CHAPTER XI

OPENING OF THE OFFENSIVE AND THE MOVE TO MESSINES.

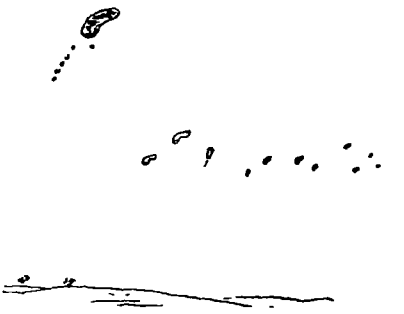
THE preparatory bombardment with which the Somme battle began was one unexampled in previous warfare.[1] It was planned to last for five days, and extended with some intensity not only to the enemy's foremost and intermediate lines, but also to a great part of his second system. Localities which were judged to be of importance were methodically pounded. On one day, for example, the villages were shelled, every gun and howitzer firing rapidly for twelve minutes with high-explosive, and this being followed by bursts of shrapnel to destroy any men who might then be exposed like ants upon a disturbed ant-heap. On another day all the enemy's known batteries were shelled. By the use of shrapnel, lanes were cut through distant wire-entanglements, while the nearer ones were battered down, trench after trench destroyed, and communications blocked. At intervals, partly in order to puzzle the enemy, and partly as a rehearsal, the British artillery laid down the same curtain of shell-fire that would cover the actual infantry attack, the field-guns placing a whirlwind of shrapnel on the enemy's front line, while the 6-inch howitzers fired on targets farther back and the 8- and 9-inch howitzers on a line more distant still, the whole artillery thus creating a barrage of 800 yards in depth. After resting upon the front area, this tremendous curtain would suddenly be advanced on to the lines farther in rear, as if to allow the infantry to attack. Under cover of this fire, small bodies of troops in some parts actually did advance, raid the enemy trenches, and return. On other occasions—it being judged that the Germans, expecting attack when the barrage lifted, would come out of their shelter and man the trenches—the barrage was suddenly laid down again upon the front line, in order to

[1] This and subsequent bombardments could be distinctly heard in Kent, Surrey, Essex, and, when other sounds were hushed, from the higher parts of London.

inflict loss and deter the enemy from quickly leaving his shelter. During two days of the bombardment rain fell, making it impossible to observe the shooting, and it was accordingly decided to spread the artillery preparation over seven days. The result was a slackening of its intensity. The reports of the guns, though never ceasing for more than a second or two, were not continuous, and, though the wide area under bombardment was never free from the bursts of the Allied shells, the fire—on the British front at least—was scattered, reminding an Australian who saw it of the slow bombardment preceding the assault on Lone Pine in Gallipoli. Nevertheless, on that part of the front which was to be most seriously attacked—the sector from the Ancre southwards—the earthern walls of the enemy's forward trenches were practically everywhere blown or shaken down and the area immediately around the front turned into something like a sea of shell-craters. The German dugouts, however, were too far below the surface to be affected, and even their entrances in the trench-walls and the staircase-shafts leading down to them were seldom smashed.

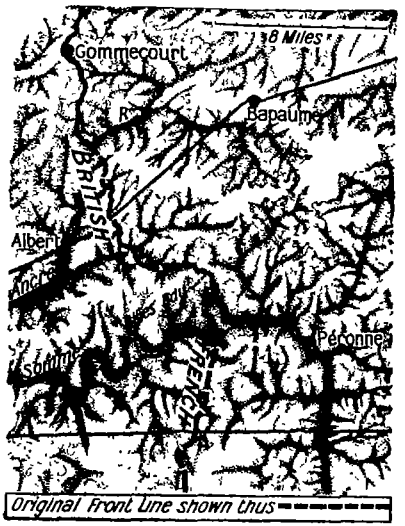
As between the German and British Armies, this bombardment marked the definite turning of the balance of superiority in artillery against the Germans. The immense military preparation with which Germany had begun the war had at last been overtaken by the civilian effort of Great Britain, supported by huge purchases in America; and British troops, who for so long had been forced to endure, without adequate reply, the weight of German gun-power, were henceforth in an ever-increasing measure able to throw preponderating bombardments upon their adversaries. A somewhat similar reversal of conditions occurred in the air. With the beginning of the bombardment, an air-offensive was also undertaken. On June 25th and the following days British and French aeroplanes attacked the line of balloons which, till then, had been almost continuously stationed behind the German front, and, by setting a number of them on fire with incendiary bullets, caused their almost complete disappearance from the Somme area. Thenceforth in that sector the sky in rear of the British line was almost daily fringed with a line of from ten

to twenty stationary balloons, while on the German side few were visible, and they far in rear and venturing only nervously into the air, ready to be withdrawn upon the approach of any Allied aeroplane.



