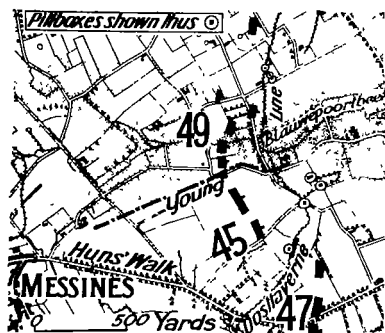
On these blockhouses most of the German reinforcements who had counter-attacked up the valley at 2 o'clock had fallen back; and, as the southern battalion (49th) of the 13th Brigade and the northern companies (45th Battalion) of the 12th Brigade swept into the valley, they met intense resistance. These companies of the 45th (New South Wales) were to keep their left along a road which happened to lead straight to the ruined farm. Their commander, Captain Young,<sup>127</sup> had promised Lieutenant-Colonel Herring that he would see to this, and, though wounded during the wait on Messines Ridge, he led the 45th's flank along the road in face of the withering fire from this nest of Germans. Captain Hand<sup>128</sup> of the second-line company, which presently closed up to the first, sent word to headquarters that his troops could get no farther, and that a field-gun was blazing at it from 300 yards away. No officer of the leading company returned, but

<sup>126</sup> Twenty prisoners and two machine-guns were captured there.

<sup>127</sup> Capt. W. L. Young, M.C.; 45th Bn. Softgoods warehouseman; of Rainbow, Vic., and Newcastle, N.S.W.; b. Dimboola, Vic., 1891. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

<sup>128</sup> Capt. J. A. Hand, 45th Bn. Plate-layer; of Wyong, N.S.W.; b. Penrith, N.S.W., 8 June, 1890.

two days later Captain Young was found dead beside the road, and not far from him lay his juniors, Lieutenants Garling<sup>129</sup> and Ryan.<sup>130</sup> Every sergeant in the company, except two, was killed, and those two were wounded.<sup>131</sup> The 49th (Queensland), which advanced past Despagne Farm down the bottom and the northern slope of the same valley, met murderous fire, and barely reached the German entanglement. Every company commander was killed.<sup>132</sup>



The 52nd, the left battalion of the 13th Brigade and of the 4th Division, was intended to attack down the spur between the Blauwepoortbeek and the next stream on the north, the Wambeek. On its left was to be the 33rd British Brigade of the 11th Division, whose attack, as we have seen, was to be assisted on the north by the 57th Brigade from the 19th Division.<sup>133</sup> But, when the 52nd Battalion reached its tapes on the ridge, the battalion (6th Lincolnshire) which should have been on its flank was not there; nor could patrols, which were at once sent out, find any sign of it before the start. A quarter of a mile to the north a body of British troops was seen, but they informed a patrol that they knew nothing of the Lincolnshire and intended to go straight to their own objective.

In these circumstances the senior company commander, Captain Arthur Maxwell, a giant young veteran of Anzac, who with his brother had fought with distinction at Mouquet

<sup>129</sup> Lieut. L. Garling, 45th Bn. Bank accountant; of Cremorne, N.S.W.; b. Camden, N.S.W., 15 Oct., 1881. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

<sup>130</sup> Lieut. C. F. Ryan, 45th Bn. Labourer; of Wellin Grove, N.S.W., b. Emma-ville, N.S.W., 1 Nov., 1886. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

<sup>131</sup> The company eventually came out with 2 corporals, 2 lance-corporals, and 19 privates.

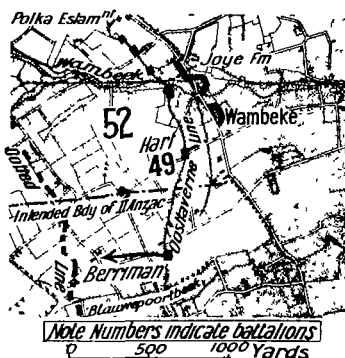
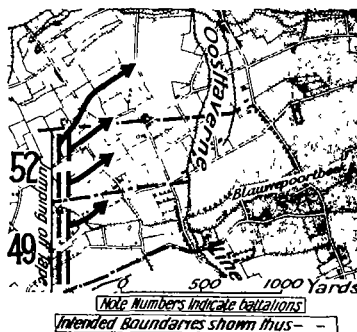
<sup>132</sup> Captains H. W. J. Rhead, F. B. Kay, F. H. Bridgman, and H. G. Selwyn-Smith. In the two southern companies Lieutenants K. C. McKie, A. J. Gledhill, L. McP. Heron, and W. E. Butler were wounded. McKie died of his wounds. (Rhead belonged to Rockhampton, Q'land; Kay to Brisbane, Q'land, and Christchurch, N.Z.; Bridgman to Pittsworth, Q'land; Selwyn-Smith to Beaudesert, Q'land; McKie to Brisbane; Gledhill to Oakey, Q'land, and Melbourne; Heron to Petersham, N.S.W.; and Butler to Villeneuve, Q'land.)

