

CHAPTER XXV

FLERS. THE SOMME BATTLE ENDS

THE Australian divisions, almost restored by their rest at Ypres, were now to plunge into the hardest trial that ever came to them. Haig's policy was to break the Germans as a man might break a rope—by keeping it strained under a wearing tension and from time to time striking heavily to discover whether it would yet snap. When the Australian divisions were ordered back to the Somme, the intention was to deliver the next blow on October 14th: the Fourth Army, whose line then lay near the bottom of the valley before Bapaume, would strike across the valley towards positions a mile and a half distant on its opposite slope and head.¹ Two days later the Reserve and Third Armies, carrying out in a modified form Haig's original plan of the Somme offensive,² would attack on the left of the Fourth.³

But incidents were already occurring which warned the British commander that, although "an ordinary winter" might not suffice to stop his advance, the coming winter would do so. When the Fourth Army on October 7th had attempted one of the preparatory stages of its task,⁴ the barrage, falling in the wet ground, proved strangely ineffective. High-explosive shells pierced deep into the earth before bursting, throwing up steam and smoke and a few clods of earth instead of the churned-up dust-cloud which in summer advances had so



¹ This attack had been planned on Sept. 29 to be carried out in three stages: (1) Oct. 1—capture of Eaucourt l'Abbaye and southern outskirts of Le Sars; (2) capture of Le Sars, the Butte of Warlencourt, and lower slopes of the valley in front of Gueudecourt; (3) capture of Pys, and a line beyond Warlencourt and Thillois on the far side of the valley as far as Le Transloy (on a spur at the head of the valley). Of these stages, the first had been accomplished on Oct. 1-3; the weather then broke, but the second stage was attempted on Oct. 7, with success only at Le Sars. (See Vol. XII, plates 276, 289, 290.)

² See pp. 235-7.

³ Their objectives were Loupart Wood, Irlles, Serre, and Gommecourt.

⁴ The capture of Le Sars, the Butte, and the valley in front of Gueudecourt.

perfectly screened the advancing infantry. German machine-guns, now specially posted from 400 to 600 yards beyond, fired with impunity through the barrage on the clearly visible troops. Near Flers the attack had also come up against a German division which fought with remarkable confidence—that same 6th Bavarian Reserve Division which had faced the British and Australians at Fromelles. The morale of the Germans did not in all cases deteriorate, nor did that of the British, under these conditions, always maintain its high level. Desertion by British soldiers to the enemy was (as is admitted in many German records) remarkably rare; but before the battle of October 7th a British deserter had informed the enemy of its imminence.

The Fourth Army's attempt, repeated in certain phases on the 8th and 12th, failed almost totally on both occasions; and though the Sixth French Army on his flank reached the edge of Sailly-Saillisel, on the same ridge as Bapaume, Haig appears by October 12th to have become convinced—with good reason—that the German line could not be pierced that year. It is true that Joffre, apparently in a desperate effort to secure results which would reconcile the French people to the strategy of the Somme, urged him to continue attacking on a wide front; and Foch, who had not yet abandoned his intention of thrusting on the heights, pressed Haig to assist the French left by launching the British right against Le Transloy. In reply Haig assured Joffre that his main plans had not been changed. As a matter of fact he was determined to keep up strong pressure during the winter, so as to break through in the spring; and, partly for these objects, partly to obtain a better position for wintering, the Fourth Army's attack against the bottom and opposite slope of the valley was still to be delivered. But the participation of the Third Army in the projected offensive was cancelled.⁵ Its tanks and some of its artillery were transferred to the Reserve Army, which, being in a favourable position to pinch the enemy's salient north of Thiepval, was still to attack on both sides of the Ancre, though with less extensive objectives than those originally planned. The rôle of the Reserve Army

⁵ At the time when this step was taken, the Third Army's reserves had already begun to move into their battle positions.

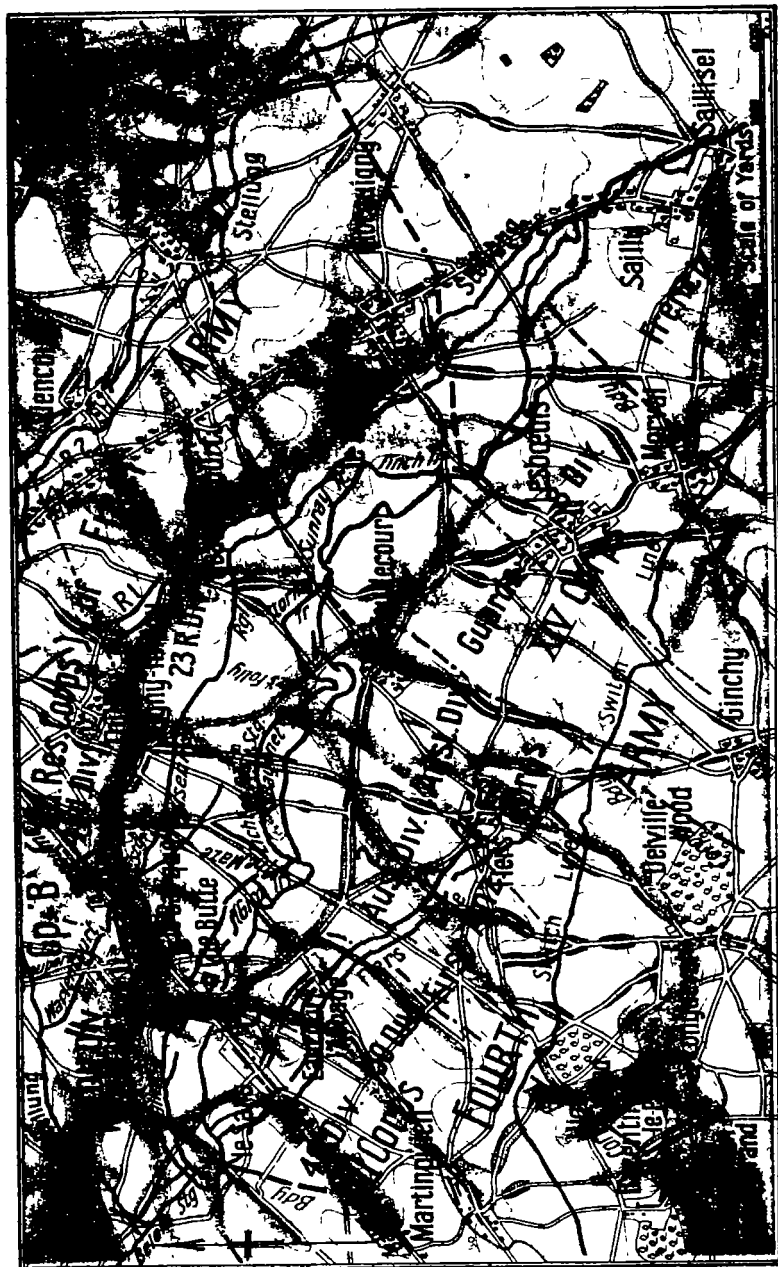
was now not to widen a breach made by the Fourth Army, but to inflict loss upon the enemy; and, as the Fourth Army's offensive was continually postponed in consequence of the boggy condition of its area, the Reserve Army was on October 14th ordered to attack independently, as soon as was convenient to itself. The part to be played by Gough's force having thus been altered, its name was changed on October 30th to "Fifth Army."

Thus from October 12th, except for certain limited attacks to be undertaken, Haig's immediate intention was that his two armies on the Somme should go into winter quarters. For winter fighting and training, both of them were to be organised in a number of quasi-permanent army corps, each of four divisions. Of the divisions in each corps, two would hold the line and attack when feasible, one, billeted in villages just clear of the battlefield, would lie in reserve training and working, and the fourth would train in a back area. The I Anzac Corps (now of four divisions) would take the place of the XV, the central army corps of the Fourth Army, which would be sent back to a training area.

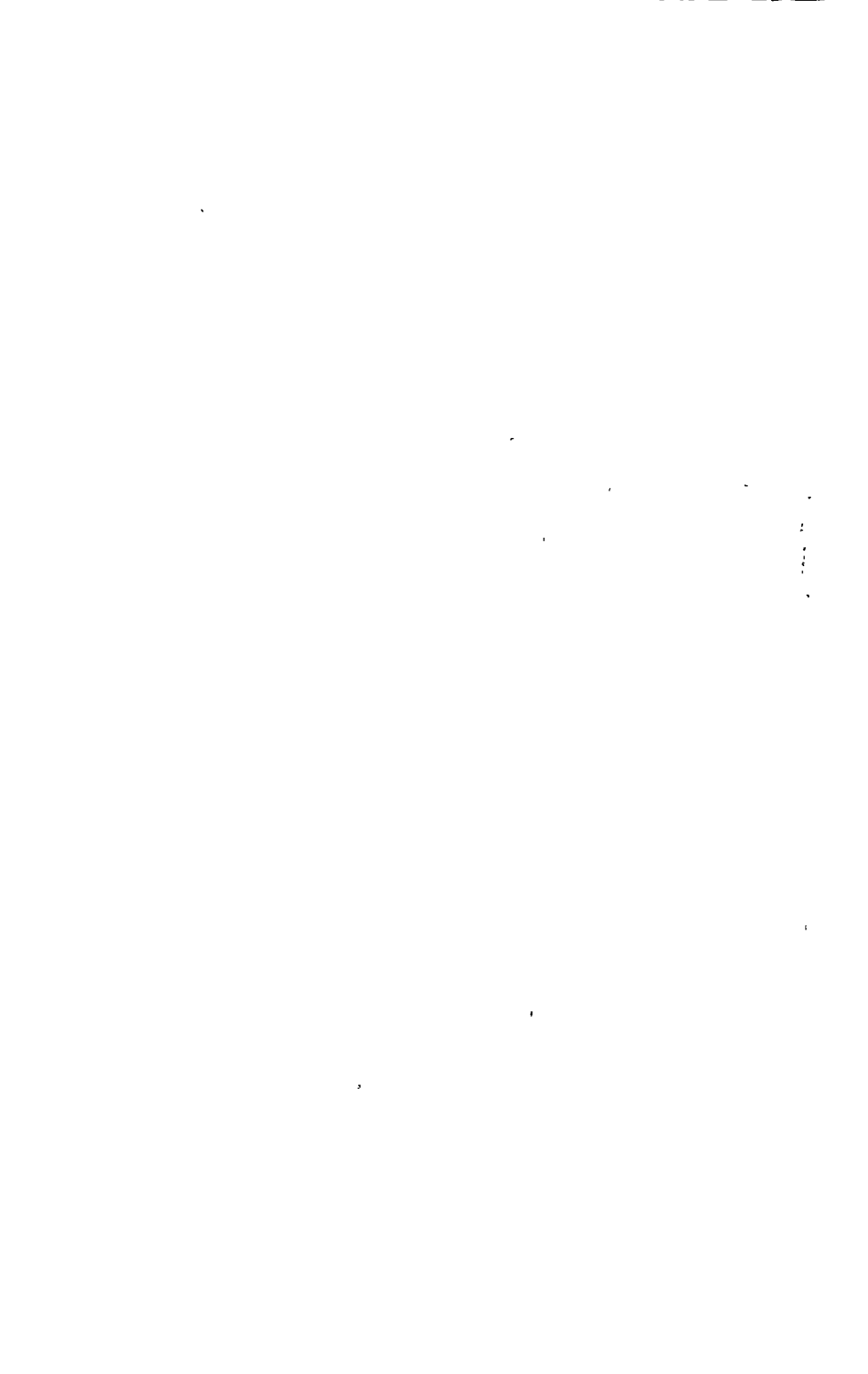
When on October 18th the 5th Australian Division reached Ailly-le-Haut-Clocher, in the Fourth Army's back area, that army was still confronted with its task of reaching, in two stages, the proposed winter line on the other side of the valley and—on its extreme right—assisting the French near Le Transloy. That very morning an attempt, made in the dark and rain by its front-line divisions to complete a preparatory stage, again failed almost totally. As the Reserve Army's attack was fixed for the 23rd, it was now arranged that the Fourth Army would repeat its attempt that day; any objective not gained would be taken on the 26th, when the French also would operate; on the 29th would be launched the advance up the far side of the valley.⁶ The 29th Division and part of the 5th Australian—both from Ypres—would be in time to take part in the first of these operations.

Rumours had reached the Australians of great hardships suffered during the recent bad-weather offensives. Some officers of the Corps, visiting the Somme area, had watched a British battalion after relief dragging itself, covered with

⁶ To Thillois and Loupart Wood, the task of reaching which had now been taken over by the Fourth Army from the Reserve Army.



THE I ANZAC CORPS SECTOR OF THE SOMME BATTLEFIELD ON 5TH NOVEMBER, 1916



mud, along the road at a snail's pace, with hardly a semblance of formation, and had been inclined mentally to censure its officers for not pulling their troops together. This critical attitude changed after a sight of the battlefield from which those men had emerged. The continuous pressing of the attack had made it impossible to devote adequate labour or even thought to precautions against rainy conditions, and consequently, when the weather broke, the Fourth Army had found itself with seven miles of unorganised crater-field behind its front-line troops. This area had been churned by the advancing battle into wild moorland, bare of dwellings, trees, or hedges, flayed in most parts even of grass, and its drainage almost everywhere blocked by innumerable craters. So long as dry weather held, the trenches which veined this brown wilderness were passable and habitable without revetment, flooring, or drainage, and a few miles behind the lines troops, waggons, and motor-lorries could make their way across country wherever desired. But a light rain converted the trenches to mere muddy ditches, and rendered the cross-country tracks distressingly heavy for men and horses and impassable by wheeled traffic. For the autumn offensive there had been crowded into this area not only troops in great density and depth, but a much greater force of heavy artillery than had opened the battle there in July. As transport became slower and more difficult, the supply of ammunition for the preparatory bombardments taxed the automobile transport almost beyond its capacity. All thought of pushing forward engineering material to floor orrevet the trenches had to be temporarily abandoned, the transport being barely able to feed and munition the troops. Although railways—both broad and narrow gauge—were being gradually pushed forward to several points close behind the "Second Line" Ridge, the railheads for delivery of supplies were still away back near Albert, and an endless procession of food, ammunition, and ambulance lorries daily churned its slow way along the few country roads leading thence to dépôts close in rear of the Second Line Ridge.⁷ The front line lay two miles down the forward slope of that ridge, and, to carry food and ammunition across the muddy fields,⁸ the regimental transport, encamped behind the Second Line Ridge

⁷ See Vol. XII, plate 262.

⁸ These were largely old turnip fields.

(where its lines were soon trampled into mud almost to the horses' bellies),⁹ had mostly been organised into pack trains. The field artillery, crowded into positions of dreadful morass in the only available depressions on the forward slope,¹⁰ received its shells by pack-horses. The carriage of wounded was by five or six relay-posts of stretcher-bearers,¹¹ who bivouacked at intervals down the slope. Their task was lightened shortly after the arrival of the Australians by the improvisation of wooden sledges for the wounded, who were then dragged by one or two horses across the mud.¹² For troops forward of the Second Line Ridge no roofed cover existed except here and there a German dugout, used as company or battalion headquarters or regimental aid-post. For units in rear—which in the summer had bivouacked in old trenches—hardly any shelter had been provided, and, the villages having been destroyed, no houses existed nearer than Albert.

By October 20th the supply of ammunition to the heavy artillery was becoming so disorganised that General Rawlinson took special measures to hurry forward the railway. To crown all, within the next few days the few country roads which now carried the whole supply for the front began to give way.¹³ It was at this juncture that the Australians began to reach the battlefield. The first stage of each brigade's journey was the easiest Australian infantry had experienced, one brigade being picked up daily west of Amiens by motor-charabancs of the French Army, and carried to the villages of Buire, Ribemont, or Dernancourt, south-west of Albert. The journey, which usually occupied

⁹ See Vol. XII, plate 263.

¹⁰ The best known to the Australians was "Gun Valley" (see Vol. XII, plate 274). Some of the New Zealand guns were so deeply embedded that they could not be dug out until long after the Australian artillery took over.

¹¹ See Vol. XII, plate 279.