British balloons on the Somme battlefield. (*From diary of Official War Correspondent, 7 July, 1916.*)

At 6.25 a.m. on July 1st the scattered shell-fire was suddenly intensified into a tempestuous concentrated bombardment, directed mainly upon the enemy's front system. In some of those sectors in which No-Man's Land was wide, the infantry scrambled out to approach the German trenches under cover of this fire. At 7.22 the new Stokes mortars opened with a rapid rate of fire, augmenting the storm which descended on the enemy's front line. At 7.30, after five minutes of hurricane bombardment, the firing of two huge mines at La Boisselle and others elsewhere,[2] and the emission of dense clouds of white smoke, the infantry was launched—the British on a front of fifteen and a half miles from Gommecourt, north of the Ancre, to near Maricourt, a mile north of the Somme, and the French between that point and the



[2] At 7.28 four mines were fired at La Boisselle—one (by the Bapaume road) containing 40,000 lb. of ammonal, another (south of the village) 80,000 lb., and two smaller. (*See Vol. XII, plate 199.*) A big mine on "Hawthorn Ridge," north of the Ancre, was, after anxious consideration, fired at 7.20. It was subsequently held that the explosion of mines before an action was attended by disadvantages almost—if not quite—as great as the advantages.

Amiens-St. Quentin road, some six miles south of the river. The British with thirteen divisions attacked five German divisions,[3] and the French with five attacked three.[4] South of the river, where the Germans, although the bombardment had been terrific, were expecting little more than a demonstration, the infantry of the French I Colonial Army Corps, with characteristic impetuosity and after thorough and intelligent training, penetrated both German lines, with the result that, for some hours at least, it appeared to both sides possible that a break-through by the French troops into the open country behind the last line of German defences might be imminent. The German command in this sector hastily withdrew its troops, highly strained by the bombardment, to a line close in front of Péronne.[5]

Immediately north of the Somme also, the early reports indicated that the first German line had everywhere been entered. Between that river and the Ancre, on the wide undulating tongue of rising land along which the main British thrust was to be directed, the troops of the "New Army" were probably assisted by the fact that the enemy had been partly deceived into believing that the main front of attack extended much farther north than was actually the case.[6] Especially in the southern half of that tongue, south of the Albert-Bapaume road, where the objectives had, upon Haig's insistence, been extended so as to give the British offensive the same direction as that of the French,[7] the troops at an early hour penetrated to their objective, the "green line," at Montauban and Contalmaison. North of the Bapaume road, where the German second line was to have been reached,[8] the 36th (Ulster) Division—undoubtedly one of the finest in the British Army—boldly crossing No-Man's Land during the preliminary bombardment, reached the German trenches

[3] Falkenhayn says five (*General Headquarters, 1914-1916, and Its Critical Decisions, p. 262*). Six, however, were identified by the British (*Sir Douglas Haig's Command,* by Dewar and Boraston, *p. 117*).

[4] The Germans had also four divisions in support or reserve in the Somme area, the British six, and the French more. The Allies had thus concentrated over thirty divisions in the Somme area against twelve of the Germans.

[5] Falkenhayn implies that the local German staff lost its head. (*General Headquarters, 1914-1916, and Its Critical Decisions, p. 265*).

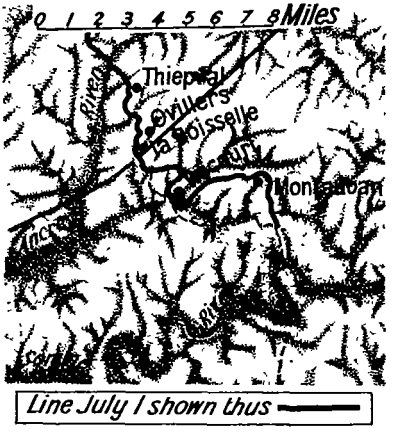
[6] The Germans might otherwise have concentrated here their reserves and artillery. As it was, the main concentration of their artillery was farther north.

[7] *See pp. 237 and 238 (footnote).*

[8] The objectives are described on *pp. 238-239.*

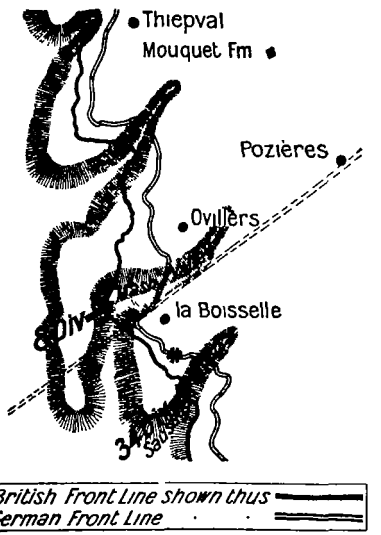
north of Thiepval before the enemy machine-gunners could emerge, and, impetuously following close on the heels of the bombardment, easily overran the enemy's front and intermediate systems, and would probably have captured its objective, part of his second line, had it not in over-eagerness pushed on into the fire of its own guns.[9] At Thiepval itself the 15th Lancashire Fusiliers of the 32nd Division captured part of the front line without difficulty, and, leaving sentries over the dugouts in which there were still many Germans, pushed on beyond the ruins of the village.

