



From the Front

April 1917

The relative quietness which has surrounded the Western Front has been shattered as once again attempts to break through the German Lines and engage the smaller German forces in open warfare has been launched.

This time however, it is planned to attack the German Front on a small, accurately defined spearhead some eleven miles long stretching from Arras in the north to Bullecourt in the south. This was designed to support the French



attack under the Nivelle Initiative which had been drawn up by the new French commander Robert Nivelle (whose mother had been English) who had replaced “Papa Joffre” on the 12th December. The French attack was to take place along the River Aisne some fifty miles to the South and the plan, in principle had been agreed at the London Convention in January 1917.

The charm of Nivelle had had its effect upon the new British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George who hitherto had been a supporter of the strategy which would involve British troops advancing through the Balkans and knocking out Germany’s weaker allies to circumvent the stalemate of the Western Front. The British premier had a low opinion of British Generals, in particular Sir Douglas Haig (whose promotion to Field Marshall became effective on the 1st January 1917) and the two had quarrelled over the issue of the mounting casualties of the War which Lloyd George recognised as an impediment to political success in Post War Britain. Accordingly Lloyd George used a Conference in Calais on



the 26th and 27th February, to hand over control of the British Expeditionary Force to the French Army. Haig was furious and pressures from the Cabinet enabled the proposal to be amended

so that Haig was subordinate to Nivelle only for the duration of the forthcoming offensive. However, this meant that Haig's cherished notion for an attack in the Ypres Salient had to be shelved.

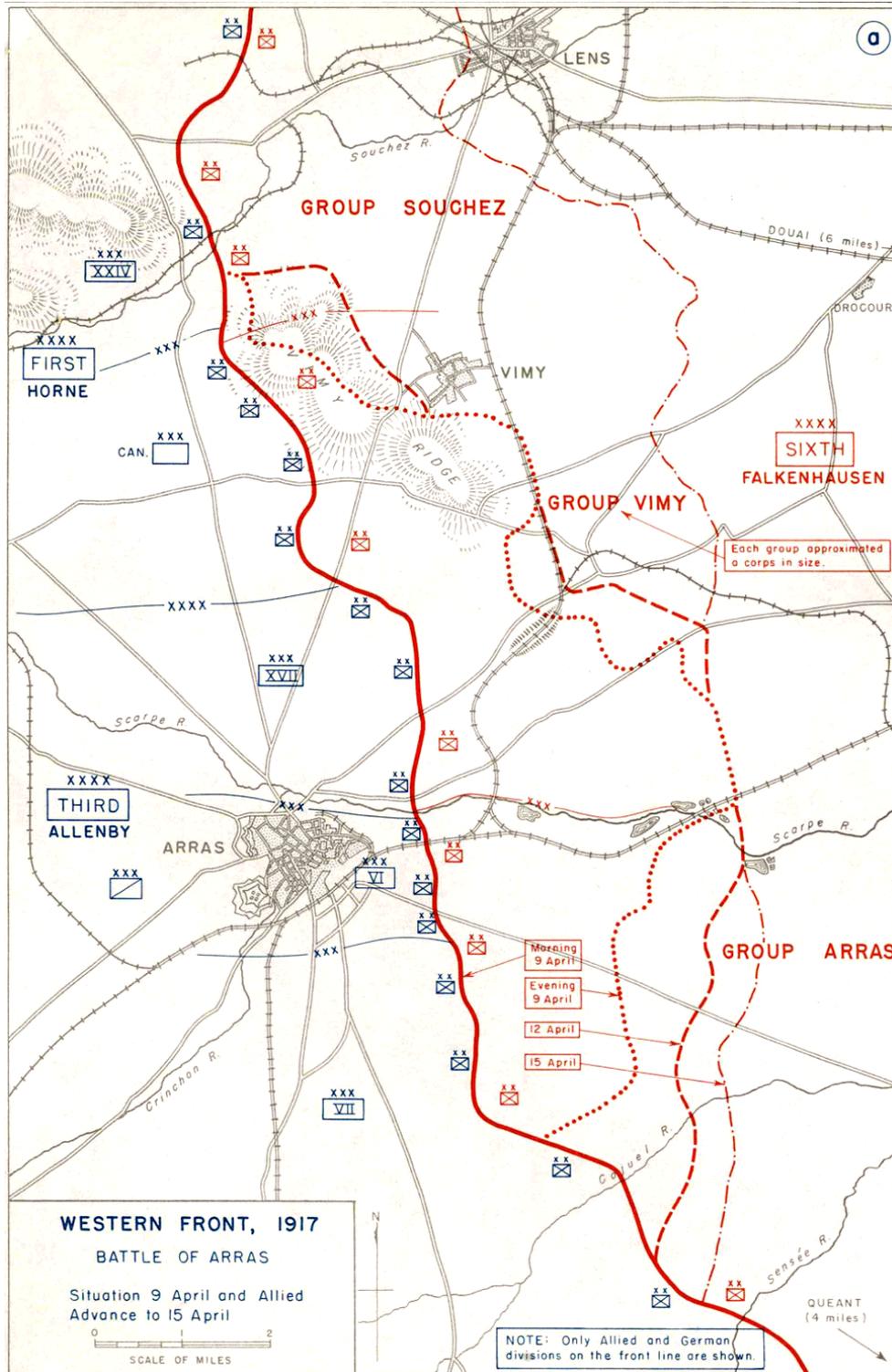
Three armies of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) were in the Arras sector, the Fifth Army (General Hubert Gough) in the south, the Third Army (General Edmund Allenby) in the centre and the First Army (General Henry Horne) in the north and the plan was devised by Allenby. It was agreed that the British attack should commence one week ahead of the planned French Offensive. Zero hour was planned for 5.00am on Monday 9th April (Easter Monday) The British plan was well developed, drawing on the lessons of the Somme and Verdun the previous year. Rather than attacking on an extended front, the full weight of artillery would be concentrated on a relatively narrow stretch of 11 mi (18 km), from Vimy Ridge in the north to Neuville Vitasse, 4 mi (6.4 km) south of the Scarpe River. The bombardment was planned to last about a week at all points on the line, with a much longer and heavier barrage at Vimy to weaken its strong defences. During the assault, the troops would advance in open formation, with units leapfrogging each other to allow them time to consolidate and regroup. Before the action could be undertaken, a great deal of preparation was required, much of it innovative.