¹² This method was suggested by a warrant officer of the 8th Field Ambulance, A. E. Roberts, who, as a farmer at Warragul, Victoria, had used such a sleigh. The suggestion was taken up by Captain H. A. C. Irving (of Glenthompson and Melbourne, Vic.) of the same ambulance and brought to the notice of Colonel Manifold, D.D.M.S. of I. Anzac Corps, who spent the night of Oct. 28 in the forward area. The "carry" was thus reduced from 7 hours to 1½ hours. By the end of October 20 sledges had been made; but horses, though promised, were difficult to obtain, owing to the strain on transport and the sickness of the animals.

¹³ The railway trains serving the front were provided by the French. They were insufficient to furnish all the ammunition and road-material required; and the Fourth Army, when this dilemma arose, appears to have expressed a wish for the ammunition to be brought up even if the roads had to be sacrificed. On Nov. 23 the roads and railways in the region of the British Army (except those in the front area) were taken over by a civilian organisation under Sir Eric Geddes, the Director-General of Transportation. The benefits of that reform were not visible during the continuance of this particular difficulty at the front.

a morning, gave almost childish pleasure, and its management by the French staff was universally praised—but the pleasure ended there. The battalions were either billeted in the overcrowded, verminous, leaky barns of Buire, Ribemont, and Dernancourt, or forthwith marched on through dense traffic eight or ten miles farther to the "staging camps" on the old battlefield, from which they could be moved within twelve hours to the front line. In the XV Corps area these "camps" lay about Fricourt, Mametz, and Montauban—once villages, but now marked only by some of their still visible foundations, and, in the case of Montauban, by part of the iron-work gate of the churchyard and a Madonna and Child standing in the ruins.



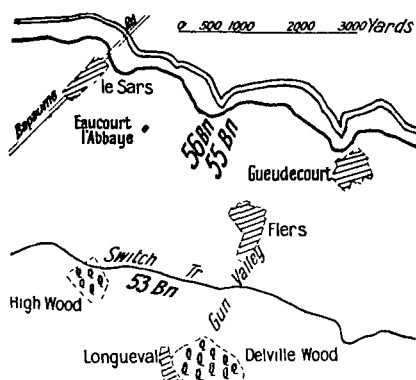
1. Ribemont; 2. Buire; 3. Dernancourt; 4. Fricourt;
5. Mametz; 6. Montauban;
7. Pommiers Redoubt.

Thus the leading brigade, the 14th, of the 5th Division, after marching ten miles in the morning to meet its charabancs (which actually passed it on the road), and worming its way on foot through traffic for another ten miles in the afternoon, turned off the crowded road at dusk into the muddy plateau known as "Pommiers Camp,"¹⁴ near Montauban. Here, as no cover was available for three-quarters of the men, the majority slept in the open, improvising what shelter they could with their blankets and water-proof sheets. Little rain had fallen since the previous day, but there was a heavy frost and the ground was wet. As the brigade was required for the next attack, it moved on next day to take over the front, and, leaving blankets¹⁵ and packs, but picking up shovels, two bombs per man, and extra ammunition, marched during daylight past the dreadful

¹⁴ At "Pommiers Redoubt," an old German work near some apple trees—whence the name.

¹⁵ Australian brigades which entered the line at later dates carried to the trenches one blanket and one water-proof sheet per man.

wreckage of Delville Wood¹⁶ and over the crest of the Second Line Ridge, and thence down the long even slope to the valley. The lower knuckles of that slope and the whole of the farther side—still fairly green—were within the enemy's lines; the day was fine, and the whole landscape up to the distant clock-tower of Bapaume, which rose over a copse crowning the opposite height, was in clear view. Two long communication trenches led down past the muddy positions in "Gun Valley" and the ruined village of Fliers,¹⁷ but the mud in these saps was in many places knee-deep, and most of the infantry had to make its way in the open beside them.¹⁸ After passing Fliers the Australians saw their first tanks, derelicts of the September fighting, in some cases with the crew still lying dead among the machinery. Before midnight the 55th and 56th Battalions had taken over from the troops of the 12th Division the front and support lines, and the 53rd the old German "Switch Trench,"¹⁹ two miles back on the summit of the Second Line Ridge.²⁰ Although the distance from Pommiers Camp to the front line was only six miles, the relief had taken from nine to twelve hours, and the front-line battalions were worn out before they arrived. The night (October 21st) was dry but bitterly cold, and the men could warm themselves only by digging the mud from their trenches and cutting fire-steps. By next day the two front-line battalions—which were detailed for the approaching attack—were so exhausted that it was decided to relieve them immediately by the 53rd and bring them back for a short rest in Pommiers Camp, which had then been improved by the addition of a few



¹⁶ See note on p. 869.

¹⁷ See Vol. XII, plates 264-6.

¹⁸ Ibid., plate 272.

¹⁹ Ibid., plate 273.

²⁰ The 54th and one company of the 55th remained as brigade reserve in Pommiers Camp.

tents. The same night the 8th Brigade under similar difficulties took over the sector south-west of the 14th, immediately north of the ruins of Gueudecourt.²¹ Both brigades were greatly impressed by the continuity of the artillery-fire; on the British side each division was now supported by more than two divisional artilleries, and the normal fire of the British heavy batteries had enormously increased.²² The fire of the German artillery, however, did not approach that which had been normal at Pozières. Where the British shells flew over in sheaves, the Germans fired single shots or salvoes, which usually left the foremost troops undisturbed and burst about the supports.²³ In the muddy ruins of Gueudecourt, close behind the Australian right, a German 5.9-inch shell burst regularly—according to one account, at the rate of one a minute—night and day, throughout the winter, the enemy's object (in which he succeeded) being to prevent the use of cellars or dugouts in the village. Flers, a little farther back behind the left, was constantly, but not so regularly, shelled, and, although some units reported the place as too dangerous for occupation, its cellars were during the winter used by the infantry for headquarters and sometimes for the accommodation of local reserves.

²¹ See Vol. XII, plates 267-8.

²² The 5th Australian Division temporarily left its own artillery near Armentières. When the division took over the sector beyond Flers, it was covered by the artillery of the 12th and New Zealand Divisions, one artillery brigade of the 29th Division, and two batteries of Royal Horse Artillery. The artillery of the 1st Australian Division shortly afterwards relieved the New Zealanders. The infantry of the 1st Australian Division, on coming into the line near Gueudecourt, was covered by the artilleries of the 30th and 41st British Divisions and two artillery brigades of the 29th Division; but on Nov. 1 the artillery of the 2nd Australian Division relieved that of the 41st. The supporting field artillery was then as follows:

5th Aust. Division's Sector.
12th Div. Artillery.
1st Aust. Div. Artillery.
One Bde., 29th Div. Artillery.
Two batteries, R.H.A.

1st Aust. Division's Sector.
30th Div. Artillery.
2nd Aust. Div. Artillery.
Two Bdes., 29th Div. Artillery

Each group was subdivided into two smaller groups covering the right and left brigades of each division respectively.

The heavy artillery allotted to the I Anzac Corps included on Oct. 30 the following groups of batteries of heavy artillery: 3rd, 14th, 21st, and 60th—heavy howitzers for bombardment; 23rd (batteries of 4.7-inch, 6-inch, and 12-inch guns) for counter-battery work; and 18th and 62nd (60-pounders). Altogether Brigadier-General L. D. Fraser (commanding the Corps heavy artillery) now controlled no less than 87 heavy guns or howitzers.

²³ The roads and cross-roads close behind the front line were for this reason dangerous, especially "Factory Corner," north of Flers. Here Lieut E. Springfield (of Daylesford, Vic.) of the 31st Battalion was killed almost as soon as the 5th Division arrived.

The 5th Division had entered the line under the XV Corps (Lieutenant-General Du Cane),²⁴ which had issued to General M'Cay orders for the attack intended on the 25th; but on the 23rd rain fell. On that day the XIV Corps, on the right of the XV, attacked to assist the French, but suffered 2,000 casualties with little gain. As the rain continued, the projected offensive in front of Bapaume was postponed from day to day, and by October 30th, when the I Anzac Corps took over from the XV, it had been fixed for November 1st. The 55th and 56th Battalions were therefore on the 30th sent back to the front line. The brigadier, General Hobkirk,²⁵ visiting the front line that day, noted:

Men very cheery but worn out with exposure. Both British and German troops walking about the parapets looking at each other. Rifles covered with mud.

General Elliott of the 15th Brigade reported to M'Cay that to attack in such ground was sheer madness.

Fighting was indeed impossible. The rain came on again; the attack was further postponed and the two battalions again withdrawn. In the past week hardly any work on the existing trenches had been possible, almost the whole labour of the troops having been concentrated on carrying up stores for the attack and (a most difficult task under these conditions) the digging of "jumping-off" trenches in front of and behind the front line. The old trenches were now in such a state that the 56th was brought out over the open in preference to wading through the saps. Even so, the two miles' journey to "Carlton Trench" near Longueval occupied six hours and utterly exhausted the troops. The operation having been again postponed to November 5th, the infantry of the 5th Division was relieved by that of the 2nd, newly arrived from Ypres. There were left, however, some of the 5th Division's engineers and ambulances, and, to avoid a change of staff immediately before action, General M'Cay and the staff of the 5th Division remained in charge.

The operations had again twice been whittled down, and the assault on the first objective was now separated from the

²⁴ Gen. Sir John Du Cane, G.C.B., R.A. Commanded XV Corps, 1916/18; Senior British Military Representative with Marshal Foch, 1918/19; Governor of Malta, 1927/31. Of Essex, Eng.; b. London, 5 May, 1865.

²⁵ Brig.-Gen. C. J. Hobkirk, C.M.G., D.S.O. Commanded 14th Aust. Inf. Bde., 1916/17, 120th (Highland) Inf. Bde., 1918. Officer of British Regular Army; of Treleach, Mon., Eng.; b. Edinburgh, Scotland, 16 July, 1869.

major enterprise, which on November 4th was indefinitely postponed. The Fifth (Reserve) Army's projected offensive—originally subsidiary to that of the Fourth—had thus become much the more important. As, however, its continual postponement through rain was interfering with the main winter's task of training the troops for the spring offensive, Haig proposed its abandonment, but at the urgent request of Foch, whose troops were still attacking, he agreed to wait until the middle of November for suitable weather. "While awaiting better weather for further operations on the Ancre,"²⁸ the smaller enterprises of the Fourth Army, which more closely affected the French, were deliberately pursued. It was in these that the Australians were involved.

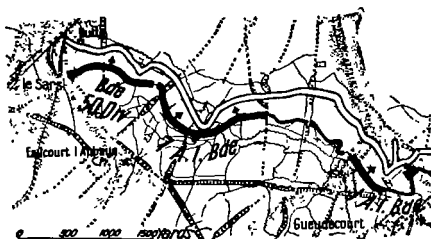
But the conditions on the Fourth Army's front were now unimaginable except by those actually engaged, and the insistence of the higher commanders on again pressing them drew strong protest from Lord Cavan, commanding the XIV Corps, which had been carrying out repeated assaults in the mud before Le Transloy. To assist the French he had, as ordered, issued instructions for the operation on November 5th. But he desired to know whether it was deliberately intended to sacrifice the British right in order to help the French left—since a sacrifice it must be. He had already lost 5,320 men in attempts on these trenches.

No one who has not visited the front (he wrote) can really know the state of exhaustion to which the men are reduced. The conditions are far worse than in the First Battle of Ypres; all my general officers and staff officers agree that they are the worst they have seen, owing to the enormous distance of the carry of all munitions.

These representations, supported by Rawlinson, were explained by Haig to Foch, and the plan of attack by the XIV Corps was modified. The operation in which the I Anzac Corps was concerned was a separate one, to take place, for convenience, on the same day. The III and XV Corps, whose combined front lay east and west in the valley south-west of Bapaume, had three, and in some places four, times attempted without success to gain the lower ends of the knuckles overlooking that shallow depression; the projected action would be an attempt to gain only part of them. The right division (the 50th) of the III Corps from Le Sars and

²⁸ *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches*, p. 48. Joffre was at this time particularly anxious to obtain visible results from the Somme offensive.

Eaucourt-l'Abbaye would attack the double German line on the flat knuckle on which lay the Butte de Warlencourt, a large ancient mound 200 yards south-west of the Roman road to Bapaume, while the left division of the I Anzac Corps assaulted the same lines farther east. Only one brigade of each division would operate; a German salient which protruded into the Australian line north of Gueudecourt, and had been formerly included in the objectives, was now to be captured in a small separate operation by the 1st Australian Division, which on October 30th had relieved the 29th Division.



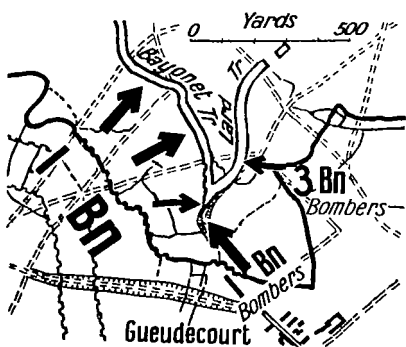
It was not intended actually to attack in the wet; and when, after nightfall on November 4th, rain began to fall, there was tense anxiety both in M'Cay's headquarters at Longueval²⁷ and in Corps Headquarters far back at Heilly as to whether the main operation, timed for 9.10 the next morning, should be countermanded. But the 7th Brigade was then on its way to the assembly position; if instructions were to reach all troops, a decision must be given by midnight. At 11.8 p.m. the commander of the British 50th Division, being consulted, gave his opinion against postponement. At 11.11, considering that the rain which had already fallen would not render the operation impossible, M'Cay informed General White that he would accept the risk and attack. At 12.30 a.m. General Paton of the 7th Brigade reported that the going in No-Man's Land was fairly good, but that the trenches were knee-deep in mud and some of the assembly trenches could not be found. To avoid the effect of rushed preparation, he recommended that the attack should be postponed for twenty-four hours. His report was telephoned by M'Cay to Birdwood, who decided that the disadvantages of delay at that stage would outweigh the advantages; the

²⁷ "Carlton Trench."

attack must therefore go forward. About the same time the commander of the tanks reported that the solitary one which remained fit for action would not be able to take part owing to the state of the ground.

The small separate operation of the 1st Division could not in any case have been countermanded, since it was to be launched half-an-hour after midnight. The objective was a small triangular salient due to the existence of a deep sunken road in a depression 400 yards north of Gueudecourt. It had been thrice attacked—on October 7th, 12th, and 18th—and on the last two occasions "Bayonet Trench," leading north-west from it, had been entered but lost again. Most of the neighbouring saps and shell-holes were waterlogged, and in the rusty wire with which the edge of the road-cutting had been protected lay the bodies of English soldiers—one had rolled in the tangled strands till they wrapped him like a cocoon. The place was now to be assaulted by two companies of the 1st Battalion from the west and by three bombing parties of the 3rd from the south. As in the other sector to be attacked, the German line was for the most part about 250 yards distant from the British and just hidden from it by a slight curve of the ground, accurate bombardment being thus rendered difficult. To reduce the width of No-Man's

Land, advanced jumping-off trenches were being dug, and the infantry was to be further assisted by a barrage laid down by half the field guns for three minutes in No-Man's Land, 150 yards in front of the enemy line.²⁸ The attacking infantry would employ these minutes in leaving their trenches and advancing towards the barrage, which would then move



²⁸ The other half of the guns would meanwhile bombard the enemy's front line.

forward at fifty yards a minute, the infantry advancing behind it to the German trench.²⁹ Machine-guns also were to cover the advance, and during the emplacing of one of these on the front parapet, early on November 2nd, the A.I.F. sustained the loss of one of its youngest and best commanders, Lieutenant-Colonel Owen Howell-Price³⁰ of the 3rd Battalion, who, while superintending the work, was shot through the brain.

The leading company of the 1st Battalion (under Captain Phillip Howell-Price, a younger brother of the commander of the 3rd), after a tiring journey through the mud from Delville Wood, arrived at the front line about sunset on the 4th and filed into the jumping-off trench before dark. The second company (forming the right half of the two waves of attack) came up under Captain Jacobs³¹ at 9.30, partly over the open, and was seen by the enemy. Rain now began to fall. A third company, Captain Jackson's,³² came up over the open at 11.15 and was lined out in shell-holes close behind the jumping-off trench. This movement also was seen, the Germans sending up several "screw" rockets as a call to their artillery, which at once laid down a light barrage on No-Man's Land. The ground was thenceforth continuously illuminated by flares from the German front line, and the Australians, lying in mud and rain in conditions of the utmost misery, were aware that their plans had been detected. At 12.20, when according to orders the first wave should have crept out into No-Man's Land to wait for the barrage, both company commanders decided that the light of flares rendered this proceeding impossible. But the support company, which was to move up to the jumping-off trench in place of the first wave, advanced and crouched in the bottom of the trench beneath the bodies of the men of the first and second waves, who, with the rain still pouring, rested their shoulders on

²⁹ Gen. M'Cay of the 5th Division had on Oct. 27 reported that, in the then existing state of the ground, a barrage advancing fifty yards a minute would be too fast for the infantry.