<sup>133</sup> The troops who had taken the 19th Division's Black Line (see p. 615).

Farm, extended a platoon of his company over part of the vacant front to protect the flank and to clear the ground of Germans, who would otherwise be left behind the battalion. When the advance started and he saw that the company in front of him was meeting only a few sniping shots, Maxwell led his whole company out across the uncovered front, heading north-eastwards into the Wambeek Valley. As they passed through the hedges they came here and there upon

large concrete shelters for guns' crews, from which 80 Germans or more were routed out and captured without resistance. Heading across to fill the gap, Maxwell led his company to the Oosttaverne Line south of the Wambeek. Any Germans who had been holding it had fled, and, under the protective barrage, Maxwell distributed the companies along both trenches. Only a fraction of the support trench existed, but, where it was absent, the troops were lined along the Wambeke-Oosttaverne road and the farmhouses bordering it, the flanks being thrown back to the first trench ("Odour Trench"), as shown in the marginal sketch. Northwards the line was extended along this trench by a couple of posts, and beyond these a patrol was maintained as far as "Polka Estaminet" on the outskirts of Oosttaverne.

The 52nd thus occupied, though with dangerous extension, the whole objective of the 33rd British Brigade. Farther north, as far as could be seen, the Oosttaverne Line seemed at this stage to be empty. On the other flank the southern companies of the 52nd had





—as was almost inevitable—swung north-eastwards with Maxwell, and with them swerved the 49th. A widening gap had thus opened between the 12th and 13th Brigades. This accident had brought one advantage—the 52nd, moving into the Wambeek valley, escaped the withering fire that met the attack down the Blauwepoortbeek; but a great part of the Blauwepoortbeek had been left uncovered. At the top of the spur between the valleys the extreme left of the 49th, under Captain Kay<sup>184</sup> (who was killed there) and Lieutenant Hart,<sup>185</sup> entered the first trench on the flank of the 52nd; but for 1,000 yards south of them the Oostaverne Line on both slopes of the valley was untaken. A party of the 49th under Lieutenant Berriman<sup>186</sup> had held on for a time in the entanglement of the German line, and Berriman on patrolling found part of the trench on the northern side of the Blauwepoortbeek empty. But as his party was exposed and useless in its first position,<sup>187</sup> he withdrew it to a house 300 yards in rear, from which he could to some extent guard the gap by firing down the valley.

The early cessation of the barrage (to allow the intended exit of mounted patrols) left only half-an-hour for quiet consolidation. But the spacing out of troops along so extended a frontage took time, and they had barely begun to dig when the artillery-fire ceased and sniping shots began to be felt, especially from two farms just beyond the line on which Maxwell had placed the 52nd. Lieutenant Chalmers,<sup>188</sup> while stationing his post near Joye Farm, was killed. Captain Anderson<sup>189</sup> was mortally wounded. Most of the shots came from Van Hove Farm on the Oostaverne spur, a little beyond the northern flank of the 52nd. About this time Maxwell, searching the country to his left rear for the British troops who should be arriving, came on a few of the 9th Gloucestershire belonging to the 57th Brigade, and, about 5 o'clock, also

<sup>184</sup> Capt. F. B. Kay, 49th Bn. Architect; of Brisbane, Q'land, and Christchurch, N.Z.; b. Christchurch, 29 Aug., 1892. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

<sup>185</sup> Lieut. B. Hart, M.C.; 49th Bn. Architectural draughtsman; of Brisbane, b. Brisbane, 6 Oct., 1895.

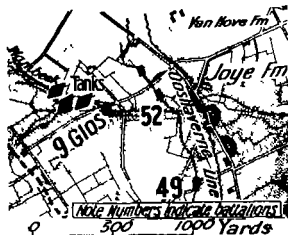
<sup>186</sup> Lieut. F. P. Berriman, M.C.; 49th Bn. Bank official, of Prospect, S. Aust., b. North Adelaide, 31 Dec., 1891.