After the Allied conference at Chantilly, Haig issued instructions for army commanders on 17 November 1916, with a general plan for offensive operations in the spring of 1917. The Chief engineer of the Third Army, Major-General E. R. Kenyon, composed a list of requirements by 19 November, for which he had 16 Army Troops companies, five with each corps in the front line and one with XVIII Corps, four tunneling companies, three entrenching battalions, eight RE labour battalions and 37 labour companies.

For the first time aerial forces were to be used in huge numbers and although the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) entered the battle with inferior aircraft to the *Luftstreitkräfte*, this did not deter their commander, General Trenchard, from adopting an offensive posture. Dominance of the air over Arras was essential for reconnaissance and the British carried out many aerial patrols. RFC aircraft carried out artillery spotting, photography of trench systems and bombing; however, problems soon arose as losses of pilots



and aircraft mounted as one German Officer reported “...during these days, there was a whole series of dogfights, which almost invariably ended in defeat for the British since it was Richthofen's squadron they were up against. Often five or six planes in succession would be chased away or shot down in flames. — *Ernst Jünger*



The battle began with the Canadian assault on Vimy Ridge an escarpment which ascended gradually but terminated in a sheer drop of 200 feet above the Douai plains and to the Germans it appeared as a huge cliff dominating the land for miles around. The German Front was overrun and not surprisingly they did not make a counter

attack as they realised it would be impossible to retake the Ridge. The following

day Haig issued orders for the continuation of the offensive by the plan was frustrated by worsening weather conditions when snow began to fall heavily. Also the Germans were swift to provide reinforcements and the result was that a fleeting chance of a successful breakthrough was snatched away. The German defenders recovered and over the next few weeks the battle deteriorated into one of attrition culminating in another set piece battle on ST. George's Day becoming known as the Second Battle of the Scarpe.

Added to this the French suffered a humiliating defeat when their initiative was launched on the 16th April, despite the assurances of Nivelle of victory within forty eight hours plus his pledge to call off the attack if that objective had not been fulfilled. However, he continued to send his men forward and saw them slaughtered in their thousands on the Chemin des Dames ridge. There then followed a major catastrophe for the French as their troops started to mutiny, this spread over the next few weeks and whilst the troops continued to defend their positions there was a widespread refusal by the French Soldiers to go over the top. This meant that the French were temporarily out of the War leaving Haig to continue the fight after he was initially not informed of the problem but realised that something was amiss.

The effect on Dewsbury was quite devastating, 46 men from the Borough were killed during the month of April, the highest total since July 1916. A good proportion of those killed came from Ravensthorpe who had provided a vast number of men to serve in the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment who had taken a heavy pasting during this particular engagement.