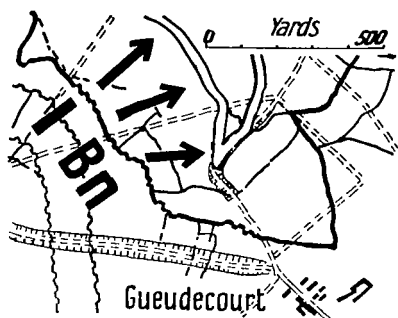
³⁰ Lieut.-Col. O. G. Howell-Price, D.S.O., M.C. Commanded 3rd Bn., 1916. Agriculturalist; of Richmond, N.S.W.; b. Kiama, N.S.W., 23 Feb., 1890. Died of wounds, 4 Nov., 1916 (*See pp. 12, 47, etc.; also Vol. I, pp. 441-2, Vol. II, pp. 538 et seq.*)

³¹ Previously mentioned in connection with Quinn's Post and Lone Pine (*Vol. II, pp. 37-8 and 546-7*).

³² Capt. C. Jackson, 1st Bn. Of Sydney, b. 18 March, 1888.

one edge of the trench and their heels on the other, and arched themselves in order to make room for their mates beneath.

When the barrage fell in No-Man's Land, the troops had a hundred yards to go to reach it before it advanced; but in the mud this distance could not be so quickly covered. The barrage, which had three times been practised,⁸³ was admirably thrown, but, by the time when the infantry topped the rise and came in full sight of the enemy, the line of shells had already left the German trench. The orderly advance of the two waves over the muddy No-Man's Land, wrote young Price afterwards, "was really a very nice piece of work," but, as they moved down the slope to Bayonet Trench, machine-gun fire from the right began to sweep them. As they reached the German

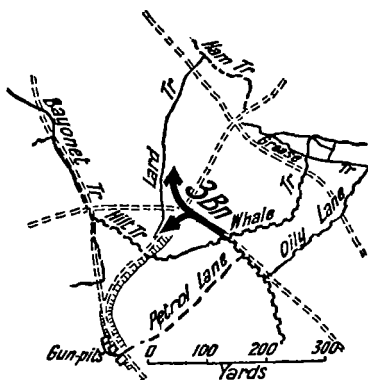


wire they were met by rifle-fire and a shower of bombs. "This," wrote Howell-Price, "was the turning point of what had up to the present been excellent work. Our men hesitated, and were lost." A few entered the German trench; the rest—their officers vainly trying to rally them—fled back over the rise. A few stubborn spirits remained for a short time, throwing bombs at the enemy, but the wave had ebbed.

A telephone had been established in the "jumping-off" trench, and Price, on returning thither, informed his battalion commander of the repulse and obtained leave to strengthen his line with the third company and make a second attack. This was launched at once—at 12.55—but went with less dash than the first, and when met with rifle and bomb fire fell back. "This," wrote Price, informing his battalion commander, "is not a report which I like to make, but we

⁸³ The first "trial barrage," a few days before, had been noticeably ragged, and the infantry asked for it to be practised again. In the last rehearsal it was excellent.

did our damnedest to pull it off." The rest of the night was spent in bringing in the wounded, many of whom lay close to the German wire.³⁴ An attack by part of the bombers of the 1st Battalion, from the gun-pits down the sunken road on the right flank, had, as soon as it emerged, been detected by a strong German post at the bend of the road and "wiped out" by machine-gun fire, Lieutenant Finlayson³⁵ and his first two sections being mown down. His sergeant, with the remaining party, had bombed the post, but were driven back. The three bombing parties of the 3rd Battalion, however, attacking the sunken road from the south through the muddy lines of the 7th Battalion, dashed across the road and reached "Lard Trench." Lieutenant Loveday,³⁶ the leader, and a section of bombers and twenty-two others were here met by half-a-dozen Germans, who fired at five yards' range, but they killed



these and then swept to the right, bombed the dugouts, and, after killing thirty-five and capturing five, seized this half of the trench. The second party, under Lieutenant Kemmis,³⁷ turned to the left, but the enemy fled before them to a strong-post on higher ground, whence they fired down and eventually forced Kemmis's party to retire. The third party, under Lieutenant Bishop,³⁸ moved out from "Grease Trench" and, joining Loveday, helped, with an additional

³⁴ Col. W. W. Hearne of the 2nd Field Ambulance was conspicuous in this work, which continued until at dawn two stretcher-bearers were shot by the enemy. It was observed, however, that the Germans themselves afterwards tended some of the wounded near their own lines.

³⁵ Lieut. R. B. Finlayson, 1st Bn. Bank clerk; of Wollongong, N.S.W.; b. Wollongong, 6 March, 1890. Killed in action, 5 Nov., 1916.

³⁶ Lieut. L. W. S. Loveday, M.C.; 3rd Bn. Clerk; of Manly, N.S.W.; b. Casino, N.S.W., 14 July, 1893.

³⁷ Capt. L. F. Kemmis, M.C.; 3rd Bn. Farmer and grazier; of Quirindi and Willala, N.S.W.; b. Armidale, N.S.W., 1 Sept., 1881.

³⁸ Lieut. H. McK. Bishop, 3rd Bn. Wheelwright; of Bega, N.S.W.; b. Moruya, N.S.W., 12 Jan., 1894. Killed in action, 5 Nov., 1916.

working party, to dig a trench back to the Australian lines. This had almost been completed when about noon the failure of the 1st Battalion was definitely ascertained and all parties of the 3rd were necessarily ordered back. No ground, therefore, was gained. The night attack, made in circumstances which rendered success almost inconceivable, had cost 170 casualties (including nine officers) in the 1st Battalion, and 38 in the 3rd.⁸⁹

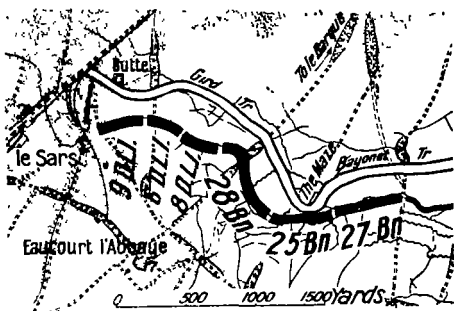
The rain, however, cleared after midnight, and the morning for the larger attack broke, as the meteorological staff had foretold, fine but with a furious wind blowing sixty miles an hour. Two of the three battalions of the 7th Brigade responsible for the Australian share in the operation had taken over the front line on the night of November 3rd; of the others, the 25th, which was to form the centre, and the 26th—the reserve—were to have moved up from Carlton Trench, Longueval, on the night of November 4th. But at this juncture there occurred several serious hitches. First, through the state of the roads, the rations of the brigade were twenty-four hours late, and on arrival were sent on pack-mules straight to the front. But as the orders were that the attacking battalions should take these rations into the fight—as well as their emergency (or “iron”) rations—the commander of the 25th Battalion held back his troops near Longueval waiting for them. Half-an-hour before midnight, still having no word as to the arrival of the rations, he ordered his companies to move, leaving behind a party to bring the supplies if they arrived. The delay resulted in a breakdown of the night's arrangements. The reserve battalion (26th) had gone forward ahead of the 25th, which lost its way. The approach of dawn found officers of the 25th desperately seeking the right direction while their men sat on a forward slope where in daylight the enemy guns would have shattered them. The leading files of the battalion

⁸⁹ In the 1st Battalion the officers killed were Lieuts. J. H. McIntyre, H. M. Lanser, R. B. Finlayson, N. J. Mullarkey, and F. S. Phillips. Lieut. Bishop of the 3rd was killed next day by the short shooting of the supporting heavy batteries, which, without sufficient notice, were called on to fire in a gale of wind; in the same occurrence nine of his men were killed and seventeen wounded. (McIntyre belonged to Marrickville, N.S.W.; Lanser to Waverley, N.S.W.; Finlayson to Wollongong, N.S.W.; Mullarkey to Kogarah, N.S.W.; Phillips to Casino, N.S.W.)

reached the front line a few minutes before the hour of the attack. According to a statement by the medical officer, some of the men sat down and simply wept with fatigue.

Nor was this the only miscarriage. To enable the attacking troops to clamber out of the trenches, which in parts had been rendered deep by the constant throwing out of mud, 600 scaling ladders were to be provided. At noon on November 4th these ladders were only beginning to reach the Longueval area, and General M'Cay was faced by the certainty that they would not arrive in time unless drastic measures were taken. He accordingly authorised one of his staff officers, Major King, to requisition the horses of the field ambulances and to have the ladders carried forward on the sledges which were to have brought back the wounded. In spite of the protests of its commander, all the horses of the 6th Field Ambulance at the advanced dressing-station⁴⁰ were then commandeered, as well as twenty from the 7th Field Ambulance. Before dawn the animals were worn out, and many of the sledges broken, but the ladders had been delivered at the front, though in some parts too late for distribution.

The 50th (North-umbrian) Division was to attack with three battalions on the left, and the 7th Australian Brigade with three on the right; these troops were to be in position during the dark, so that there would be no preliminary movement in day-



Plan of attack, November 5.

light to give warning to the enemy. But shortly before dawn, as the 25th Battalion, which was to assault the projecting

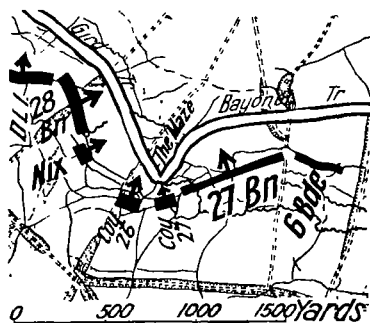
⁴⁰ At "Thistle Dump," near Longueval.

triangle known as "The Maze,"⁴¹ had not arrived, General Paton determined to substitute for it the reserve companies of his two flanking Battalions (27th and 28th) and one company from his reserve (26th), forming them into a composite battalion under Colonel Walker of the 25th, who had come forward ahead of his troops. While Paton was standing with Walker on the parapet—the trenches being too muddy—arranging the necessary movement, a German sniper wounded him. Walker, though next in command of the brigade, remained for the time being to direct the temporary battalion. A company of the 27th (South Australia) formed its right, and one of the 26th (Queensland and Tasmania) its centre. One of the 28th (Western Australia) was to furnish its left, but, as the head of the 25th (Queensland) was now approaching, the foremost company of that battalion was chosen instead. Just as the barrage fell, this company arrived at the head of the communication trench, "Turk Lane," somewhat to the left of its proper position, and its fine young commander—Captain Nix of Pozières fame—led it straight forward over the sap-head.

The men were desperately weary and short of rations; but the day was bright and clear, the wind a cool gale, the barrage prompt and good. On the other hand the task of getting the 7th Brigade into the line in time for this offensive had been too hurried to permit of thorough preparation. Although the written orders both from M'Cay and Paton were clear, a vital alteration appears to have been made in those given to some of the front-line troops. As in the 1st Division's attack, to help the troops to cross No-Man's Land, the barrage, starting at 9.10 a.m., was to lie for three minutes in No-Man's Land, 150 yards short of the German line. The infantry would leave their trenches at 9.10 and would have three minutes in which to catch up this barrage before the guns advanced their fire fifty yards a minute and

⁴¹ This was the point where a strong double loop-line ("Gallwitz Stellung"—"Gird Trenches") of the old third German line ("Below Stellung"—"Flers Lane") ran into the existing British front. The Germans had dug two short switches ("Spatny Riegel" and "Neuer Spatny Riegel") connecting the uncaptured part of the Gird lines with their front farther east in "Bayonet Trench" ("Lichtenfels Stellung"), and these, with two communication trenches, formed "The Maze" (*See plates 68 and 69 and Vol. XII, plate 284.*)

the infantry moved behind the barrage to attack the German line. But the actual order which reached at least part of the infantry was that they should not move until 9.13. How far this fatal error extended will probably never be known. The fact remains that, although the going in No-Man's Land was better than was expected, the infantry in this attack were far distant from their barrage. When, after clambering from slippery trenches and threading their way through stubble between the shell-holes, they presently caught sight of the German trench for which they were eagerly watching, the few grey helmets which marked it appeared to be still 150 or even 200 yards distant, and the shells of the barrage were already bursting farther ahead. Other grey helmets quickly appeared in growing numbers as the German sentries warned the garrisons. In The Maze—opposite the Australian centre—clusters of the enemy could from the first be seen firing with all their energy into the advancing lines on either side of them. The Maze trenches, having been wrongly marked in the earlier maps as being partly in British possession, had to a great extent, if not entirely, escaped the artillery-fire; and, as part of them were left unattacked owing to Nix's company emerging too far to the west, their garrison maintained this fire with impunity throughout the operation. Nix was killed; the left battalion (28th) was enfiladed but continued to advance, although the enemy's front line (Gird Trench) was now crowded with Germans, who, some of them standing on the parapet, poured in heavy rifle-fire. When several machine-guns began to appear, the Western Australians, dropping into shell-holes, at first shot down the gunners; but others took their places, and within a few minutes the enemy had beaten down this opposition, and thenceforward deadly machine-gun fire pinned the 28th to the crater-field, fifty to a hundred yards





66. AUSTRALIANS IN IMPROVISED SHELTERS NEAR MONTAUBAN, WINTER OF 1916

Aust War Memorial Official Photo No E45



67. AN AUSTRALIAN DRIVER AND HIS PACK-HORSE

It was noted that, in spite of great difficulties and hardships, Australian drivers kept their horses in excellent condition

Aust War Memorial Official Photo No E2

To face p 912



68. THE "MAZE" AT "YELLOW CUT"

Part of the trenches attacked by infantry of the 2nd Division on the 5th and 14th November, 1916

*Aust War Memorial Official Photo No E220
Taken in February, 1917*



69. YELLOW CUT, LOOKING NORTH-EAST FROM THE MAZE

A branch of the sunken road leading from Ligny-Thillois to the German front line. The photograph was taken (in February 1917) at the point where this "road" ran through the trenches held by the Germans during the winter.

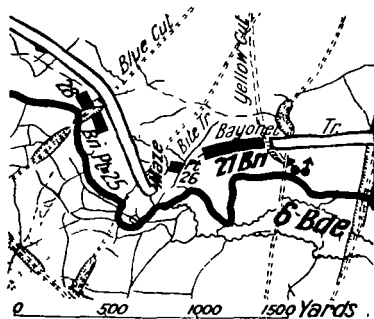
Aust War Memorial Official Photo No E248

To face p 913.

in front of the German line. The neighbouring British attack, as far as the Butte de Warlencourt, suffered the same fate; but on the extreme left the British swarmed over the sides of the Butte and seized a trench between the old chalk pit (from whose contents the Butte had been made) and the Bapaume road. The German garrison, however, in dugouts beneath the far side of the mound, resisted all attempts to seize the Butte.

The right Australian battalion (27th) had, like the rest, first seen the Germans 200 yards away busily preparing to resist. On its left about The Maze the enemy was thick, and throughout the advance machine-guns fired from there and from a distant trench on the left front ("Bite Trench"), but from the right, where the 6th Brigade had pushed out some Lewis guns into No-Man's Land to cover that flank, there came little interference, and the centre company of the 27th under Captain Elder,⁴² screened from the worst of the fire on its left, succeeded in rushing several hundred yards of Bayonet Trench. This appeared to be, like parts of the British front, merely a line of connected shell-holes, and was garrisoned by a series of posts with bombs but without rifles.

Part of the companies on either flank also reached this trench, and for an hour and a half Elder's men dug solidly to improve the position. All was thought to be well, but he had not succeeded in establishing firm touch with the flanking companies when, about 10.30, bombing was heard on the right and he found



that the Germans were attacking his trench. Stick bombs could be seen flying, and a file of enemy bombers reinforcing along the bank of a half-sunken road ("Yellow Cut")⁴³ on

⁴² Major J. D. Elder, M.C.; 27th Bn. Physical culture director; of Glasgow, Scotland, and Adelaide, S. Aust; b. Dunfermline, Scotland, 5 Dec., 1888.