In and between these several points of success, however, lay six ruined villages; and, although the two on the right, Montauban and Mametz, were captured, the four others in the centre and left, Fricourt, La Boisselle, Ovillers-la-Boisselle, and Thiepval, were not. Mere heaps of rubble, but with the cellars strengthened with steel and concrete and connected with a rabbit warren of deep dugouts, they stood out like promontories against the advancing flood, which penetrated between them. La Boisselle, close to the Bapaume road, was not to be assaulted in the first instance, but "contained," the attackers sweeping past it on either side, while the village was left to be subsequently dealt with by bombing parties. It had been hoped that both La Boisselle and Ovillers would have been rendered untenable by the bombardment, which had been directed on them for that reason with special severity. But, in spite of the explosion of the two



[9] The 36th seized the "Schwaben Redoubt," north of Thiepval, and pushed on towards the "Stuff Redoubt" in the second line without waiting for the bombardment to lengthen. An officer's patrol also moved southwards along the Switch Line towards the German second line at Mouquet Farm, and reported the trench empty.

immense mines at La Boisselle, the German machine-gunners stood to their posts with admirable gallantry. The attacking divisions on this sector were those of the III corps, which had held the front at Armentières before the arrival of the Australians. Of these, the 8th Division north of the road, crossing the wide No-Man's Land of "Mash Valley" towards Ovillers, with the machine-guns of La Boisselle shooting into its flank, continued to advance until its lines had so dwindled that it had to be withdrawn from the battle that night and sent to another front. South of the 8th the Tyneside troops of the 34th, whom the Australians had relieved at Bois Grenier, simply charged through the fire of German machine-gun posts in "Sausage Valley," south of La Boisselle; remnants succeeded in establishing posts in the chalky crater of the "great mine,"[10] and even penetrated to Contalmaison. But La Boisselle itself, protected by a terrific barrage and attacked only by a handful of bombers, remained in German hands; and north of it as far as the Ancre, except for a mere foothold near Ovillers, no permanent progress was made. The successes of the 36th and part of the 32nd Divisions were isolated. In the rest of the area the German machine-gunners had succeeded in setting up their guns in the crater-field before the attacking infantry reached them. The Fusiliers at Thiepval were cut off and captured, and, north of it, the Ulster division was forced to retire, losing 5,500 men in a single day.



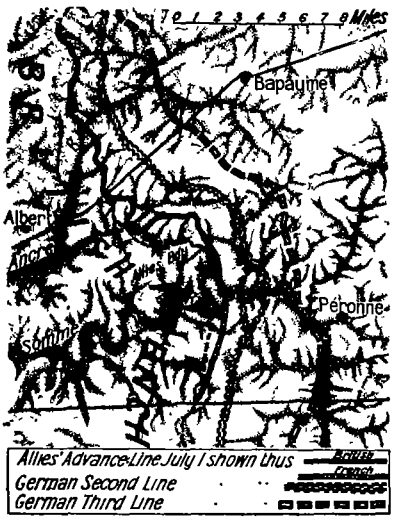
[10] The "great mine" was south of La Boiselle. The mine-crater seen by most visitors to the battlefield, north of the main road, was somewhat smaller

North of the Ancre, where a defensive flank was to be seized by the Fourth Army as far as Serre, and a diverting attack made by the Third Army as far as Gommecourt, both attacks were completely defeated. No-Man's Land was wide; the bold decision to cross it during the preliminary bombardment was not adopted by all commanders; and a number of magnificent divisions dashed themselves to pieces on the insufficiently-broken enemy line. These troops included the 29th Division from Gallipoli, which obtained a temporary foothold on "Hawthorn Ridge," where a big mine had been exploded ten minutes before the attack commenced. The enemy, however, well warned by this explosion that the day and hour of the assault had arrived, laid down a tremendous bombardment, causing the supports to issue late. The divisional commander then decided to renew the attack with the 88th Brigade, and at 9.15 the heroic battalion of Newfoundlanders, which had joined the division in Gallipoli,[11] struggled on without reaching the enemy line until, of 750 men, only 140 were left unwounded. With a loss of 5,000 the famous division had utterly failed. Farther north the 4th and 31st Divisions, though for a time they pierced the first German system south of Serre, were driven back, suffering heavy loss. The failure of these and other penetrating forces to hold on was at the time attributed largely to lack of training and of care in "mopping-up" (that is to say, clearing the rabbit warren of German trenches and dugouts as they overran them); but it was probably due in a much greater degree to attacks by German units on either flank who had beaten off the British in their own sector, and then turned upon the penetrating infantry.

Thus by the night of July 1st the position was that the French had met with unexpected success south of the Somme, having gained all objectives and taken 4,000 prisoners. In the southern half of the sector between the Somme and the Ancre the British, with the French on their right, had

[11] In September, 1915, taking the place of the 5th Royal Scots, which, having dwindled to the strength of a company, was withdrawn from the division.

advanced upwards of a mile, and were in some parts not far distant from the enemy's second defence-system; and undoubtedly, if this could be quickly attacked before the Germans had time to dig other lines and to bring up troops from other parts of the front, that system also could be broken through. The British had taken 2,500 prisoners. But north of the Bapaume road, though the early reports had been favourable, there had been a failure to attain the objectives laid down. Between that road and the Ancre, where the second line and the ridge on which it lay were to have been seized, the actual gain was two small footholds in the German front line.[12] North of the Ancre, nothing had been secured. The front of the advance had thus been rendered dangerously narrow. But neither troops nor munitions were available for a renewal of the offensive against the whole of the unattained objectives. Accordingly the operation north of the Ancre, being only of secondary importance, was abandoned. But south of the Ancre the task of reducing Fricourt, La Boisselle, and Thiepval had to be immediately faced.