<sup>187</sup> Lieutenant J. H. Tritton (Richmond, Q'land) reached him there, but was wounded at close range by a German, whom he then shot with his revolver.

<sup>188</sup> Lieut. C. E. A. Chalmers, 52nd Bn. Accountant; of Bellerive, Tas.; b. Hobart, 11 May, 1882. Killed in action, 7 June, 1917.

<sup>189</sup> Son of the Bishop of Riverina. (Capt. R. Anderson, 52nd Bn. Grazier; of Hay, N.S.W.; b. West Maitland, N.S.W., 15 Oct., 1892. Died of wounds, 8 June, 1917.)

found a platoon of the Worcestershire halted some way back in the Wambeek valley. Here, too, were three of the IX Corps' tanks, which had come past the north of Wytschaete.<sup>140</sup> Maxwell asked the tanks and the Gloucestershire to go out and seize Van Hove Farm. The tanks moved at once, the first, a "male," firing its six-pounder gun at the farm to scare the Germans, and a second, a "female" (*i.e.*, armed with machine-guns only), leading forward the infantry. Two companies of the 6th Border Regiment (the first troops of the 33rd Brigade seen by Maxwell<sup>141</sup>) came up at this time with their adjutant, and appear to have taken part in this attack. The Germans were driven out, and the farm was occupied.<sup>142</sup>



It is now known that the heat and strain of the march, especially over the broken ground near Wytschaete, had been too much for the 33rd Brigade. As has been seen,<sup>143</sup> the time for its start, as ordered by the 16th Division, was dangerously late, but at 1.15 verbal orders arrived that, "as the enemy was demoralised and surrendering freely," the march must be pushed on "without any regard for the distress of the troops." As the rest of the brigade was behind time, the 7th South Staffordshire, originally the brigade reserve, were ordered to push on with the 6th Lincolnshire; but when the attack started the foremost battalion commanders were still behind the ridge, and had only a few companies with them, the rest of the troops being out of touch with them, and in some cases completely lost. The leading companies, although late, went forward, but, finding other troops ahead, most of them halted on the slope and tried to get touch with

<sup>140</sup> They belonged to No. 2 Company. The 13th Brigade's own tanks (No. 6 Section of No. 5 Company) were late. One was ditched on the Messines crest and two near the jumping-off line at Despagne Farm. The fourth went to the right of Oxygen Trench, which, however, had already been captured. This tank was struck by a shell on its way back.

<sup>141</sup> It is possible, however, that a few of the 7th South Staffordshire had already arrived. They helped to rout some Germans out of the houses on the Wambeke-Oosttaverne road, and afterwards withdrew to "Mahieu Farm."

<sup>142</sup> Maxwell was unaware that the 6th Border attacked the farm. There is no doubt, however, that it was occupied by men of that battalion under Captain J. W. Hood, and was held till dusk by troops under Lieutenant J. H. Mann. (Hood belonged to Edinburgh; Mann to Walsingham, Surrey, Eng.)

<sup>143</sup> PP. 614-5.

the rest of their battalions.<sup>144</sup> At nightfall the brigade was still unorganised, its battalion headquarters and separate companies being sprinkled about the eastern slope, unaware, in many cases, of each other's position.

In spite of these mishaps the main part of the Oostaverne Line was in the Second Army's possession, exactly half the battle-front — from the southern flank to near Oostaverne—being held by Australian troops. In this sector there was only one portion of the objective uncaptured — the 1,000 yards across the Blauwepoortbeek valley. Australian commanders then and afterwards expressed regret that the afternoon attack had not been made at the original hour, 1.10, before the German reinforcements came up.<sup>145</sup> But, as events proved, General



Plumer was wise in ordering the two hours' postponement. Even with "zero" at 3.10, the 57th Brigade was only just in time with its attack, and the 33rd Brigade was too late. It is not too much to say that the attack on the Oostaverne Line was saved from probable failure by two circumstances—first, the postponement of the hour, and, second, the action of the young Tasmanian, Captain Maxwell, in filling the gap, clearing out the Germans who would otherwise have been in rear of the advancing troops, securing the vacant front, and holding it until the British centre came up.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Part of one company of the 7th South Staffordshire pushed on to Wambeke, but, finding the Australians there with some of the 9th Gloucestershire, withdrew to Mahieu Farm.

<sup>145</sup> Even the Potterie Farm, though not included in the day's objectives, could easily have been taken at the first rush.

<sup>146</sup> This practically agrees with a generous acknowledgment of Maxwell's services sent in by the commander of the 33rd Brigade after the battle.