⁴³ See plates 68 and 69.

his right, fully exposed and offering a splendid target. But rifles were mostly blocked with mud and hardly a shot could be fired. Elder's men, after finishing their own bombs, used German stick grenades, of which a large number lay about. A pigeon message was sent, and this duly arrived at the "loft" of the army corps; but before action could be taken the handful of the 27th—driven in, now, from left as well as right, and with its bombs running short—began to break from the trench. Elder was eventually forced out and, after lying all day in a shell-hole near the German wire, returned to the Australian line at night with a remnant of his company. Part of the composite battalion, however, had succeeded in penetrating The Maze, and, being reinforced with bombs, held on despite all efforts of the enemy.

Spectators in all parts of the Anzac area had watched the steadily advancing line disappear behind the curve of the plateau. At a few points it had been observed to enter a trench, and some of the returning wounded reported that the objectives had been gained. The gale prevented British aeroplanes from reconnoitring the line, and a heavy barrage laid down by the enemy cut off with its smoke all further view. No other reports except those from Elder were received, but the commanders of the centre and left battalions believed, and reported, that their objectives had been gained. As the 50th Division knew that, except near the Butte, its troops had failed, it was arranged between I Anzac and III Corps that the British right should attack again during the afternoon. Fortunately, before this attempt was made, it was realised at the front that the Australian left was not in the enemy's trench. Two platoons of the 28th, sent forward about noon to reinforce the vanished companies, disappeared in the same manner, and the battalion scouts shortly afterwards found that both these and their predecessors were in shell-holes short of the German trench. When at dusk the survivors began to creep back, the Germans, imagining themselves attacked, threw a heavy barrage on the front.

At midday General Legge and the staff of the 2nd Division had taken over control of operations, M'Cay and the staff of the 5th returning to their own division. The intention now was that the right of the 50th Division and the

left of the Australians should attack next morning to make good the portion of the objective between their two supposed footholds. At 9 p.m., however, the 7th Brigade reported that only three weak companies of the 25th were available, and these quite exhausted. The operation was therefore cancelled, and shortly afterwards reports of reconnaissances (among them, one by Major Bachtold of the 14th Field Company, sent forward to dig communications to the positions supposed to have been captured) first brought home the fact that no Australian troops were in the enemy line except at The Maze. The British also had been driven from their gains near the Butte. Except for the tiny foothold in The Maze, which was lost a few days later, no ground had been won. The enemy's shell-fire was not comparable with that of Pozières, but in proportion to the numbers engaged the loss had not been slight—700 in the 50th Division and 819 in the 7th Brigade.⁴⁴ The latter was forthwith relieved by the 5th.

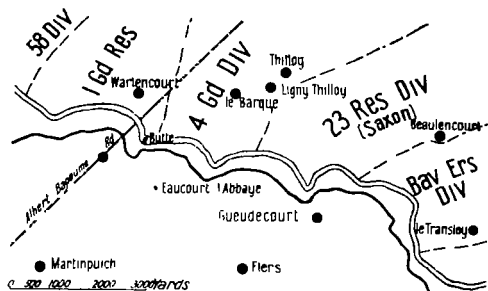
The Germans opposed to the Australians in this attack were fresh troops of the 4th Guard Division. Like the British, the enemy had been sending away to quieter fronts troops worn out upon the Somme, and bringing them back when refreshed. Thus the XIX (Saxon) Corps, after opposing the Australians at Pozières and subsequently holding a quiet sector near La Bassée, had been back in the Somme area athwart the Bapaume road when the Australians returned. Here the XIX Corps, besides its two proper divisions, had two others under its command, the whole forming a "Group," of which there were four (now entitled "A," "B," "C," and "D") on the battle-front of the First German Army, north of the Somme. The group controlled by the XIX Corps was "B"; its front extended from near Pys to Le Transloy.

After about three weeks' heavy fighting, it was being relieved on November 4 by the Guard Reserve Corps (the same which had relieved it beyond Pozières, had faced the Australians at Mouquet Farm, and, like them, had been sent to rest at Ypres). The Saxons were suffering under British pressure and bad weather, and, as before,

⁴⁴ The details of these are as follows—Brigade Headquarters—1 officer, 25th Battalion—4 officers, 77 others; 26th Battalion—5 officers, 132 others; 27th Battalion—10 and 303, 28th Battalion—7 and 288; 7th Machine Gun Company—1 and 5; 7th L.T.M. Bty—2 others. Officers killed (or died of wounds): 25th Battalion—Captain J. E. Nix; 26th Battalion—Lieutenants J. M. Kennedy and J. J. Smith; 27th Battalion—Captain E. A. Warren, Lieutenants J. R. Sommerville, B. Whyborn, E. B. Olifent, F. T. Measday, R. W. Rees, and R. H. Guthrie; 28th Battalion—Lieutenant W. R. Moore. (Nix belonged to Charters Towers, Q'land; Kennedy to Geelong, Vic; Smith to Hurstville, N.S.W., and Maryborough, Q'land; Warren to Mount Gambier, S. Aust.; Sommerville to Hindmarsh, S. Aust.; Whyborn to Denial Bay, S. Aust.; Olifent to Henley Beach, S. Aust.; Measday to Glenelg, S. Aust.; Rees to Port Adelaide, S. Aust.; Guthrie to London and Adelaide; Moore to Narrogin, W. Aust.)

their relief, originally intended for November 6, had to be hastened. The 1st Guard Reserve and 4th Guard Divisions were moving into the line opposite Le Sars and Flers respectively, the 23rd (Saxon) Reserve and the Bavarian Ersatz Divisions on their left forming the remainder of the group.⁴⁵

The German staff had on November 1 discovered the presence of the 5th Australian Division in the line at Flers, and also the disappearance of the 2nd Australian from the front at Ypres. From this German General Headquarters had conjectured that the whole I Anzac



Corps was being brought to the Somme in order to provide reserves for a new attack. Other British divisions also were disappearing from the Ypres sector, and everything seemed to point to preparations by the British to attack on a broad front south of the Ancre, and possibly north of it also. On November 3 the 1st Australian Division was identified in the line north of Gueudecourt, and one of its men, after capture, gave the information that a general attack was to be made during the coming week along the whole Somme battle-front. If this failed, he said, operations would cease. The German staff was convinced that this was accurate, and that the British were only waiting for good weather to launch an attack extending as far north as Gommecourt.

The Germans were thus in possession of the original plan, but were unaware that, more than a fortnight before, it had been abandoned for a less extensive one. They had also noted that, in the area to which the Australians came, troops moved about with extraordinary freedom at from 2,000 to 3,000 yards behind the British front line. On November 3 German observers reported continual movement in the distant lines behind this sector, assemblies of troops near Eaucourt l'Abbaye, and a strong eastward movement of British batteries. The artillery of the XIX Corps was accordingly warned, and its southern wing was strengthened in order to guard against an attack on Le Transloy, the capture of which would have "turned" the German reserve trench-line on the slopes south of Bapaume.⁴⁶

Such was the situation when the Guard Reserve Corps came into the line. The historian of the 4th Guard Division recognises that its position was on the whole a strong one—its back country hidden from observation except by aeroplane, its own artillery observers well posted on the Bapaume heights, and its guns in hidden positions. Moreover the troops of the Guard Reserve Corps were much elated by finding their airmen at last active overhead.

⁴⁵ The machine-gun company of the 2nd Guard Reserve Regiment brought with it two Lewis guns captured at Mouquet Farm.

⁴⁶ The "R. I. Stellung" ("Till Trench"). Behind this on the heights there would still have lain the incomplete "R. II Stellung" skirting the southern edge of Bapaume.

On November 4 it was observed from air-photographs that trenches were being dug by the Australians threatening the small German salient north of Gueudecourt. So great appeared the risk of its being cut off that the corps staff considered the possibility of evacuating the place; but the 23rd (Saxon) Division,⁴⁷ some of whose troops held the salient, was opposed to this, as it might allow the British to outflank other positions. It was therefore decided not to withdraw until a new line had been built farther back, to bridge the gap which the withdrawal would create.

The expected attack—delivered (as already described) by the 1st Australian Brigade that night, and repulsed—was interpreted by the Germans as an attempt to gain a position from which flanking fire could be brought to assist the more important assault which they judged to be imminent. That attack, duly occurring at 9.10 a.m. on the 5th, fell upon the whole front of the 4th Guard Division, but barely extended to either of its neighbours. A German report states that the British aeroplanes were prevented by storm from patrolling, and the British artillery was in consequence affected, its lack of method being remarkable. The infantry, in the mud, fell easy victims to the fire of the German infantry. The length of Bayonet Trench seized by Captain Elder was in the sector of the 5th Foot Guards, which employed a reserve company to counter-attack.⁴⁸

The rest of the Australian attack and all except the extreme left of the British had been faced by the II Battalion, 5th Guard Grenadiers. After the battle this unit was relieved by the I Battalion. As the Australian nest in The Maze could not be ejected, a special bombardment of its position (Spatny Riegel) was ordered; but, according to the history of the 4th Guard Division, this post was not retaken until early on November 11. The German staff, having learnt that the 2nd Australian Division had taken over the front at midday on the 5th, assumed that this must indicate a desperate intention to continue the fight, and consequently imagined the attack to have been made on a much greater scale than was actually the case. This mistake found its way into the German *communiqué*, and into several German histories.

The attempt to advance in this sector—though no vital object was to be gained and the effort had already four times failed—was, through some process of mind extremely difficult to understand, at once ordered by the Fourth Army to be repeated at the earliest suitable moment. But November 7th was a day of drenching rain and wild gale, and—partly in consequence of the concentration of energy upon works needed for the next attack—the conditions became so appalling that this operation, at first fixed for the 9th, was eventually postponed until the 14th. Indeed, the attacks of November 4th-5th and 14th and the interval between them

⁴⁷ This division had moved into the line about the end of October.

⁴⁸ Saxon troops were still in reserve. One of their companies was sent to take this company's place; another carried ammunition for the 5th Guard Grenadiers.

formed the most trying period ever experienced by the A.I.F. on any front. On his journey into the trenches, each infantryman now carried his greatcoat, waterproof sheet, one blanket, 220 rounds of ammunition, and, when fighting was in prospect, two bombs, two sandbags, and two days' reserve rations, besides the remnant of that day's "issue." Thus burdened, the troops dragged their way along the sledge-tracks beside the communication trenches, the latter—except in the actual front-system—being now never used. But the sledge-tracks also were by this time deep thick mud, which, especially when drying, tugged like glue at the boot-soles, so that the mere journey to the line left men and even pack-animals utterly exhausted. In the dark those who stepped away from the road fell again and again into shell-holes; many pack-animals became fast in the mud and had to be shot, and men were continually pulled out, often leaving their boots and sometimes their trousers. Three of the 25th Battalion had to be dug out of the "jumping-off" trench on November 5th; a company commander of the 5th Pioneers was dragged out by a mule; a few weeks later a rescue party broke the back of an officer of the 2nd Division whom they were trying to haul from the mud. After each fight, when the carriage of wounded across this area had to be performed almost entirely by stretcher-bearers,⁴⁹ these men, working in four or five relays of six or eight to each stretcher, were quickly worn out; and, though detachments of the 21st and 24th Battalions worked devotedly as well as all the available bearers of the field ambulances, numbers of wounded, after being tended at the forward aid-posts, had to be left lying for twelve hours in the open without blankets⁵⁰ for want of men to carry them. When sledges became available, single horses were often unable to drag them. A man of the 27th has recorded that when, after lying in No-Man's Land for five days with a smashed leg, he was eventually brought to the trenches by stretcher-bearers under a white flag, he had to be dragged thence over the mud area by three horses attached to a sledge.

⁴⁹ See Vol. XII, plate 279. (On Nov. 5 the horses which were to drag sleighs with the wounded had been worn out by taking ladders to the front line.)

⁵⁰ The sleighs for bringing the blankets had been used for bringing up the ladders.

Coming into the trenches under such conditions, and starting their tour of duty in a state of exhaustion, the garrison of the front line usually had to stay there forty-eight hours before relief. At first the men tried to shelter themselves from rain by cutting niches in the trench-walls, but this practice was forbidden, several soldiers having been smothered through the slipping in of the sodden earth-roof, and the trenches broken down. If, to keep themselves warm, men stamped or moved about, the floor of the trench turned to thin mud. At night the officers sometimes walked up and down in the open and encouraged their men to do the same, chancing the snipers; but for the many there was no alternative but to stand almost still, freezing, night and day. Captain Morgan Jones⁵¹ has recorded that he saw one of the 20th Battalion standing with his feet deep in the mud, his back against the trench-wall, shaken by shivering-fits from head to foot, but fast asleep.

Mud and mud (says the diary of the 18th Battalion on November 8). Men cannot stand still long in one place without sinking up to their knees. Rations arrived, but it was only with great difficulty they could be carried up.

"Taking 'em up," said a youngster afterwards, "we were so 'done' we didn't give a damn whether a shell got us or not; but after dumping 'em we began to take an interest in life again." No fires were allowed in the front line,⁵² and at this stage no food or drink could arrive there hot—except occasionally tea, which was carried in petrol-tins and reeked so strongly of gasoline that men declared after drinking it they dared not light a cigarette.

In all British divisions subjected to them since the middle of October these conditions had resulted in the occurrence of the form of frost-bite commonly known as "trench feet." This trouble, resulting from local stoppage of circulation, and too often ending in gangrene and the actual loss of the foot, could be prevented by discarding the tightly-wound puttees and wrapping loose sandbags instead around the

⁵¹ Capt. C. P. Morgan Jones, 20th Bn. Journalist; of Bondi, N.S.W.; b. Cheltenham, Glos., Eng., 10 April, 1889. Died 25 Sept., 1936.

⁵² "Tommy cookers" (small tins of solidified alcohol) and primus stoves were used in the front area, but the supply of both was utterly inadequate, and kerosene for the primuses was insufficient.

shins, wearing loose boots unlaced at the top and regularly taking them off and rubbing the feet with whale-oil, drying feet and boots in specially provided drying-places, putting on dry socks, and maintaining the body with one hot meal daily and an occasional drink of hot coffee or cocoa. Its ravages early in the war had been met by making it a disciplinary offence to neglect these precautions and regarding its prevalence as a disgrace to the unit in which it occurred. Most of these precautions, however, were utterly impossible in the conditions then obtaining on the Somme.⁵³ In the last week of October the 29th Division had to report that 164 cases had been admitted to field ambulances, the 4th (British) 159, and the 9th (Scottish) 95. In the week ending November 4th the 33rd and 17th Divisions (responsible for most of the week's fighting in the mud) reported 278 and 212 respectively, the 5th Australian 167, 1st Australian 112, 8th British 106. From November 4th to 11th the largest figures were: 17th Division 363, 1st Australian 231, 2nd Australian 205, 33rd Division 104, 50th Division 71. But—like the battalion war-diaries, most of which do not even mention “trench feet”—these figures, officially reported, probably give but a slight notion of the true number of cases.⁵⁴ After a tour in the line during this continued wet-weather offensive, practically all the men in many Australian battalions were suffering from “trench feet,” at least in its incipient stages. Thus, when the 27th Battalion (7th Brigade) was relieved after the fight of November 5th, ninety per cent. of its men were said to be affected. In the 5th Brigade (which relieved the 7th) the 17th Battalion, coming out of the line 498 strong⁵⁵ on the night of November 9th, sent to hospital an officer and 150 men, mostly with trench feet, and reported that 140 others would be unfit

⁵³ For example, in the deep sticky mud the boots and sandbags would be pulled off the men's legs.

⁵⁴ In the case of the Australians, at all events, the numbers known to have occurred are difficult to reconcile with the numbers shown in the Fourth Army report. Most were also cases of exhaustion, and were possibly reported by divisions as such. The D.M.S., Fourth Army, on Nov. 10 drew the attention of the Adjutant-General's branch to the fact that “very large numbers of Australian divisions were going sick; 1,500 have been admitted to Casualty Clearing Stations in the last 36 hours. They are not suffering from any disease, but are merely tired and exhausted.”