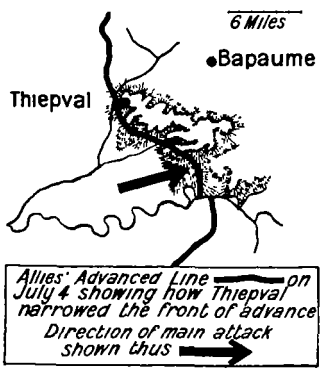


Against Fricourt and La Boisselle new local attacks were forthwith launched. Haig had ordered, before the battle, that reserves "must not be wasted in impossible frontal attacks against strong places—they should rather be thrown in *between* these strong places"; and such was now the general policy. But the disadvantage of such local fighting was that the

[12] Opposite Authille, in the "Leipzig Salient"; and south of St. Pierre Divion. The latter foothold was lost on July 7.

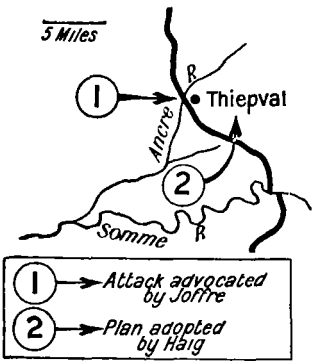
enemy was able to concentrate on it a large proportion of his guns, whose fire against a wider attack might have been comparatively harmless. Fricourt, however, was taken next day with comparative ease; but at La Boisselle the garrison fought tenaciously, protected by a narrow and deadly barrage. In costly attacks by the 19th and 12th Divisions of the III Corps, lasting over several days, this village was gradually captured. But Ovillers remained intact. To the left there was no progress, Thiepval, on the northern edge of the tongue between the Somme and the Ancre, being firmly in German hands.

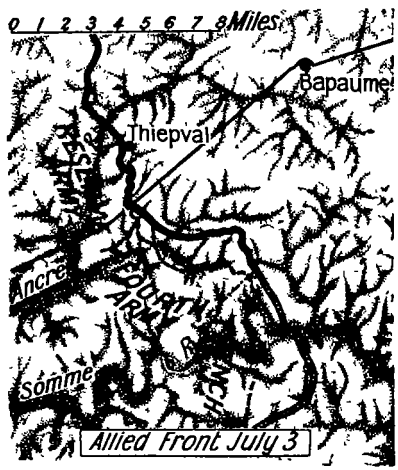
Both Joffre and Haig recognised that, if the offensive was not to be restricted to a dangerously narrow front, Thiepval must sooner or later be taken. The second German line between the Somme and the Ancre, now faced by the Allies, lay generally along the summit of a ridge which crossed the angle between the two rivers almost like the cross-shaft of an "A."[13] It was at the north-western end of this ridge, on a marked prominence immediately above the Ancre, that Thiepval lay, and in German hands it operated as a solid buttress or gate-post, narrowing the intended breach in the German line. At a conference on July 3rd Joffre urged upon Haig that this dangerous impediment should be removed by renewing the frontal attack. Haig equally desired to remove it, and had on July 1st ordered that the assault should, if practicable, be at once renewed. On the 2nd he had ordered Rawlinson to consider whether Thiepval could be frontally attacked from the west, in conjunction with a converging assault from the south on the Second-Line ridge near Mametz Wood and Contalmaison. For the Thiepval operation the X Corps was



[13] If the north is at the top of the page, the A lies on its side, thus: ⊢

on that day—together with the VIII Corps north of the Ancre—placed under the command of General Sir Hubert Gough of the "Reserve Army," who would act under Rawlinson. Haig had decided that, if the shell-supply was sufficient for the two attacks, the capture of Thiepval should be forthwith undertaken. But the commanders on the spot were of opinion that a frontal attack would be an operation of great difficulty, requiring thorough preparation; Haig recognised that the German defences from Thiepval to Pozières were "far stronger and more elaborate" than farther south on the same ridge and that the British artillery would not suffice for their reduction unless the attack on the southern half was to be robbed of some of its support. He was against any such transfer of his strength, being intensely anxious to break through the second German defence-system in the southern sector near Longueval before the enemy could bring up reinforcements or complete new lines of defences; he was convinced that the proper method was to continue his thrust where the enemy's resistance had proved weakest, and not where it was strongest. While his attack in the south proceeded eastwards, he could endeavour to get behind Thiepval from the south-east, rendering its reduction comparatively easy and bloodless. Upon this plan he now decided, and, although Joffre vigorously advocated a renewal of the frontal attack upon Thiepval, Haig, who stood out as a strong man even among strong men, adhered to his new decision, and ordered that, on the front from the Albert-Bapaume road south-eastwards, the eastward thrust should be vigorously continued, while north of that point the effort should at present be restricted to



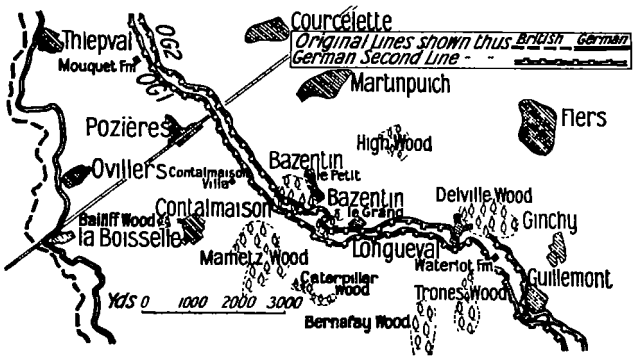


obtaining local or subsidiary gains. The two army corps (VIII and X) on the northern sector, where the advance would for the present be less strongly supported, were accordingly formed into a separate army under General Gough and the staff of the Reserve Army, who on July 3rd were made independent of General Rawlinson. The British force on the less-active northern half of the battlefield thus became known as the "Reserve Army," the title "Fourth Army" being retained by the III, XV, and XIII Corps, which, in the southern sector under Rawlinson, were to continue the vigorous eastward thrust, being reinforced for the purpose by all available reserves of men and artillery.