However, the whole town was lifted by the news of the award to two Victoria Crosses. Horace Waller, a 20-year-old private in the 10th Service Battalion, was of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for his valiant actions on 10 April 1917 south of Heninel, France. During the day, Waller continued for more than an hour to throw bombs and held off enemy attack. In the evening the enemy again counter-attacked and eventually killed Waller. The award was made, "For most conspicuous bravery when with a bombing section forming a block in the enemy line. A very violent counter-attack was made by the enemy on this post, and although five of the garrison were killed, Pte. Waller continued for more than an hour to throw bombs, and finally repulsed the attack. In the evening the enemy again counter-attacked the post and all the garrison became



casualties, except Pte. Waller, who, although wounded later, continued to throw bombs for another half an hour until he was killed. Throughout these attacks he showed the utmost valour, and it was due to his determination that the attacks on this important post were repulsed.”

— *The London Gazette*, " No. 30122, 8 June 1917

He is buried at Cojeul British Cemetery, Pas-de-Calais, France

Four days later on the 14th of April the highest accolade was awarded to acting Sergeant Major John William Ormsby who also served in the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. The Battle of Arras commenced on the 9th of April with the loss of 9 men from Dewsbury. By now John Ormsby had been promoted Sergeant and in fact was acting Sergeant Major when he found himself leading a platoon after losing his commanding officer “He displayed most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty (Fayet, France) during operations which culminated in the capture of an important position. Acting as Company Serjeant-Major he showed throughout the attack absolute indifference to the heavy machine gun and rifle fire, and set a fine example.



After clearing the village he pushed on and drove out many snipers from localities further forward. When the only surviving officer was wounded he took command of the company and led them forward under heavy fire for 400 yards to a new position. He organised his new position with great skill and held his line with determination until relieved of his command.



His conduct throughout was admirable and inspired confidence in every man under his command”. *London Gazette* 8th June 1917 following the action on the 14th April 1917 at Fayet in France.

John Ormsby was invested with his Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace on the 30th June 1917

IN MEMORIAM

1914-1918

Horace Waller V.C.
John William Ormsby V.C., M.M.
FOR VALOUR



Horace Waller V.C.

Private Waller was awarded his V.C. on 10 April 1917 whilst serving with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry south of Hamain, France. He was with a bombing section forming a block in the enemy line when the enemy made a very violent counter-attack on this post and five of the garrison were killed. Private Waller, who was just 20, continued for more than an hour to throw bombs and finally repulsed the attack. In the evening the enemy again counter-attacked and all the garrison became casualties except Private Waller who, although wounded, later continued to throw bombs for another half an hour until he was killed.

Throughout the attacks he showed the utmost bravery and it was due to his determination that the attacks on this important post were repulsed.

He is buried at Colnet CWGC, Pas-de-Calais, France.

John William Ormsby V.C., M.M.

Sergeant Ormsby was awarded his V.C. on 14 April 1917, whilst serving with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in Favi, France.

During operations which culminated in the capture of an important position Sergeant Ormsby, acting as company sergeant-major, showed complete indifference to his own machine-gun and rifle fire and set a fine example. After clearing a village he pushed on and drove out enemy soldiers from places further forward. When the only surviving officer was wounded Sergeant Ormsby took command of the company and led them forward, under heavy fire, for 400 yards to a new position. He organised his new position with great skill, and held his line with determination until relieved of his command.

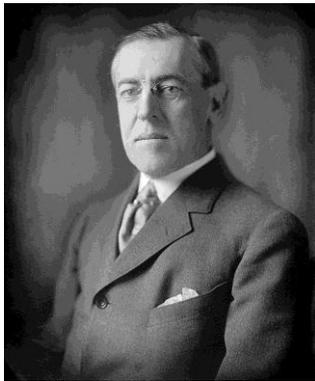
He was 71 when he died in 1982 and is buried in Dronsbury Cemetery.





From the Front

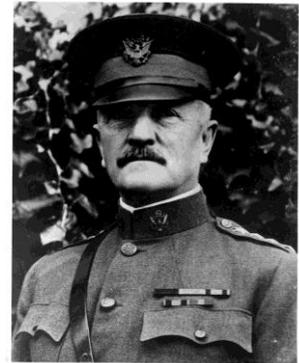
April 1917 Part 2



At long last it is possible to announce that America has entered the War on the side of the Allies, following a long and at times bitter debate in Congress. Finally President Wilson, who has adopted a patient approach to the problems set before him by Germany has convinced parties from both sides of the House to declare war, not on the indefensible grounds of financial or territorial gain but in defence of democracy. After a two day debate

Wilson was given a mandate, by 373 votes to 50, to sign the declaration of war which he duly did on the 7th April 1917.

However, on a cautionary note it might well be quite some time before the effects of the incoming reinforcements are felt. The troops have to be trained and then transported from the United States to Europe and the leader General John Pershing (Black Jack) has already made noises that his troops will fight as a single identifiable unit and not be dispersed amongst the Allied fighting men. Some £700 million has been allocated to the Army and it is admitted that some form of compulsory service is adumbrated should voluntary recruiting fail.