⁵⁵ Not including some 200, detached for semi-permanent fatigues, such as road-making, who were not available to the unit during its tour in the front line.

for duty for several days. Its sister battalion, the 18th, reported 4 officers and 132 men sent to hospital, and another 100 unfit for duty.

Although the Adjutant-General's branch of the Fourth Army staff expressed the opinion that trench feet was "merely a matter of discipline," and circulated a foolscap sheet setting out the measures to be taken to prevent it, the medical authorities of Fourth Army and Corps were under no misapprehension as to the difficulty of carrying them out. With conditions so bad that some of the 6th Brigade had to be dug out of their trench before they could be relieved, and that the mere movement from Delville Wood to the front line occupied the greater part of a day, alleviation would not be secured by discipline alone. Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Butler, the D.A.D.M.S. of I Anzac, proceeding to the advanced dressing-station and living there, kept his superiors well informed.

The sick wastage of all divisions in the front line is going up rapidly (noted the D.M.S. of the Fourth Army on November 3), more especially among the Australians. This is principally due to the exhaustion of the troops and the appalling conditions of wet and mud and discomfort under which they exist in the front line. It is impossible while fighting is going on to do anything to alleviate it.

This conclusion, hopeless though it might seem, was almost literally true. The one alleviation possible at that time was to cut down the duration of each battalion's tour in the front line. This had accordingly been reduced to four days—the companies spending two days in the firing line and two in support—and sometimes less. But the reserve position in Switch and Gap Trenches, where another three days were usually spent, was merely an open muddy drain⁵⁸ in which men suffered almost as severely as in the front line. Most authorities well realised what ought to be done. The prime need was for the communications to the forward area to be so improved that material, and troops in fresh condition, could arrive there to commence its improvement. Both Generals Walker (1st Australian Division) and Legge (2nd Australian Division) reported to this effect, and Legge urged that the troops, if they were not to attack for a

⁵⁸ See a photograph taken there on 23 November, 1916—*Vol. XII, plate 273*.

week, might be so informed, in order that the energy wasted in keeping them in constant readiness for attack might be turned to the improvement of the communications. Gellibrand and others advised that duckboard tracks should be laid—not in the communication trenches, which were impassable, but over the open beside them.

None of these suggestions, however, could at the moment be complied with, nor could attention be turned primarily to the front area, since a trouble even more serious had now occurred farther back. On October 31st, under the constant traffic—chiefly of ammunition lorries for the heavy artillery—the Mametz-Fricourt road broke down and had to be closed for a few hours; on other roads there occurred long blocks in the traffic which lasted for hours at a time, the crowded vehicles standing for as much as a mile on either side of the points of blockage while the traffic-control men, or some officer who happened to be handy, had the obstacle⁸⁷ cleared and gradually worked the traffic through. The danger here was not from the enemy; the German air force, though much more active than during the summer, missed the opportunities, offering daily and nightly, of bombing this crowded mass.⁸⁸ But lorries and even ambulances took twelve hours to make a circuit of a few miles; the actual supply of food to the troops became precarious; and the staffs of Corps and Army found themselves faced by the imminent probability that all motor-traffic on roads to the active front would come to a complete standstill. Consequently by far the most urgent need of the moment was to strengthen the roads: the first measure for improvement even of the front trenches was to remake the roads, so that the lorries could bring up material for laying down tracks over which could be carried duckboards and other material for making tracks farther forward. By these the required materials would eventually reach the front line.

⁸⁷ Usually a bogged lorry.

⁸⁸ The Germans occasionally shelled the Longueval and Bazentin trains, whose steam they could see, and whose whistles they could hear. They regularly shelled the dumps at The Quarry, and one shell, hitting a lorry on the road from Montauban to Longueval, killed 12 men and wounded 13. But German airmen, though they set the sky aglow on Nov. 6 by igniting a French ammunition dépôt at Cerisy, failed to bomb the congested roads.

An energetic—at times a desperate—campaign to overcome the winter conditions had been launched by the I Anzac Corps as soon as it took over the area. The 5th and 1st Divisions had noted that the long distance between the front line and supporting troops, headquarters, and supply dépôts, though no disadvantage during the summer, was now a cause of trouble and danger.⁵⁹ The headquarters and supply and engineer dépôts of the 5th Division were respectively 15,000, 17,000, and 23,000 yards from the front line. The 350 men of the 8th Brigade⁶⁰ in the forward lines were supported by 300 in "Flers Trench" a mile to the rear, and by another 300 in "Crest Trench" 3,000 yards farther back. The brigade reserve (one battalion and the surplus troops) was farther away still, at Montauban. The result was not only tactically dangerous—since, if the enemy attacked, it would be hours before the supporting troops could have reached the front—but the long journeys wore out the troops on relief, blocked the traffic, and broke down the roads.⁶¹ It was therefore urgent to advance both the camps for the reserves and the dumps of supplies. This meant the building of hutments and of railways, and, until these could be supplied, everything depended on the roads.

These conditions affected all corps of the Fourth Army. In the I Anzac Corps the burden of the campaign against them centred on one man, General White. Partly because every branch of the corps work was affected, and partly because he was known to all as a man who "could get things done," almost every branch contrived to have recourse to him; and during this, the most difficult period of the A.I.F.'s existence, he wielded an influence never approached by that of any other officer of the A.I.F. with the exception of General Monash at the end of the war. Two days after the arrival of corps headquarters he attacked the problem in a memorandum laying down a policy for roads, railways, and camps, and requiring careful forecasts to be made of the

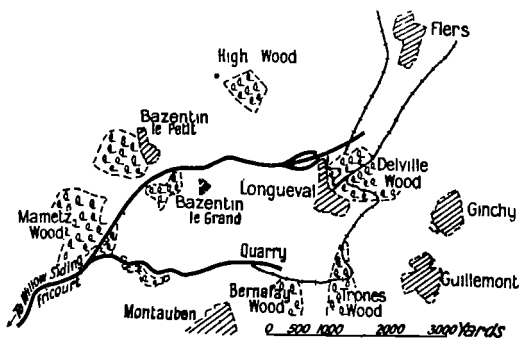
⁵⁹ There are recorded observations to this effect by Lieutenant-Colonel A. B. Carey (of Hendon, Middlesex, Eng.) of the 5th Australian Division, and General H. B. Walker of the 1st.

⁶⁰ This brigade's sector was at first a narrow one, and only part of the troops were taken forward.

⁶¹ Despatches from corps and divisional headquarters took so long to get through that arrangements had to be made to communicate even the most secret information over the telephone or telegraph lines—a course usually avoided.

traffic so that it might be systematised. The main lines of this policy—further elaborated and discussed at conferences attended by himself, General Carruthers, and the engineers of the divisions—were as follows:

In pursuance of the policy of Fourth Army and XV Corps, the broad-gauge railway was to be thrust as far forward as possible in the gullies behind the Second Line Ridge, one branch (already in use) following an old French narrow-gauge line from Fricourt as far as a quarry in the gully north of Montauban; the other (to be ready about mid-November) diverging from this up a more northerly gully past Bazentin to Longueval. A huge dump was already being established at the "Quarry Siding," and Decauville railways were to be forthwith constructed from The Quarry to Longueval, and from Longueval forward into the area of each division. A specialist being called for to control the building and operation of the light railways of the I Anzac Corps, Lieutenant-Colonel Fewtrell⁶² of the 4th Pioneers, formerly in the railway service of the New South Wales Government, was appointed and was allotted for the work half a battalion of pioneers and several field companies. The even more urgent work on the roads was partitioned among officers appointed to take charge of specially divided "district" and "sub-districts."⁶³ There were allotted for this labour three battalions of infantry from the forward divisions, three British "labour" battalions, an Australian pioneer battalion, and several odd companies—a total of nearly eight battalions. The only hope lay in digging great drains and in patching the tracks with timber beams laid "corduroy" fashion. By November 6th 440 tons of road metal were arriving daily at Quarry and Willow Sidings.⁶⁴ The traffic-control



*Original scheme of railways, I Anzac Sector.
(A sketch of the railways eventually constructed will be included in Volume IV.)*

The Quarry to Longueval, and from Longueval forward into the area of each division. A specialist being called for to control the building and operation of the light railways of the I Anzac Corps, Lieutenant-Colonel Fewtrell⁶² of the 4th Pioneers, formerly in the railway service of the New South Wales Government, was appointed and was allotted for the work half a battalion of pioneers and several field companies. The even more urgent work on the roads was partitioned among officers appointed to take charge of specially divided "district" and "sub-districts."⁶³ There were allotted for this labour three battalions of infantry from the forward divisions, three British "labour" battalions, an Australian pioneer battalion, and several odd companies—a total of nearly eight battalions. The only hope lay in digging great drains and in patching the tracks with timber beams laid "corduroy" fashion. By November 6th 440 tons of road metal were arriving daily at Quarry and Willow Sidings.⁶⁴ The traffic-control

⁶² Maj.-Gen. A. C. Fewtrell, C.B., D.S.O., V.D. Commanded Aust. Mining Corps, 1915/16; 1st Anzac Light Railways, 1916/17. Civil engineer; of Sydney; b. Chester, Eng., 12 March, 1885.

⁶³ Colonel Carey, C.R.E., 5th Division, on whose careful observations and recommendations the schemes of railways and roads were largely based, was given charge of the "circuit" roads from Bazentin to The Quarry; Lieutenant-Colonel V. A. H. Sturdee (of Melbourne) took charge of the road from Albert to Montauban.

⁶⁴ "Willow Siding" was on the broad-gauge railway near Fricourt; 7,000 pit-props were delivered there about the same date for use on corduroy roads, and 5,000 railway sleepers at "Quarry Siding."

police increased their posts, the best known of which were at "Cosy Corner," near Montauban, and a very dangerous post in Longueval. They were also reinforced by some of the corps cavalry and cyclists.

In his scheme of camps White provided that each of the two front-line divisions must have, close behind the crest of the Second Line Ridge at Bernafay and Bazentin respectively, hutments for two infantry brigades and their attendant units; behind these in the "staging area" were to be three camps each for a whole brigade—near Fricourt, Mametz, and Montauban.⁶⁵ The scheme of works, which included also the making of three defence lines forward of the crest of the ridge, the provision of deep dugouts in the forward area, the building of sidings, provision of water-supply, tanks, bathing and drying places, and horse-standings, the manufacture of trench stores, well-sinking, loading and off-loading, and the burying of cable-lines, called for a great force of labour, of which part was furnished by British labour units attached to the Corps, but at least half by the divisions themselves.⁶⁶ Many of the detached parties could not be recalled by their units for tours in the front line, and through this cause and "trench feet" the fighting strength of battalions fell very low—in some cases, to less than 300.

In this, as in all other trials of the war, the Australian troops were undoubtedly helped by the typically Anglo-Saxon habit of looking upon any current struggle as a joke, with the opponent usually as the butt. This attitude, ingrained in British people partly through their love of sport and partly from their horror of betraying their deeper feelings, was as strong in the Australians as in any troops. It is exhibited in the majority of letters from the front; it is found in official reports and messages sent from the thick of the fighting; it leaked into the despatches not only of war

⁶⁵ The third division (in reserve) and the fourth (far back in the training area) were in villages clear of the battlefield.

⁶⁶ Thus on Nov. 2 in the reserve division (2nd Australian Division) the 5th Brigade had 16 officers and 992 men on these works and the 6th 23 officers and about 1,000 men. In other brigades the numbers were probably somewhat less. At that time the following British troops were working for the Anzac Corps: 13th Field Company; 178th and 258th Tunnelling Companies; 133rd, 134th, 149th, 217th, and Sussex Army Troops Companies; 12th (Devon), 2nd, 37th (Royal Fusiliers), and 22nd (West Yorks) Labour Battalions.

correspondents, but of generals. It is found in most regimental histories, and even the official histories may not be entirely unaffected by it. A pose which refuses to regard the horrors of war as serious may not always be wholly beneficial, but for men in the midst of those horrors it is an unmixed advantage, and it unquestionably lightened for both British and Australians the excessive burden of this winter.

German accounts make it evident that the enemy's infantry, though subjected to severe hardships in the muddy front and support lines, was suffering no such extremes of discomfort as the British. His front was lightly held, in a series of posts, with supports in depth. His communication trenches, it is true, were mostly useless, and later in the winter one or two men were said to have been drowned in the mud in two dreadful sunken roads—"Blue Cut" and "Yellow Cut"—by which troops were guided from the villages of Le Barque and Thilloy to the actual front.⁶⁷ The muddy area on the German side was, however, merely a narrow strip along the front. The slopes leading down to it were green. The cellars of Bapaume, two and a half miles behind the front line, offered quarters for troops, and, though the villages beyond were subject to recurrent air-raids and long-distance shelling, they were all used for billets, and the surrounding country was intact. The 4th Guard Division suffered from shell-fire during its movement to the front line; but the dreadful weariness and exposure, which at this time rendered every relief on the British side a nightmare agony, are barely referred to in German narratives. At the beginning of November, the 23rd (Saxon) Reserve Division opposite Gueudecourt, and the Bavarian Ersatz Division adjoining it on the south, applied for relief—the former on grounds of suffering through sickness and wet, the latter because its numbers had fallen so that it could no longer give its battalions rest. To the 23rd Reserve Division was accordingly lent the 392nd I.R. to relieve some of its troops; the Bavarian Ersatz Division was allowed to use those of its own troops formerly held back for corps reserve. The sick rate of these divisions is not shown in the available records; but that of the 4th Guard Division on certain dates (November 11—6; November 14—6; November 15—5; November 16—4) shows that the wastage cannot have been comparable to that of most Australian or British divisions on the Somme mud.

The German artillery, on the other hand, was subjected to deadly counter-battery "shoots" from which the British was almost entirely free. This was due to the fact that the German aeroplanes, although more numerous than before and occasionally venturing to machine-gun the infantry in the British trenches, seldom crossed the front lines, whereas the British pilots looked on the German front lines as their starting point. The British heavy artillery was thus directed with such accuracy that, in the 4th (Prussian) Guard

⁶⁷ Many similar statements were later current on the British side; their truth is difficult to ascertain, but no definite cases of unwounded men drowning in shell-holes are found in the official records thus far examined.

Division alone, on November 5 fourteen guns and howitzers (including eight 5.9-inch) were put out of action. Between November 6 and 14 twelve on an average were put out of action daily; on November 15—sixteen; November 16—fifteen; November 17—twenty-one; November 18—twenty-two; and thereafter from six to thirteen daily.

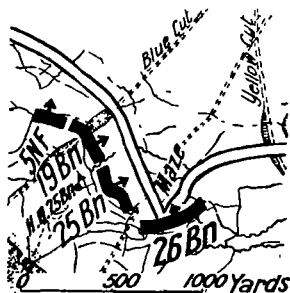
Except in the case of the railways, which were able to take the wounded from Quarry Siding on November 5th and from near Longueval on the 14th,⁶⁸ the energetic measures adopted by the I Anzac Corps to meet the adverse conditions lacked the time to affect the arrangements for the next fight; indeed, in the forward area they were hampered by the preparations for it. The 19th and 20th Battalions, which on the night of November 9th relieved the 17th and 18th, suffered so acutely that after two days Colonel Ralston of the 20th urged that his troops should be withdrawn. The brigadier, Holmes, refused, being of opinion that the battalion could stand another day of it. On the night of the 12th, however, they were relieved by two battalions of the 7th Brigade, the 25th and 26th, lent to the 5th Brigade because the 17th and 18th were unfit for the line. The 19th and 20th came out to Switch and Carlton Trenches expecting a rest; but they had barely settled down after the march when their commanders and, later, the company commanders were called to brigade headquarters and it was explained to them that their battalions must return to the line as soon as night fell—the 19th Battalion to deliver with the 25th and 26th the renewed attack, and the 20th to support.

A convenient "jumping-off" trench had been dug by the 2nd Pioneers along the left half of the front. This, the chief labour of the past week, had been well carried out, although Germans had seen the parties and at least once driven them in with machine-gun fire, mortally wounding a Lewis gunner⁶⁹ of the covering party who pluckily fought

⁶⁸ This method had been suggested by General M'Cay to avoid the dreadful delays of ambulances on the congested roads. In the second fight (November 14) the small Decauville trains carrying material for constructing the Longueval railway were, on their return journey, to pick up the wounded at the advanced dressing-station ("Thistle Dump"), close beside the railway, and carry them to Quarry Siding. There all cases—both the lightly and the seriously wounded—were to be placed in broad-gauge trains (leaving about every six hours) and carried to the main dressing and collecting stations at Bécordel, south of Albert.