The task of both armies was now a race against time in capturing a number of formidable intervening positions, which had to be stormed or otherwise reduced before a suitable line could be obtained from which the enemy's second-line system in the southern area could be attacked. On July 4th the Fourth Army, though still opposed by the enemy in the eastern outskirts of La Boisselle, captured Bernafay and "Caterpillar" Woods, but found Mametz Wood—immediately in front of the German second line—strongly held. Haig did not, however, anticipate that this obstacle would long delay his progress, which, at this stage, appeared to him to promise at least a reasonable chance of a sweeping victory. "The next few days," he informed his army commanders, "may place us in possession of the enemy's defences from the Ancre to the Somme"; and he instructed the Third Army to prepare to

deliver an attack in case he broke through. The First and Second Armies also were ordered to choose points for attack.

But the capture of Mametz Wood did not follow so rapidly as he had hoped. On the 6th the Fourth Army at last swept beyond La Boisselle, took "Bailiff Wood," and



again entered Contalmaison, but was later driven out of that village. On the same day the Reserve Army obtained a footing in the "Leipzig Salient" in front of Thiepval, and between there and La Boisselle, reached the outskirts of Ovillers. On July 7th the Reserve Army was still only on the edge of Ovillers; the Fourth Army appeared at one time to have taken Contalmaison and Mametz Wood, but was again driven from both. The delay thus caused was highly disappointing to Haig. In a letter written next day to Robertson he said: "It has not been possible to push on fast enough to deprive them (the Germans) of the possibility of bringing up reserves." "We have to be prepared," he stated, "for a struggle lasting for several weeks, and very exhausting to both sides," although "signs of serious demoralisation" had been evident in many of the enemy's units.

By July 11th, after repeated attacks, Mametz Wood and Contalmaison had been seized. The enemy, counter-attacking, retook both Mametz and Trones Woods, but on the 12th both

were again taken by the British and a slight advance was made at Ovillers and beyond Contalmaison. The Fourth Army had thus finally gained the last strong positions of the enemy lying in front of his second line on the southern half of the British battle-front.

That line, however, was in some parts no less than three-quarters of a mile distant, and, over the problem of its approach, there occurred at this stage between the Commander-in-Chief and his army commander almost precisely the same difference of opinion as had arisen between Sir Ian Hamilton and Major-General Hunter-Weston before the Second Battle of Krithia in Gallipoli.[14] There Hamilton, the commander-in-chief, had desired "to cross the danger zone by night and overthrow the enemy in the grey dawn," and his junior, Hunter-Weston, had differed. Now it was the subordinate, Rawlinson, who advocated a night advance, while Haig, the commander-in-chief, opposed it with precisely the arguments formerly urged by Hunter-Weston:

> The troops are not highly trained and disciplined, nor are many of the staff experienced in such work, and to move two divisions in the dark over such a distance, form them up, and deliver an attack in good order and in the right direction at dawn, as proposed, would hardly be considered possible even in a peace manœuvre. . . . Although the enemy morale is shaken, he is still dangerous to take liberties with.[15]

Haig, therefore, at first overruled the plan; but upon finding that not only Rawlinson, but all the corps commanders concerned, were heartily in its favour and were opposed to his own alternative of two separate attacks on two portions of the southern front, he gave his assent, though after strong resistance and insisting that special precautions must be taken to meet the possibility of non-success.

The result was the sanctioning of a night advance, the plan formerly discarded at Krithia, although on that occasion the absence of adequate artillery support had rendered the assistance of the dark all the more desirable. Now the artillery for two days heavily bombarded the enemy position.

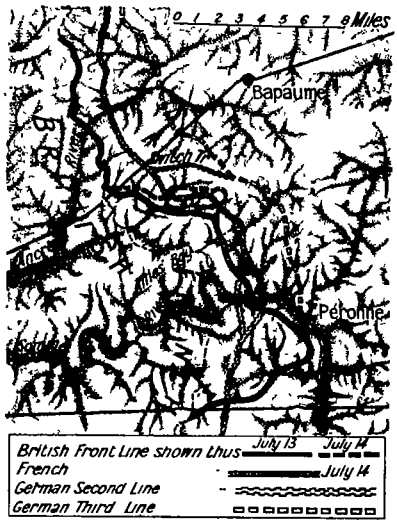
[14] *See Vol. II, p. 3.* [15] From the Fourth Army's war-diary.