From the Near East comes welcome news. The Secretary of State for War has issued a statement following a communication from the Commander in Chief Egypt describing the action south of Gaza on the 26th – 27th March. The primary objective of the operation was to seize an area called the Wadi Guzzee in order to cover the advance of our railway. It occurred to Lieutenant- General Sir Charles Dobell, Officer in Command, that the enemy might retire without



fighting and in order to make them stand he decided to capture Gaza by a coup de main. Fog delayed the start of the operation until the late afternoon when the enemy first line trenches were captured and more than 700 prisoners taken. The German commander Von Kress then moved up three columns towards Gaza to support his troops but these columns were admirably delayed by our mounted troops and armoured cars, so much so that heavy losses were inflicted on the enemy. Owing to the fact that a great amount of water carried by the troops had been consumed during the long delay of the morning the attacking force could do no more than take up a defensive position just south of Gaza.

This position was attacked the next day by Turkish forces who were repulsed everywhere and huge losses were inflicted on the Turkish cavalry by our own Camel Corps. The total losses by the enemy have been calculated at 8,000, 950 prisoners were captured as well as two Austrian Howitzers. British losses amounted to less than 400 but 200 men who fought their way into Gaza are missing believed to have been cut off.

By the beginning of April Gaza was in British hands and the troops who had suffered many privations



against the desert terrain, in which they were continually marching, digging, building railways and roads, constructing pipelines and fighting, are at the gateway of the Promised Land.

However this is counterbalanced by a report from Russia the Vladimir Illyich Ulyanov (alias Lenin) has returned to the country. Born to a wealthy middle-



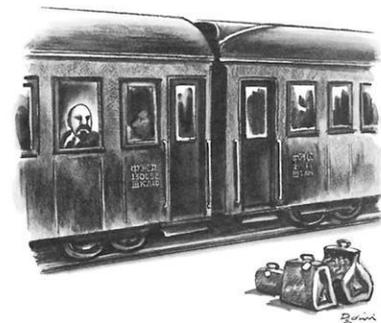
class family in Simbirsk, Lenin embraced revolutionary socialist politics following his brother's execution in 1887. Expelled from Kazan Imperial University for participating in protests against the Russian Empire's Tsarist regime, he devoted the following years to a law degree. He moved to Saint Petersburg in 1893 and became a senior figure in the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). In 1897, he was



arrested for sedition and exiled to Shushenskoye for three years, where he married Nadezhda Krupskaya. After his exile, he moved to Western Europe, where he became a prominent party theorist through his publication. As we have learned from previous issues of From the Front February 1917 saw the outbreak of the February Revolution out in St. Petersburg – renamed Petrograd at the beginning of the First World War – as industrial workers



went on strike over food shortages and deteriorating factory conditions. The unrest spread to other parts of Russia, and fearing that he would be violently overthrown, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated. The State Duma took over control of the country, establishing a Provisional Government and converting the Empire into a new Russian Republic.



*Lenin, Anticipating His Arrival at Finland Station,
Sees His Baggage Taken Off at Beloostrov*

When Lenin learned of this from his base in Switzerland, he celebrated with other dissidents. He decided to return to Russia to take charge of the Bolsheviks, but found that most passages into the country were blocked due to the ongoing conflict. He organised a plan with other dissidents to negotiate a passage for them through Germany, with whom Russia was then at war. Recognizing that these dissidents could cause problems for their Russian enemies, the German government agreed to permit 32 Russian citizens to travel in a sealed train carriage through their territory, among them Lenin and his wife. The group travelled by train from Zürich to Sassnitz, proceeding by ferry to Trelleborg, Sweden, and from there to the Haparanda–Tornio border crossing and then to Helsinki before taking the final train to the Finland Station in Petrograd, arriving on the 3rd April 1917

Lenin returned to Russia aboard a train pulled by this steam locomotive, now on permanent exhibit at the Finland Station

Arriving at Petrograd's Finland Station, Lenin gave a speech to Bolshevik supporters condemning the Provisional Government and again calling for a continent-wide European proletarian revolution. Over the following days, he spoke at Bolshevik meetings,

lambasting those who wanted reconciliation with the Mensheviks and revealing his *April Theses*, an outline of his plans for the Bolsheviks, which he had written on the journey from Switzerland. He publicly condemned both the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries – who dominated the



influential Petrograd Soviet – for supporting the Provisional Government, denouncing them as traitors to socialism. Considering the government to be just as imperialist as the Tsarist regime, he advocated immediate peace with Germany and Austria-Hungary, rule by soviets, the nationalisation of industry and banks, and the state expropriation of land, all with the intention of establishing a proletariat. If he were to succeed in his ambitions it would mean the withdrawal of Russia from the War and the establishment of a regime contrary to the known political practices of the civilised world.