⁶⁹ Private H. C. Moor (of Grafton, N.S.W.), 18th Battalion, a young English emigrant whose father had been the hero of a fine incident in the sinking of the *s.s. Berlin* in 1907.

them shot for shot. On this occasion Bayonet Trench was omitted from the objectives, the right of which was The Maze.⁷⁰ The barrage was to advance at the same rate as before,⁷¹ but, in order to allow the troops more time to catch up, it was to continue for six minutes instead of three in No-Man's Land before advancing. This advantage was nearly thrown away through the reluctance of some of the battalion commanders to order their troops to leave the trenches during the preliminary six minutes. But, on General Legge pointing out that this had caused the previous week's failure, the brigadier (Holmes) compromised by ordering his troops to leave the trenches three minutes after "zero," thus giving them three minutes to catch up the barrage. The 25th and 26th (mainly Queensland) Battalions, forming the centre and right of the Australian attack, had hardly recovered from their experiences of November 5th, and Holmes, who went round their lines the day before, reported that they were "pretty cheap." But, he added, "when spoken to cheerily, they realise that matters would be still worse if it were raining. On the whole they are not too bad."



Zero hour was fixed on this occasion at 6.45 a.m.⁷² The weather had been fine since November 9th, and the ground was certainly not heavier than on the 5th. But the Germans, knowing that an attack was to come, not only laid down their barrage so promptly that it caught the last waves of the attack, but had also a few hours before the attack re-erected some of the battered wire-entanglements at The Maze. The right battalion of the Australians, the 26th (Queensland and Tasmania), attacking that sector, succeeded in crossing certain

⁷⁰ The foothold won on November 5 by the 7th Brigade in The Maze had (according to German accounts) been lost on Nov. 11. Brigadier-General Holmes was entirely wrong when, in writing to General Legge on Nov. 7, he expressed a doubt whether the 7th Brigade had ever held a post beyond its old front line in this neighbourhood.

⁷¹ Brigadier-General Gellibrand had on Nov 7 reported to the chief of staff of the 2nd Division that he considered the rate should be 25 yards a minute (instead of 50), but this advice was not adopted.

⁷² Clocks had been put back an hour on October 1. This was therefore true time.

parts of the front trench and entering the second, but was quickly repulsed and by 8 o'clock was reported, though uncertainly, to be back in its original line. The centre and left battalions, 25th (Queensland) and 19th (New South Wales), were reported to have taken both objectives (Gird and Gird Support Trenches). By 9 o'clock word had been received that the 50th British Division had seized part of its objective just west of the Australians; but it was later reported that its attack elsewhere had failed, and touch with the successful troops had been lost, except through the Australian position. The British brigade commander accordingly ordered a new attack to be launched to the left of the captured position. On the Australian right the 26th had already been ordered by Holmes to renew its attack on the nearer trenches of The Maze, and was strengthened first by one and later by a second company of the 20th Battalion.

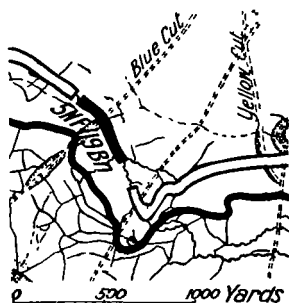
On this day the air was, for the time being, in possession of the Germans, who had sixteen aeroplanes overhead. The one British machine which attempted to patrol was driven away while the enemy reconnoitred as he pleased.⁷³ It was doubtless partly for this reason that the reports received by Holmes differed widely from the facts. It was true that his left battalion, the 19th, advancing with extraordinary rapidity on the skirts of the barrage, had arrived at the German trench "with the last shell" (as the Germans prisoners put it).⁷⁴ This swiftness appears to have been partly due to the fact that the 19th, instead of waiting in its trench for three minutes, as ordered, advanced at zero with the Northumberland Fusiliers, whose barrage arrangements were different from its own. Some of the enemy were caught hurrying up their dugout stairs with machine-guns; a few were shot;⁷⁵ others made for a sunken road (known as "Blue Cut") leading through the muddy crater-field towards Le Barque.

⁷³ There had recently been great activity in the air. On November 9 26 British 'planes attempting to bomb Vraucourt dump were attacked by more than 30 German machines—"the biggest air fight which the war had yet seen." (*The War in the Air, Vol. II*, by H. A. Jones, p. 315.)

⁷⁴ When examined by British intelligence officers these prisoners, whose regiments had previously faced the Australians at Mouquet Farm, all agreed in declaring with emphasis that, among the Germans, the Australian infantry had the reputation of attacking with much more dash than the average run of troops.

⁷⁵ Sergeant P. D. Jones (of Leichhardt, N.S.W.) of the 19th dropped into the trench among three Germans; he shot the first two and, as the third turned to run, bayoneted him.

The first two waves of Australians were to hold the German front line, and the third and fourth to go on to the enemy's support trench, 150 yards beyond; but the four lines had been thrown out of order in crossing the mud and one of the two company commanders responsible for the farther advance (Captain Anderson⁷⁶) wounded. The other, Lieutenant Dent,⁷⁷ took forward his men after some re-organisation, and Captain Scott⁷⁸ of the first wave independently



led forward a dozen men on the right.⁷⁹ They had been warned that air-photographs showed that only parts of the support trench might be in existence, and both parties found only broken sections of trench. The enemy had fled; not a German was in sight; and, after occupying the position, Dent with one companion⁸⁰ pushed out still farther to make certain that the proper trench did not lie beyond. After going 150 yards he was wounded by a shell and was unable to return.⁸¹ Meanwhile Lieutenant Trenerry⁸² searched for the second objective for several hundred yards to the left of the sunken road, but could find no trace of it. No British or Australian troops could be seen to right or left, and, as word came along the advanced line that it was being fired on from the rear, Captain Scott returned to the first objective to ascertain the position. Here also he found that—except

⁷⁶ Major R. C. A. Anderson, O.B.E.; 19th Bn. University student; of Sydney; b. Petersham, N.S.W., 30 April, 1893.

⁷⁷ Major A. E. Dent, 19th Bn. Clerk; of Gosford, N.S.W.; b. Elsternwick, Vic.; 13 Sept., 1894.

⁷⁸ Lieut.-Col. W. J. R. Scott, D.S.O.; 20th Bn. Insurance inspector; of Sydney; b. Bingara, N.S.W., 21 June, 1888.

⁷⁹ One of this party—a young Lewis gunner, Private F. B. Healy (of Newcastle, N.S.W.)—had had his hand smashed as the attack started. Nevertheless, thinking that a Lewis gun might be required at the second objective, he carried one thither. Later in the day he was killed.

⁸⁰ Sgt F. G. Toovey (No 1772; 19th Bn.). Labourer; of Burragarang, N.S.W.; b. Burragarang, 16 July, 1896. Killed in action, 14 Nov., 1916.

⁸¹ After endeavouring for several days and nights to get back to the Australian lines, he was captured. His companion was never again heard of.

⁸² Capt. W. L. Trenerry, M.C.; 19th Bn. Bank clerk; of Manilla and Paddington, N.S.W.; b. Queanbeyan, N.S.W., 29 Nov., 1892.

for some Lewis gunners of the 25th who had advanced with his own troops, and a mixed party of the 5th and 7th Northumberland Fusiliers under a highly capable officer, Lieutenant Armstrong,⁸³ on the left—there were no troops of his own side on either flank of the 19th. Where the bulk of the 25th should have been was a straight empty length of boggy trench, apparently regarded by the enemy as unfit for occupation. The main part of the 25th, which in this fight lost many of its tried Pozières leaders⁸⁴ who had survived the previous week's engagement, does not appear to have seized any portion of the objective.

Major Sherbon of the 19th having been killed about 6.20 a.m. while placing the troops in position, Captain Scott was now in command of the whole advanced line. The party holding the German support trench was eventually withdrawn, losing some men by shell-fire on the way,⁸⁵ but in the first objective the position was made fairly secure by posting bombers and Lewis gunners on—and also in rear of—each flank. Lieutenant Armstrong held the left, reinforced by the Lewis gunners from the 25th and by fifty of his own brigade who reached him about nightfall. Lieutenant Trenerry held the right, with a Lewis gun looking down the straight muddy trench which Scott preferred not to occupy. In spite of hostile fire, a communication trench across the old No-Man's Land was dug in three hours by some of the 2nd Pioneers under Captain Taylor,⁸⁶ who was seriously wounded during the operation.

A T-head with a front of about 500 yards had thus been gained in the German lines; but the attacks projected with a view of making good the two flanks proved extremely difficult to organise. On the British front this operation was first ordered for 4 p.m., then postponed to 6.30, but rendered impossible by a heavy barrage laid down by the enemy at 5, which held up the preliminary movements. Eventually at 11 p.m. two companies attempted to advance; but the first

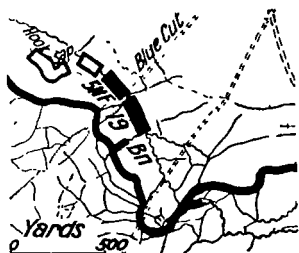
⁸³ Lieut. H. Armstrong; 5th Bn, Northumberland Fusiliers.

⁸⁴ Including J. Helms (of Cloncurry, Q'land), commanding this party, was with it at the beginning of its retirement, but was never afterwards seen.

⁸⁵ Including Captains C. M. Johnson, W. F. Donisch, and Lieutenant W. P. Healy, all of whom were killed.

⁸⁶ Captain W. Taylor, M.C.; 2nd Pioneer Bn. Clerk; of Sydney, b Coolabah, N.S.W., 18 March, 1892.

men to get out were met by such an outburst of fire that the order was cancelled. The fire came from Germans who had penetrated into some old trenches⁸⁷ intervening between the attacking British troops and their advanced detachment under Lieutenant Armstrong. The detachment was thus thoroughly cut off from its own division, and, pending a further attack—now planned for November 16th—was rationed and munitioned by the 5th Australian Brigade.



On the other flank the repetition of the 26th's assault, ordered by General Holmes in the belief that the 25th had gained its objective, was not delivered, in spite of repeated orders from the brigadier, until 4.45 p.m. The commander of the 26th then employed for the purpose not his own troops,⁸⁸ but two companies of the 20th which had been sent to support him. The Maze had previously been bombarded, not very accurately, with Stokes mortars. The two waves of the 20th, after some show of unwillingness from part of the men, climbed out and advanced, boldly enough, but too far to the right. The delay entailed in putting them straight allowed the Germans to set up machine-guns, and the advance was stopped. About the time when he heard of this, Holmes was also informed that the 25th was back in the jumping-off trench, and, believing that its attack had been successful and that for some unknown reason it had abandoned its objective, he ordered it at once to return thither. A composite battalion of the 6th Brigade under Colonel Forbes of the 21st Battalion had been lent to him as reserve,⁸⁹ and one of its companies (detached from the 24th Battalion) was now sent to the 25th's front line. As the commander of the 25th could find only ninety men for the attack—and those very tired—this company was eventually lent to assist in the effort. But here also the attempt to

⁸⁷ Known as "Hook Sap" and "Blind Trenches."

⁸⁸ A third wave of men of the 26th was organised, but the attack failed before this wave had emerged.

⁸⁹ This battalion had at first been placed under the young commander of the 24th, Major Nicholas—the same who had captured a German machine-gun at Pozières (see p. 697)—but he was killed when leading his troops to the front line.

carry out the dreadful tasks of that front by means of troops of one battalion or brigade placed at the disposal of another proved highly unsatisfactory. Through a long series of orders, delays, and persistent misunderstandings, the night of November 14th and most of the 15th elapsed without this attack taking place.

Meanwhile in the advanced T-head the 19th, under Captain Scott, and the party of British on his left still held out. The trench was well stocked with material abandoned by the enemy, and (to quote a contemporary diary) Scott's men were—

fighting the German with his own rifles and ammunition and bombs; ate his food, drank his mineral waters, and warmed his cold coffee with his solidified alcohol . . . and used his Very pistol and flares.

A few hours after dark⁹⁰ on the 14th the Germans counter-attacked up the trenches on both flanks and over the open from the front. Here, however, as at Pozières, the possession of so portable a weapon as the Lewis gun was of incalculable advantage to the British side. A Lewis gunner of the 19th, posted in a shell-hole in front of the line, saw the enemy by the light of a flare, and by opening fire gave timely warning.⁹¹ The attack on the front withered before the fire of rifles and Lewis guns; and, although the enemy came nearer on the flanks, endeavouring to bomb up the trenches, all attempts were repulsed. On the right, where a section of German bombers could be clearly seen by the light of the flares with which they signalled the stages of their advance, the Australians let them turn into the straight muddy trench and advance up to a marked point forty yards from Trenerry's barricade, and at that distance—just out of bomb-throw—swept them away with the fire of a Lewis gun.⁹² At 2.15 a.m. on the 15th the Germans renewed the attack on the flanks, but were again repulsed. The Australians—then about eighty strong, without greatcoats or

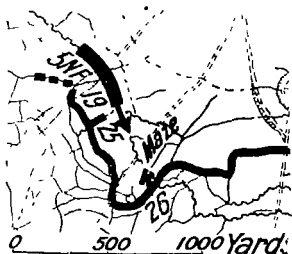
⁹⁰ Scott gives the time as 10.30 p.m. The history of the 5th Guard Grenadiers gives 1.5 a.m., but mentions only one counter-attack.

⁹¹ Lance-Corporal Louis Lewis (of Mungindi, N.S.W.), a Lewis gunner, with two other men of the 19th, spent the whole day in a shell-hole 150 yards in advance of Scott's position actively sniping at the enemy.

⁹² It is said that for nearly 48 hours Private F. D. Thompson (of Oatley, N.S.W.), in charge of the gun, hardly took his eyes off this point.

sheepskin vests, and fighting, on their own initiative, with German rifles so that they could pass on all their own cartridges to the Lewis guns—were still firmly in possession at day-break.

At day-break General Holmes himself, as was his wont, came through to his front posts⁹³ and discovered—and personally explored—the fifty yards of muddy, empty trench beyond the right-hand barricade. No sign of the enemy could be seen even beyond that length, and accordingly Holmes on his return ordered the 25th Battalion immediately to carry out its part in the long-delayed attack. This was now to take the shape of a bombing attack along Gird Trench from both ends, the 25th (strengthened by the supporting company of the 24th) issuing from the barricade of the 19th Battalion, and the 26th advancing from its own bomb-stop near The Maze. Holmes's impatience was increased when an artillery officer reported having made his way through Gird Trench from the position of the 19th to that of the 26th without meeting



a soul.⁹⁴ After much delay a party (afterwards reported to have consisted of twelve of the 25th and forty of the 24th) made its way some distance down this sap; but the officer in charge, finding the mud so deep and sticky that the transport of bombs would be impossible, withdrew his men, leaving Sergeant Gordon⁹⁵ and a few of the 25th to clean out a small sector. Meanwhile, after delays due to deep mud, a party of the 26th under Lieutenant Stapleton⁹⁶ attempted to bomb up from their end; but by this time there was a strong German post in the trench, and on meeting this, Stapleton

⁹³ Holmes as usual wore his "staff cap" with its brilliant red band, and his companion, Captain MacCallum, naturally did the same.

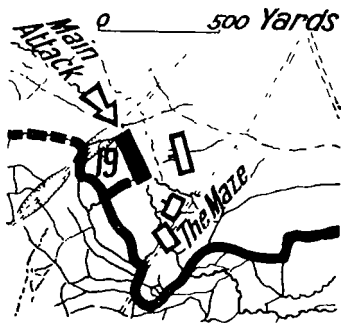
⁹⁴ According to the records of the 2nd Division, this occurred at 5 p.m. on the 15th—that is, about the time when the attempt to occupy the trench was made. Unless the Germans had temporarily withdrawn, the report is inconsistent with other narratives, British and German, which state that the trench was occupied.

⁹⁵ Sgt J. B. Gordon, D.C.M. (No. 373; 25th Bn) Labourer; of Brisbane, Q'land; b. Banffshire, Scotland, 1887.