The troops were, by Haig's orders, informed of the general situation—that the Russians, Italians, and French on their several fronts were heavily pressing the enemy; that the battle was "more than half won," and "steady, determined, united, unrelenting effort for a few more days will definitely turn the scale in our favour, and open up the road to further successes which will bring final and complete victory within sight."[16] During the night of July 13th the assaulting units were led out to the "jumping-off" line for the attack, which had been specially marked on the ground with white tape. At dawn, after five minutes' intense bombardment, the assault was launched by seven divisions of the III, XV, and XIII corps[17] on a front extending from near Contalmaison to Trones Wood. Its success was brilliant. The second line was seized along almost the whole front of attack, and near "High Wood," on the summit of the ridge, the enemy showed signs of breaking. British and Indian cavalry had been brought up in readiness for a possible advance into open country, and a few squadrons were now sent forward into High Wood, from which they looked out over the wide valley behind the German second line to the Bapaume ridge and the open country beyond. The trench-system which the troops of both sides had believed impregnable had again almost been broken through, a fact which henceforth affected the outlook, certainly of the British troops and their commanders, and probably of the Germans also.

At the beginning of the Somme battle the enemy had constructed only one line of defence beyond the point now reached—the incomplete third system running through Le Sars and Flers, near the bottom of the valley across which the cavalry looked. In the interval, however, he had hastily laid out not only a "switch" trench joining this third line to the intact defences north of the British thrust, but also certain other works on the ridge on which his second line lay. These

[16] The honesty which caused Haig to avoid giving his men any easy assurance of immediate victory is characteristic.

[17] From left to right—the 34th, 1st, 21st, 7th, 3rd, 9th, and 18th Divisions.

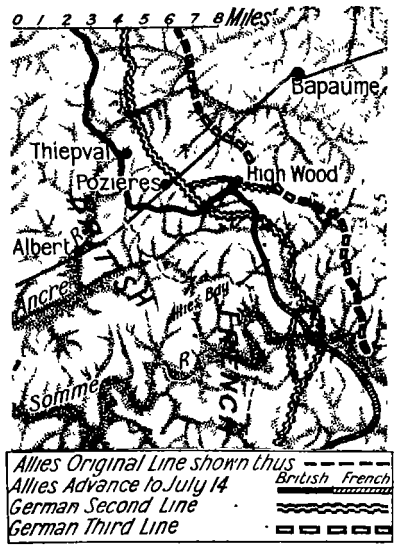


could doubtless have been at once pierced on a narrow front, had there been at hand any fresh force sufficient to establish or widen the breach in the second line at High Wood; but in truth no method had yet been devised by which advantage could readily be taken of a breach on a narrow front through a line held by staunch troops; nor, on the Western Front, was such a method ever invented. Whenever danger of a "break-through" occurred, the defending side naturally attacked it as men do a bush-fire, from its flanks, and such eruptions always tended to be beaten down to a narrow point, when they could be easily stamped out. So long as the defender had reserves of good morale, he could speedily bring to a halt any narrow advance, even in unfortified country. The opening which seemed for a few hours to exist at High Wood was speedily closed—the enemy having recovered himself—so that two days later[18] the British were forced to withdraw from that isolated and advanced position. The only sure means of further progress appeared to be to bring up the artillery, and, after thorough preparation, deliver an assault upon the enemy's new positions before he had time to strengthen and extend them.

By this time, both in the first advance and in the subsequent effort to press without delay the advantage which had been gained, nearly 100,000 men had been lost.[19] In those few days the flower of the "New" Army had fallen. Haig had thrown in twenty-five divisions, of which twenty-two had been on the Somme, either in the line or in reserve,

[18] This fighting is described with somewhat more detail in *Chapter xiv.*

[19] The figures quoted are those for July 1 to 16. The infantry of the 34th Division in three days (July 1-3) lost 6,591 officers and men, *viz.*—101st Brigade, 2,299; 102nd Brigade, 2,324; 103rd Brigade, 1,968.

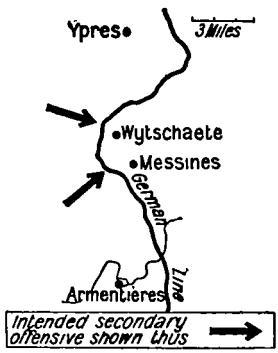


when the battle began, and six, withdrawn exhausted,[20] had been despatched to other armies. In their place, the quieter parts of the front had been "milked" (as the phrase was) to obtain ten fresh divisions for the Somme battle; three of these had been already thrown in, five were still intact in reserve, and two on their way to the Somme. Unfortunately, however, the examination of the prisoners captured on July 14th showed that the Germans had been reinforcing their line as rapidly, having brought eight divisions into the line opposing the British, in addition to the six originally there. These had been obtained largely by "milking" the German front facing the French between Chaulnes and Rheims. A small proportion, however, had been withdrawn from sectors opposite the British: a reserve division had been brought southwards from Cambrai; as early as July 5th it was reported that the 13th Jäger Battalion, which had formed part of the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division holding the Sugar-loaf Salient south of Armentières, had been identified on the Somme;[21] by July 13th nine battalions from the Lille-Lens area were believed to have transferred thither. There thus appeared to be evidence that the enemy had begun to withdraw at least single regiments or battalions from the quiet portion of his front opposite the Anzac and other corps of the First and Second Armies, in order to meet the desperate thrusts of the Fourth Army on the Somme.

[20] In addition, some exhausted brigades (including the 102nd and 103rd of the 34th Division) had been sent away, their divisions absorbing in place of them fresh brigades from other divisions.

[21] The correctness of this report was afterwards questioned by the intelligence staff of the Second Army.

Such "milking" had, of course, been anticipated, and, in order either to prevent it or to take advantage of it if it had occurred, it had recently been planned[22] that one of the British offensives originally contemplated by Haig and Joffre as a preliminary feint should be launched, not before, but after, the commencement of the Somme offensive. The operation chosen by Haig for this purpose had been an attack by the Second Army against the Messines Salient—the great forward bulge in the German line between Armentières and Ypres.[23] On the 14th of January, 1916, Haig asked General Plumer to consider three schemes of attack—one of them being against Messines. As far back as July, 1915, during Sir John French's régime, Plumer had been considering plans for this enterprise, and they had been approved in November, 1915, by General Robertson, then chief of French's staff. The attack, which would be preceded by the explosion of a large number of deep-level mines, would be launched by twelve divisions, with three others in reserve. On May 28th, when ordering his army commanders to initiate the various activities already described, in order to divert attention from the Somme, Haig had warned them that this offensive by the Second Army "on a large scale" might take place either before or after that on the Somme;[24] two days later he directed that preparations for the Messines offensive should be pushed on with all possible speed, and on June 16th informed his army commanders that if the enemy, by hurrying



[23] *See p 330.*

[24] A subsidiary offensive in Flanders had also been considered in connection with the plan for making preparatory attacks *before* the Somme offensive (*see p 220*).

[24] Haig's order stated: "Preparations for taking the offensive on a large scale are being made on two sections of our front, *viz* —

(*a*) By the Second Army, and
(*b*) by the Fourth Army and a portion of the Third Army.

"It is not yet certain which of these attacks will be launched first." Army commanders, however, were instructed to make their preparations upon the supposition that the Somme offensive (*b*) would be launched first.

to the Somme all his available reserves, checked that advance at the Second Line Ridge, but left himself weak in the north, the main British offensive might be transferred to Messines, British reserves from the Somme being rapidly brought thither for the purpose.[25]

At the beginning of June the deep mines for the Messines offensive were approaching completion, but a vast amount of work remained to be done on roads, railways, and ammunition dumps, and important details were still under consideration[26] by Major-General Harington,[27] the new chief of the general staff of the Second Army. Plumer, always warmly disposed towards the Australian and New Zealand troops, had intimated to G.H.Q. that he was "most anxious to use the Anzac Corps in the offensive on the Second Army front."[28] In his plan he allotted them the task of attacking Messines itself, in the right centre of the operation.[29] He and Harington discussed the project on several occasions with Birdwood and White, who, at Plumer's request, though conscious of their inexperience of large operations on the Western Front, submitted a plan. In the middle of that month the movement of Australian troops to the projected front of this attack was ordered, and commenced; on June 17th the 7th Infantry Brigade, withdrawn from Armentières, relieved part of the 24th British Division in the Wulverghem sector, opposite Messines. Next day the

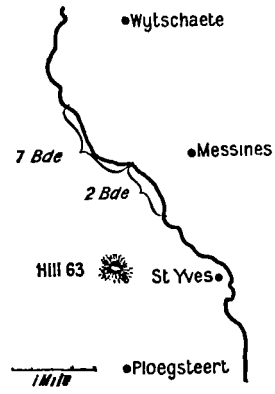
[25] This measure, it was explained, was contemplated as a possible alternative to the latter phases of the plan of offensive on the Somme.

[26] For example, it was now decided that any German guns which might be captured intact in the area up to the "Oosttaverne Line" (the German reserve defence-line behind Messines) should be saved for possible use, and not destroyed unless it became quite clear that the Oottaverne Line could not be gained and held.

[27] General Sir Charles H. Harington, G.C.B., G.B.E., D.S.O., p s.c. Chief of Staff, Second Army, 1916/17, and of British Force in Italy, 1917/18; Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, 1918/20. Officer of British Regular Army; of London; b. Chichester, Eng., 31 May, 1872. Died 23 Oct, 1940.

[28] His chief-of-staff wrote to G.H.Q. on April 28: "He (Plumer) is very anxious to keep the Anzac Corps in the Second Army. He knows many of the officers. . . ."

[29] The allotted corps were, from left to right: V Corps—3rd, 5th, and 20th Divisions; new corps—1st, 2nd, and 24th Divisions; I Anzac Corps—1st and 2nd Australian Divisions, and New Zealand Division; II Corps—23rd, 38th, and 41st Divisions. The whole force was designated, in a document of June 4, the "Reserve Army," but would be under Second Army.



2nd Brigade began to come into the line of the 24th Division astride of the River Douve, on the right of the 7th.[30] Both brigades were under the commander of the 24th Division until, on July 4th, the headquarters of the 2nd Australian Division arrived and took control of this front. Next day the 2nd Divisional Artillery and part of the 1st took over the gun-positions from the British batteries. The strength of the artillery allotted approached that of the army on the Somme, comprising, if the offensive was launched by July 7th, 180 howitzers of 6-inch and over, or more than 275 if it was deferred to the end of that month. One huge 15-inch howitzer[31] had already arrived, and emplacements were forthwith begun for sixty-seven heavy guns and also for forty field-batteries, to be located mainly behind hedges, the positions being screened overhead with camouflage netting.[32] On Hill 63, directly facing Messines, the Australian engineers and pioneers began the construction of some thirty observation-posts for the artillery, and plans were in preparation for bivouacking the attacking force behind hedges and under trees. Extra dressings, blankets, and stretchers were drawn by the medical staff. On July 3rd the headquarters of the I Anzac Corps handed over control of the Armentières front to General Godley and the staff of the II Anzac Corps and moved to Bailleul, where it relieved the staff of the V Corps at the ancient *Mairie*.