⁹⁶ Lieut. (tempy Capt.) C. A. Stapleton, M.C., D.C.M., 26th Bn. Station hand; of Charters Towers, Q'land; b. 15 March, 1894.

decided that further progress in the mud was impossible. After the relief of the 26th, which occurred that night, six bombers of the 27th became stuck in the mud at this point, and freed themselves only by leaving their rubber boots behind. Stapleton's decision therefore appears to have been justified.

During the night of the 15th the companies of the 19th Battalion in the T-head were relieved by three from the 28th, and the British by two companies of the 4th East Yorkshire. There was impending an attack from the neighbouring British positions against "Hook Sap"; the Australians also would probably have undertaken to expel the enemy from the trench on their right, in which he was now definitely established; but at 4.30 in the afternoon of November 16th, before either of these operations took place, the enemy launched a surprise attack against the front and both flanks of the T-head. The position had been shelled at odd intervals since the afternoon of the 15th, and especially after 4 p.m. on November 16th, but not so constantly as to cause expectation of an attack. The attempts against the Australian front and flank withered. But the East Yorkshire on the left—who, being overlooked by the Germans in Hook Sap, were forced to keep low in their trench—were surprised by a sudden discharge of grenades which killed or wounded the party at their barricade. A considerable portion of the British garrison now broke back through the Australian trench to their own lines; but the Western Australians checked the enemy's advance, and Captain A. Brown (who had commanded in O.G.2 at Pozières) immediately formed a plan of counter-attack. An attempt to bomb out the enemy was hopeless, the German bomb-supply being the greater; but Brown had ample men for a bayonet attack—he had, indeed, on the previous night sent back one company because



the trench was too full. He therefore directed Lieutenant Barber⁹⁷ and the nearest part of the 28th, together with an officer and some of the men of the East Yorks, to climb out of the rear of the trench into shell-holes, and, on a signal from himself, suddenly to charge the flank and rear of the German bombers as they passed along the trench. Meanwhile he had the S.O.S. signal fired—two red rockets and one white. The men near him climbed out into shell-holes, but Brown, on rising to lead the attack, was shot through the neck. He had passed word to other officers to carry on if he failed; but Lieutenant Barber was killed, and no other leader of the same quality was immediately at hand. The men—not in good heart—began to break back, and, by the time word reached Lieutenant McIntyre⁹⁸ at the other end of the T-head, the Germans had almost reached the sole communication trench. Some of the garrison escaped by this avenue before it was closed; others, after vainly fighting for its head, retired over the open. About twenty who had been posted in advance of the T-head were completely cut off before they knew what was happening, and were captured unwounded.

In the display of rockets and flares of all colours which, as usual, accompanied this German attack,⁹⁹ the S.O.S. signal had passed unnoticed; and through a defective system of intelligence the several German preparatory bombardments, which should have given warning of the enemy attack, had not been reported to headquarters of the 2nd Division. It was nearly 5.50 p.m. before General Legge learnt, through the 50th British Division, that the trench was attacked, and at 6.6 he heard from the same source that it had been lost. Lieutenant-Colonel Wisdom, who had succeeded Paton in command of the 7th Brigade, rightly decided that, if the Germans occupied it in strength, any attempt to retake it with the troops at hand was out of the question. As his

⁹⁷ Lieut. R. E. Barber, 28th Bn. Insurance clerk; of South Perth, W. Aust.; b Timaru, N.Z., 8 Aug., 1888. Killed in action, 16 Nov., 1916.

⁹⁸ Capt. J. McIntyre, M.C.; 28th Bn. Millhand; of Kalgoorlie, W. Aust.; b. St. Kilda, Vic., 22 Aug., 1893. Killed in action, 28 Feb., 1917.

⁹⁹ These were signals from the German storm-troops to the machine-gunners, artillery, and others, to show how far the attack had progressed.



70. GERMAN ARTILLERY OBSERVERS ON THE HEIGHTS BETWEEN BAPAUME AND PÉRONNE
The photograph (taken on 27th November, 1916) shows the country close behind the
German lines

German Official Photograph.

T. 100. P. 930



71 GERMAN DUGOUTS DURING THE WINTER ON THE SOMME

Those here shown were in a canal cutting, probably opposite the French front near Allaines. *Inset* A German sentry in The Maze, winter of 1916-17

German Official Photograph
Inset From the History of the 5th Guard Grenadier Regiment

patrols found it strongly garrisoned, no such effort was made. Its capture had cost the Australians 901 casualties, and the British between 500 and 600. The casualties of the 28th Battalion, mostly incurred in its loss, were 82.¹⁰⁰

This attack, like that of the previous week, had been hourly expected by the Germans. Prisoners taken in the fighting of November 5 had stated that one more big effort was to be made by the French and British before the offensive was abandoned, and the German G.H.Q. considered it probable that this attack would extend from the neighbourhood of the Bapaume road to Gommecourt. It was observed on November 10 that the Australians were digging a jumping-off trench closer to the German line; and on the 13th a feint barrage laid down on the whole British front to assist the Fifth Army's offensive convinced the Guard Reserve Corps that the assault upon its front was now imminent. Towards evening it was observed that British troops were assembling in the jumping-off trenches and in dead ground near The Maze. "All enemy measures," it is said, "pointed to preparations for an attack." Consequently the III Battalion of the 5th Guard Grenadiers, then holding the line, sent forward part of its 12th company, "with ample ammunition" to assist the 9th company, which, together with the 10th and 11th on its left, was holding the front actually threatened.

After a comparatively quiet night, which (says one German account)¹⁰¹ was employed by these companies in improving their wire and strengthening their firing line, the 10th company at 6.15 a.m. reported that the enemy was digging close in its front. About the same time the 9th and 11th reported that the trenches in front of them were filling. The German infantry therefore called upon its artillery for fire, which became gradually stronger until, at 6.45, the "drum-fire" of the British artillery broke out, falling heavily both on the front trenches and on the back area.

¹⁰⁰ Out of a fighting strength of 267. The detailed losses of the other units engaged were: 19th Battalion—11 officers, 374 others; 20th Battalion—4 and 67, 25th Battalion—6 and 174; 26th Battalion—8 and 170. The 5th Machine Gun Company also lost 1 officer and 22 others; 5th L.T.M. Bty.—1 and 2; 21st Battalion—21 other ranks; 24th Battalion—1 officer and 38 others. Officers killed (or died of wounds) were: 19th Battalion—Major I. B. Sherbon, Lieutenants A. J. Gurr, W. A. Somerset, J. Helms, W. M. Stewart; 20th Battalion—Lieutenant F. Dunbar; 24th Battalion—Major G. M. Nicholas; 25th Battalion—Captains C. M. Johnson, W. F. Donisch, Lieutenants W. P. Healy, R. W. Grant; 26th Battalion—Captain W. H. Gartrell (who died while in the enemy's hands), Lieutenants L. A. Ward, W. A. Macintosh; 28th Battalion—Lieutenant R. E. Barber; 5th M.G. Company—Lieutenant T. Tennant. In the 20th Battalion Captain H. R. Rush and Lieutenants R. H. F. Carlisle and D. Gavan Duffy were killed by a shell in Carlton Trench immediately after coming out of the fight. (Sherbon belonged to La Perouse, N.S.W.; Gurr to Sydney; Somerset to Elsternwick, Vic.; Helms to Cloncurry, Q'land; Stewart and Dunbar to Sydney; Nicholas to Melbourne and Trafalgar, Vic.; Johnson to Townsville, Q'land; Donisch to Dalby, Q'land; Healy to Sydney, N.S.W., and Wellington, N.Z.; Grant to Windsor, Q'land; Gartrell to Charters Towers, Q'land; Ward to Ipswich, Q'land; Macintosh to Rockhampton and Barcardine, Q'land; Barber to South Perth, W. Aust.; Tennant to Port Kembla, N.S.W.; Rush to Marrickville, N.S.W.; Carlisle and Gavan Duffy to Melbourne.)

¹⁰¹ *History of the 5th Guard Grenadier Regiment*, p. 323.

It was on the right of the 10th company that the 19th Australian Battalion and the British on their left penetrated the German trenches, capturing the company commander, Lieutenant von Bülow, and a platoon commander. The German account says that in The Maze the Australians penetrated the wire and threw bombs, but were beaten back through the courage of the newly-promoted commander of the 11th company, Lieutenant of Reserve Wynen, who himself replied with bombs but was killed. The Germans record two attempts of the 19th Battalion to advance farther and seize Gird Support; the advancing troops are said to have run into their own barrage, to have been fired on from their rear by two German machine-guns, and to have been thus forced back into the first trench.

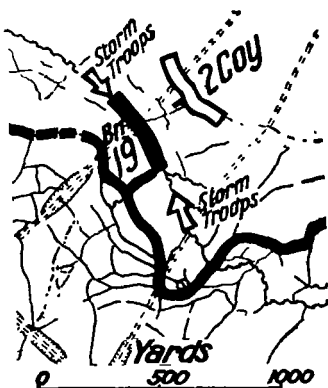
It was obvious to the Germans that their opponents had suffered heavily; their dead were strewn so thickly that German supports, when later sent forward, mistook them for new forces lying out ready to attack. The 9th company, which still held its front line west of the captured sector, immediately counter-attacked Lieutenant Armstrong's position, but was driven back, the British apparently following it up and being stopped only after considerable loss to the Germans. An Australian thrust eastwards made with weaker forces is said to have been easily stopped in boggy ground.¹⁰² As the Germans had lost heavily and the trenches of their opponents were observed to be again filling, the front-line companies refrained from further counter-attack.

News that a small part of his front trench had been lost reached the commander of the III Battalion, 5th Guard Grenadiers, Major Roosen, at 8 a.m. He at once ordered a platoon of his reserve company, the 12th, to counter-attack. This platoon, however, in advancing over the open was so cut up by artillery-fire that few men reached the 10th company. At 11.30 a.m., on request from the front, the rest of the 12th and a platoon of the 11th were loaded with bombs and sent up to reinforce the 9th, their places in support being taken by troops of the II Battalion (6th and 8th companies). At 1.45 p.m. the 6th company and the 1st Machine Gun Company were ordered to counter-attack from a new trench which was being dug 200 yards back to bridge the gap in front of the 19th Australian Battalion, but strong artillery-fire and heavy loss prevented this effort being made. (This attempt to counter-attack was not specially reported by Scott, but was observed by Lieutenant Dent, then lying out wounded.)

After dark the British artillery-fire relaxed and the III Battalion was relieved by the II. The I Battalion had already been brought up to the support position. Food, drink, and ammunition were taken forward, and new arrangements made by the 4th Guard Division to retake the trench from its "tough enemy." Three storm-troops of the divisional storm-company were to attack from the flanks and the 2nd company (I Battalion) from the front. The operation (according to the German account) began, without artillery preparation, at 1.5 a.m. on November 15. The 2nd company, advancing from the new trench occupied by the 6th, half of which was to support

¹⁰² No thrust in this direction was made by the 19th, whose flank merely moved down the trench for a short distance and built a block. The enemy was some distance away.

it, made the frontal attack on the Australians, but came under heavy fire, the leaders of all three waves being killed and the company commander wounded. The party of storm-troops attacking the British flank, after thrusting fifty yards, received heavy machine-gun fire and could not hold on. The party attacking the Australian flank, however, reoccupied 100 yards—apparently of previously unoccupied trench—which was then taken over and blocked by part of the 6th company. The attack having failed, the 2nd company was withdrawn, and a *minenwerfer* sent up to harass the occupants of the T-head.



At 2 p.m. on the 15th the Australians were seen concentrating opposite the German left. It is said that the 5th Foot Guards were informed by a deserter (apparently an Australian)¹⁰⁸ that a great attack was being planned for next day. The 15th was spent in trying to establish touch between the company in the newly-dug trench in front of the Australians and the German troops in The Maze, but rifle and machine-gun fire prevented this.

On November 16 the II Battalion was ordered to retake the lost position. At noon the German artillery began its programme, and—employing tactics more commonly used by the British—endeavoured to deceive or puzzle its opponents by merely increasing its fire for ten minutes each time, at 2.20, 3.5, 3.45, and 4.10 p.m. At 4.25 all batteries were turned for five minutes upon the “nest,” machine-guns and light trench-mortars assisting. At 4.30 the storm-troops, strengthened by sections from the II Battalion, attempted to attack the flanks, and a wave of the 3rd company (I Battalion) the front. The storm-troops intended for the attack on the Australian flank were broken by artillery-fire, but those on the other flank punctually launched their attack, and—according to the German account—surprised the British, who, before they could come to their senses, had lost a third of the “mud- and water-soaked position.” The leader of the German storming party, Under-Officer Krüger of the 93rd R.I.R., had been killed. The Australians now began to break, and the 3rd company, coming up at that moment in frontal attack, completed the recapture of the position. The loss suffered by the Germans in this counter-attack was small, a result attributed by them to the element of surprise.

The casualties of the 4th Guard Division for the whole fight (November 14-16) are given as 795—about half those of the British and Australians. The total casualties suffered from November 3 to 22 by the 5th Guard Grenadier Regiment, which bore the brunt of the fighting, are given as 1,041.

¹⁰⁸ Isolated instances of Australians deserting to the enemy did occur during this winter, but it is by no means safe to assume that, whenever the enemy supposed a prisoner to be a deserter, he really was one.

Thus ended a series of operations which, through the weather and the state of ground, were undoubtedly the most difficult in which the A.I.F. was ever engaged. It was obvious that the inner working of the brigades which participated was far from perfect, and for this, on a report from Holmes, General Legge held the commanders of the 25th and 26th Battalions mainly responsible. Changes were made in the commands, and the 7th Brigade subsequently reached a standard of remarkable efficiency; but, while these changes appear to have been well justified by their results, the tactics adopted by Legge and Holmes, in simply ordering the 26th Battalion to repeat an attack which had failed, appear to have incurred some criticism from higher authority. The proper course, it was held, would have been instantly to investigate the causes of failure and then carefully plan another attack, avoiding those causes.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the higher commanders themselves were primarily responsible for laying upon their infantry tasks which, despite certain brilliant achievements,¹⁰⁵ were certainly beyond its powers. It would be idle to suppose that any force could support without signs of bending the tremendous stresses which—for the Australians—began at Pozières and reached their climax at Flers. The morale of the A.I.F. was never low; even in the worst conditions at Flers the response of the troops often amazed even those who knew them best; but this period represented the bottom of the curve. The most certain symptom of demoralisation—desertion to the enemy—which was then happening almost daily among the German forces on the Somme, was very rare among the British and almost unknown in the Australian force. Yet during this winter there did occur one or two cases of young soldiers who, finding themselves at the limit of their endurance, walked over to the enemy. A captured German officer told of a youngster of the 4th Australian

¹⁰⁴ General White, referring to the fact that he and General Walker had made a similar mistake at Anzac (*see Vol. II, p. 604*), said: "We have not had one case in which an attack, ordered to be repeated (*i.e.*, to be repeated without the method being changed), has succeeded."

¹⁰⁵ Such as the attack by the 19th Battalion just narrated. The most brilliant, however, was probably an enterprise of the 7th Lincoln Regiment, which, on November 2, amid the worst conditions on the battlefield, followed up an unsuccessful German counter-attack by spontaneously seizing and holding part of the enemy's trench and securing a considerable number of prisoners.

Division who had come across, saying that he could no longer bear the cold and mud and want of sunlight; the officer had taken him into his own dugout and talked to him for half-an-hour—"quite a nice chap," he said. Most battalions had their unwilling squads who tried to avoid trench-service by malingering. At least one man of finer fibre, when his battalion—the 24th—was ordered to undertake the nightmare journey through the crater-field back into the line, turned to his mates and, saying simply "I'm not going in—I'm finished," shot himself. The spectacle of a battalion leaving the line—usually an occasion of lightheartedness—is thus described by a diarist who had been watching an Australian unit pass:

I was rather shocked with the look of the men. Not demoralised in any degree—but grey drawn faces—and very very grim. It is the first time I ever passed an Australian battalion without seeing a single smile on any man's face. . . Gask (the surgeon)¹⁰⁶ tells me that they feel it more than any troops here. Their letters show it—some of them are utterly sick of the war and do not want to fight again. . . .¹⁰⁷

There can be no question that the Australian force, reared in a land of almost continual sunshine and genial warmth, was throughout this period being subjected to intense suffering: the reserve trenches were little better than the front line; the camps, now springing up in rear of the ridge, were ankle-deep or knee-deep in mud. In the nearer rest billets (in Dernancourt, Buire, and Ribemont) the rain poured through the leaky barns, drenching the straw on which men were supposed to rest. Firewood, through difficulties of transport, was unobtainable, and the troops even in these billets could not dry their sodden clothes except by the heat of their bodies or by using for fuel the farmers' gates and fences, or the matchboard lining of military huts. Yet men held to their posts till they had to be dug out of them; and some of those with "trench feet"—in order to allow the stretcher-bearers

¹⁰⁶ Major Gask, a well-known British surgeon then working at No. 38 Casualty Clearing Station, Heilly, which served this part of the line. (Colonel G. E. Gask, C.M.G., D.S.O.; R.A.M.C. Of London; b. London, 1 Aug., 1875.)

¹⁰⁷ The Germans, who obtained a hint of this discontent from some of the men they captured, endeavoured to use it for propaganda, so as to create a rift between the British overseas dominions and the motherland by spreading the untrue assertion that dominion troops were being deliberately employed more constantly and harshly than the British. The statements quoted by the Germans were those of individual "grousers" who, like almost all troops in this war, had very little true knowledge of what any other troops were doing.

to carry others who, they thought, were in greater need—made part of the dreadful journey from the front line to the dressing station crawling upon hands and knees.¹⁰⁸

But the time was at hand when these troubles began little by little to diminish. The long-delayed offensive of the Fifth Army had been launched on November 13th, the day before the second action at Flers, and met with striking success. This result was especially welcome to Haig, not only for its own sake, but because (as he informed Gough beforehand) it would strengthen the hand of the British representatives at the conference of the Allies convened at Chantilly for November 16th.¹⁰⁹ Another not unimportant result was to confirm Haig's confidence in Gough. It is true that at Serre, where the ground was thick in mud and the 3rd Division was consequently unable to keep up with the barrage, this operation failed as completely as those in the valley before Bapaume; but the acute German salient astride of the Ancre, from Beaumont Hamel to the "Stuff Redoubt," was, by a magnificent advance of five divisions,¹¹⁰ almost straightened. Further attempts to deepen the thrust were in part successful. The German troops, whose resolution had perceptibly deteriorated as the Somme battle progressed, showed a marked willingness to surrender; and by November 19th, when the advance was stopped, the British had actually secured 7,500 prisoners at a cost of about the same number of British casualties.

With this brilliant action the First Battle of the Somme—the hardest and bloodiest ever fought by the British Army—ended. The British part in it was the logical outcome of

¹⁰⁸ The spirit of many may be judged from that of a private, P. L. de Jongh (of Lidcombe, N.S.W.), 55th Battalion. About midnight two runners, R. N. Campbell (of Lithgow, N.S.W.) and de Jongh, were taking a message from the front line reporting the completion of a relief; but de Jongh did not reach headquarters. Campbell, who had been leading, remembered hearing a shell burst behind him. Later Major Stutchbury found de Jongh, crawling towards headquarters with only one leg. He had been blown into a shell-hole, pulled out by some passing men, and left as dead. Recovering consciousness, he cut off with a penknife his leg (which had been almost severed) and crawled along the track. It took Stutchbury five hours to get him to the regimental aid-post. On reaching it, the wounded man asked for a cigarette and said: "Now tell me, Doc.—have I a sporting chance?" He lived five days, but died of gangrene.

¹⁰⁹ It was especially desired to resist suggestions for the transfer of strength from the Western Front to Salonica.

¹¹⁰ The 19th, 2nd, 51st, 63rd (Royal Naval), and 39th. The 4th Canadian Division had carried out a successful preliminary movement some days earlier.

dull, determined strategy, and the devotion of an inexperienced army. Almost the whole of the 500,000 British troops who—according to calculations made before the battle—were available for expenditure in casualties,¹¹¹ were duly expended; and the question arises, how far that sacrifice was justified by the results. In his despatch after the close of the battle Haig claimed: "The three main objects with which we had commenced our offensive in July had already been achieved. . . . Verdun had been relieved; the main German forces had been held on the Western Front; and the enemy's strength had been very considerably worn down." But this contention—that the offensive had been intended to wear down, rather than to break through, the enemy—though elaborated by Dewar and Boraston, Haig's loyal but not discriminating literary supporters, is unlikely to be upheld by posterity. Haig looked back upon this battle with different eyes from those with which he had planned it. No one who reads his orders, instructions, and appreciations written during the course of the long struggle can be left with the faintest doubt that his main object in the first and each succeeding phase—except the period from July 23rd to September 14th, when he was merely "wearing down" the enemy—was to break through the front of the Germans and roll up their flank.¹¹² It is true that before the offensive was launched he foresaw that his first effort to achieve that aim might not be successful, in which case he might attempt to wear down the enemy to a breaking-point and then again endeavour to create the breach. This policy of stretching the rope and then striking it from time to time to see if it would break was eventually adopted by him; the making of a breach was unsuccessfully attempted three—possibly five—times, and was again to be attempted in the spring of 1917. In the meantime Haig was convinced, upon the assurances of his intelligence staff, that the process of wearing down the enemy was proceeding satisfactorily.

¹¹¹ Australian documents of which the authenticity is beyond question record a statement to this effect made on 1 July, 1916, by an eminent British authority.

¹¹² See pp. 317-318, 332n, etc. The process of rolling up the German flank certainly aimed at the destruction of the German forces rather than the attainment of important localities; but by no stretch of meaning was it—or could it be—included in the connotation of the term "wearing down."

There is sufficient evidence (he wrote) to place it beyond doubt that the enemy's losses in men and material have been very considerably higher than those of the Allies, while morally the balance of advantage on our side is still greater.

It is now known that on November 15th the French, Russian, and British staffs agreed in estimating the German casualties on the Somme at 630,000 against 485,000 for those of the French and British.¹¹³ A very different notion as to the relative loss was, as has been shown,¹¹⁴ held by some careful observers at the front. There was a fairly widespread feeling that the intelligence staff at G.H.Q. was dangerously optimistic, and in England reports emanating from officers and men on leave as to the extent of British casualties caused an undercurrent of menacing criticism. But it was not until the summarised casualties of the opposing forces were officially published after the war that the extent of this tragic error was known or guessed by the majority of even well-informed critics.¹¹⁵ Assuming the figures quoted by Dewar and Boraston to be correct,¹¹⁶ against British losses of 463,000 incurred on the Western Front between the 1st of July and 19th of November 1916, the Germans opposite the British lost only 218,000.

¹¹³ These were evidently the figures accepted by the Chantilly conference (see *The Life of General Lord Rawlinson of Trent*, by Sir Frederick Maurice). On October 7 Haig had assessed the German loss at 370,000 (see p. 887). This figure may have been partly based on an assumption that, in the seventy German divisions believed to have been engaged, the average loss had been about 5,300. It is difficult to believe that Haig's intelligence staff can have agreed with the Chantilly estimate.

¹¹⁴ See p. 876. It has to be admitted that these doubts were not general or popular—at least in the A.I.F., which was always optimistic and constitutionally inclined to prefer attack, despite its often excessive cost, to defence. Nevertheless the opinion that the attacking troops lost more than the defending was based on observed facts. For example, Sergeant Rule of the 14th Battalion noted in his diary during the following winter: "There were not many men who hunted around and saw as much of the old Somme battlefield as I did; and one thing that always struck me forcibly was the scarcity of dead Huns and the abundance of English dead. Without counting, or trying to collect details at the time, I have since put it at three to one, and that's low to my way of thinking." Another observation on which the conclusion was at the time based was that the Germans obviously employed lighter forces than the British, especially in counter-attack.

¹¹⁵ It is now known, however, that Winston Churchill, then a private member, at the beginning of August in a memorandum circulated by Sir Frederick Smith to the Cabinet, argued that in July the ratio of loss had been at least 2.3 British casualties to 1 German. This figure, which proved almost exactly correct for the whole battle, was arrived at by reasoning much more elaborate than the crude guesses referred to in the previous footnote, but nevertheless along the same lines.

¹¹⁶ The figures given in *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire*, compiled by the British War Office, show (on p. 360) that for the months July-December 1916 the British loss in France was 481,842 and that of the Germans facing the British 236,194. Dewar and Boraston, and also Sir Frederick Maurice in *The Life of General Lord Rawlinson of Trent*, argue that the figure representing the German loss must be wrong. Sir Frederick Maurice estimates the German casualties in the Battle of the Somme at 558,000.

Deducting from these figures the losses estimated to have been incurred on other parts of the front, Dewar and Boraston show that the figures for the Somme casualties would be 410,000 British against 180,000 German.¹¹⁷ The balance of loss was also against the French, but not to the same degree. In round figures this period cost the two allies three quarters of a million casualties against half a million on the German side. These figures include the casualties incurred during the latter stages at Verdun and also on "quiet" parts of the front; but they may safely be assumed to indicate, at least roughly, the proportion of the German loss to that of the Allies in the First Battle of the Somme.

It is inconceivable that Haig would have persisted in his offensive on the Somme had he realised, even approximately, how much lighter than his own was his enemy's loss; nor would the Government, which at the end of July showed marked anxiety concerning the casualties,¹¹⁸ have permitted him to do so. But the argument which he constantly used in explaining to it his determination to continue was a grossly and tragically mistaken one. Far from the German loss being the greater, the British Army was being worn down—numerically—more than twice as fast, and the loss is not to be measured by bare numbers. The troops who bore the brunt of the Somme fighting were the cream of the British population—the new volunteer army, inspired by the lofty altruistic ideals traditional in British upbringing, in high purity of aim and single-minded sacrifice probably the finest army that ever went to war. Despite the indignation expressed by one of the higher commanders at the criticism current in England, a general who wears down 180,000 of his enemy by expending 400,000 men of this quality has something to answer for. The truth appears to be that, although Haig did believe attrition to be necessary, it was, in this battle, merely a subsidiary aim—so much so that little, if any, effort or imagination was devoted to the invention of

¹¹⁷ As stated above, Dewar and Boraston argue that the figure for the German loss is incorrect.

¹¹⁸ The Cabinet was then contemplating with anxiety the possibility of "between 200,000 and 300,000 casualties with no very great gains additional to the present." (*Soldiers and Statesmen*, by Sir W. Robertson, Vol. I, p. 270.)

economical methods.¹¹⁹ The best answer to Haig's critics is, not that the "wearing down" succeeded, but that from first to last he was big enough to adhere to his intentions of "breaking through," even when Rawlinson lost sight or hope of it. Haig failed to break through, and, because he failed, his literary supporters have argued that it was never his main purpose; if that were true—which it is not—the most comprehensible reason for his conduct of the battle would disappear.

It is true that the Somme offensive relieved Verdun; prevented the transfer of more than a few divisions to the Eastern Front (though it did not avert the crushing of Roumania); and strained—more by its dreadful bombardments than by infantry action—the morale of German divisions. It is beyond doubt that in this battle a considerable part of the German forces reached and passed their zenith of endurance; a decline of morale was evident to all its opponents in the last stage of the offensive, and is admitted by German historians. On the other hand the new British army, although its exalted spirit also was never again wholly recaptured,¹²⁰ acquired confidence and experience. To this extent the battle marked a definite step towards the winning of the war.

But the cost was dangerously high. It is not easy to resist the contention that it was fortunate for England that she furnished no more troops for this battle, seeing that whatever number she sent would have been squandered at this disproportionate rate. The question must arise whether so disproportionate an expenditure of man-power was necessary, and whether the same ends could not have been better attained by different means. It is impossible to believe that they could not. Britain was not ill-served in the matter of technical invention: by the adoption of the Lewis gun, for example, she had already far more than counterbalanced the

¹¹⁹ The German method of attrition at Verdun put out of action nearly two opponents at the cost of one German. Assuming the accuracy of the figures already quoted, Haig's method put out of action one German at the cost of more than two British soldiers. To argue that his method was right surely involves the complacent assumption of an extraordinarily low standard of efficiency. For Haig's intentions, see pp. 733-4.

¹²⁰ See the most brilliant sketch of the Great War in the English language—*Disenchantment*, by the late C. E. Montague, *chapter ix, section 3*.

former German preponderance in machine-guns. The tank—a British invention—was to become one of the deciding factors in the war. In tactical invention the British artillery staff, in contrast to the general leaders, applied its imagination to the situation of the opposing infantry, and constantly furnished the sole element of surprise to be observed in this battle.¹²¹ That vital element appears almost entirely absent from Haig's strategy at this period; nor was ingenuity devoted to the invention of suitable methods for "wearing-down" the enemy.

Haig's choice of his assistants was far from perfect, and he left them much too free to pursue their several aims. Co-operation with the French was probably as efficient as circumstances allowed; but the internal working of the British offensive was from first to last marked by a lack of co-ordination of which the fighting at Mouquet Farm was merely a single instance. In spite of the press censorship and propaganda by which the Somme battle was presented to the British people as a series of victories, these defects were not unnoticed in England, and in some quarters doubts had arisen as to the capacity of the Commander-in-Chief. In France dissatisfaction with the conduct of the battle was more general, and criticism more outspoken. The report, indeed, went that Foch no longer retained his old mental and physical energy; and the discontent in political circles culminated towards the end of the year in the removal of Foch and Joffre¹²² from their commands. The British people—though Haig was practically unknown to it, except through the now obvious efforts of the Northcliffe press to popularise him—was prone to stand by its leaders in critical times; Haig was much too firmly supported to be seriously threatened, nor indeed was there at that time any other name so outstanding as to attract the nation's confidence. He retained his post unshaken: the same relentless will which had

¹²¹ Haig's opinion, expressed by his chief-of-staff in February, 1917, was: "As a result of past experience it may be said definitely that, in view of the great and prolonged preparations required, the enemy cannot be surprised as to the general front of an attack on a large scale, but only to some extent as to its exact limits and as to the moment of the assault."

¹²² Foch was removed in November, after a motor-car accident, which offered an excuse; Joffre's removal in December was due to causes among which the failure to break through on the Somme was only the most recent.

enforced continuous tension on the British Army through half of 1916 was still to direct its effort. After Earl Haig's death in 1928, German comment made it evident that he was lightly regarded in Germany, at least by the majority of publicists.¹²³ In this lay only another proof of the characteristic inability of the German people to grasp the mentality of others—an inability which contributed more than any other cause to their ultimate defeat. Haig's leadership of his partly trained army in 1916 has been bitterly and not always unjustly criticised; in two important qualities—quick imagination and sure judgment of subordinates—he was deficient. But nations are all too prone to require in their military leaders only qualities of brilliance, neglecting those attributes which, for the attainment of the common aim, are perhaps even more essential and equally rare. The victories by which a Bonaparte pursues his unlimited objectives may prove more costly to his nation than defeats. Haig's one aim was the success of the Allies, and his sole guide in action was duty. He had the capacity of learning by his mistakes and the moral courage to change his attitude when the need became clear to him. Terrible as was to be the fighting of 1917, his conduct of the Third Battle of Ypres was marked by co-ordination almost unknown on the Somme. In 1918 his greatest blow was at last accompanied by the vital element of surprise;¹²⁴ and it is probable that history—if it is history and not the mere national propaganda which sometimes poses as such—will assign him a greater share than is yet recognised in the responsibility for the victories with which the war ended. It is difficult to conceive any factor more ominous to the Germans than the continued presence among their opponents of this resolute, unwavering soldier, deeply skilled in technique, but prevailing by qualities of character more than of intellect; cold and inarticulate, but with the strength to keep the British Government at arm's length; punctiliously

¹²³ The historian of the German cavalry, General D. M. von Poseck, however, in the *Militär Wochenblatt* of 25 March 1928, showed better appreciation of this former adversary.

¹²⁴ The limited offensive at Cambrai in November 1917 also had been launched as a surprise. An officer who knew Haig says that throughout the war he was constantly in search of methods of surprise. It must, however, be doubted if his capacity lay in that direction (*see p. 286*).

loyal to it, to his subordinates, and to his Allies; fulfilling every engagement, eschewing the intrigue which so often sullies the careers of the great; dealing in the daylight with those who would have struck him in the dark; above all, practically alone in his magnificent capacity of serving his country on occasion by quietly passing on to rivals credit due to himself, without uttering a syllable, then or afterwards, to betray the extent of his sacrifice.