By then, however, it was already becoming improbable that the offensive against Messines would be undertaken. It would have meant relaxing the effort on the Somme, and, although the Anzac staff was not yet aware of the fact, Haig, in answer to an appeal from Joffre, had by June 28th prepared

[30] At the end of the month the two Australian brigades opposite Messines were shifted slightly northwards along the line.

[31] Manned by men of the Royal Marine Artillery.

[32] Generally open netting, somewhat similar to that of cricket or tennis nets, with scattered bunches of grass or shreds of hessian threaded through it.

"a scheme . . . for the withdrawal of fresh formations" to enable the struggle on the Somme to be continued "with such vigour as will force the enemy to abandon his attacks on Verdun." On June 30th it had been arranged between G.H.Q. and the Second Army that the I Anzac Corps should be held ready for sending south at any moment. On July 2nd the 1st and 2nd Divisions with corps headquarters were placed under orders to move at twenty-four hours' notice. The actual transfer, however, was not ordered, and local preparations for the Messines offensive had been resumed when, on July 7th, the order arrived for the immediate transfer of the corps to the Fourth Army, the move to be completed by noon on July 13th. The documents and plans concerning the Messines attack were handed back to the staff of the Second Army, all notion of that operation being then, apparently through the withdrawal of the necessary forces, temporarily abandoned.[33] The secret had been well kept, and few of the Australian troops then in front of Messines were aware that such an offensive had been contemplated.[34] Indeed, by

[33] General Plumer on July 10 wrote that an attack on the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge was "under present circumstances . . . impracticable." Haig does not appear to have allotted him, up to that time, any definite force for the offensive, although his requirements had been discussed.

[34] The line occupied for rather more than a fortnight by the 2nd and 7th Brigades in front of Messines extended from "Donnington Hall" to "Shell Farm." It was overlooked by the enemy in Messines, the buildings of which at that time still crowned the opposite hill; and some of the communication trenches were so shallow, straight, and exposed to view that parts of the line could not be approached through them by daylight. German sniping was bold and accurate. Captain R. J. Lewis (of Darwin, Northern Territory), one of the company commanders of the 25th Battalion, was shot through the head on the morning on which the battalion entered the line. Active patrolling was started at once by the Australians, and Lieutenant A. W. Phillips (of Charters Towers, Q'land), patrol officer of the 25th, was severely wounded while scouting.

Gas warfare was active on this front. After the German gas attack of June 16/17 (*see p. 191*) cylinders were brought up and installed behind the parapet in the Australian sector and elsewhere. A discharge of gas was ordered for the night of June 29, should the wind be favourable. On the 7th Brigade front, during the early part of that evening, two cylinders were struck by a German shell, and began to leak, but the leak was stopped. At 9 a.m. another cylinder was struck, and leaked, but this also was stopped. On the front of the 2nd Brigade the German shell-fire knocked down part of the parapet, preventing the discharge of 33 of the cylinders. Later in the night, as the wind freshened, the 27th and 28th Battalions discharged their gas, each for some twenty minutes. On the front of the 7th Battalion, however, the gas was not released until the following night. A detachment of infantry, "splendidly organised and trained by Lieut. Fitzgerald, 5th Bn., A.I.F.," made a barrage with smoke candles.

It was noted that the enemy flares, which were sent up to inform his artillery of the arrival of the gas-cloud, were on this occasion white stars, bursting at the summit of their ascent into red and green, this had obviously been contrived to avoid their being imitated or confused with any British signal.

July 7th General Plumer, in response to a suggestion from G.H.Q., was contemplating an operation for the same purpose by a smaller number of troops in quite a different area.

The 25th and 27th Battalions took part, as has been related (*p. 266*), in the raids on the night of June 28. On the afternoon of July 4 the enemy opened a hurricane bombardment on the trenches of the 27th Battalion, killing Captain J. W. Blacket (of Kent Town, S. Aust.), Lieutenant W. W. Hosking (or Norwood, S. Aust.), and several men. On the night of June 25 the German 211th Reserve Infantry Regiment apparently tried to carry out a silent raid against part of the line held by the Australians. A small patrol of the 8th Battalion was working through No-Man's Land in front of the sector held by its unit, when it met a large party of Germans. The Australian patrol withdrew into its lines, as did the men who were out in the neighbouring listening-posts. Fire was then opened on the enemy while he was in the act of cutting the Australian wire. He was driven off, and some scouts, going out, found two dead Germans on the wire, of whom they brought in one. The enemy shortly afterwards appeared again, but withdrew when fired on. The body of the other dead soldier was afterwards found to have disappeared, the German party having evidently returned in order to bring back its dead and thus avoid being identified.

The other chief incident of this short tour at Messines was a "sham raid," carried out by the artillery of the 24th Division on the night of July 5, when the British guns laid down upon a sector of the German trenches a bombardment exactly similar to that accompanying a raid. The enemy believed that a raid had actually taken place, and his infantry, which had evidently withdrawn, was presently observed bombing its way back along trenches that had never been invaded.

The two Australian brigades were relieved by the 124th and 72nd British Brigades (24th and 41st Divisions). The latter noted that much gear, left behind by part of the 7th Australian Brigade, had to be salvaged and sent in.