

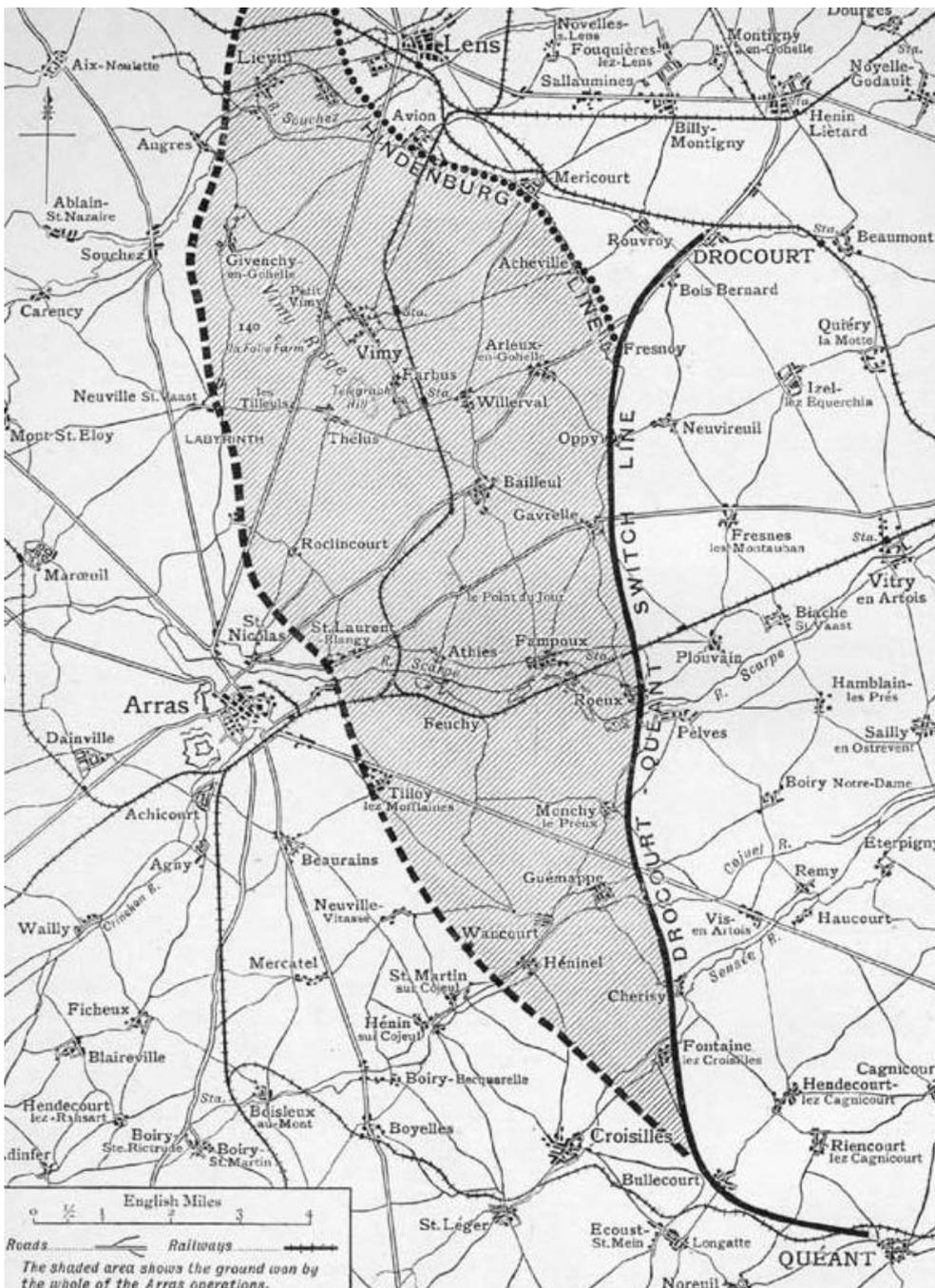


From the Front

May 1917

The British offensive recommenced on the 3rd May 1917 when an attack was launched eastwards from Monchy to break through the Boiry Regal and reach

the Wotanstellung, a major German defensive position. This became known as the Third Battle of the Scarpe and coincided with the Australian attack at Bullecourt to present a two pronged assault, which the British Commanders hoped that success would force the Germans to retreat further east. Unfortunately neither prong was able to make significant advances and the attack was called off the following day, after the incurring of heavy casualties.



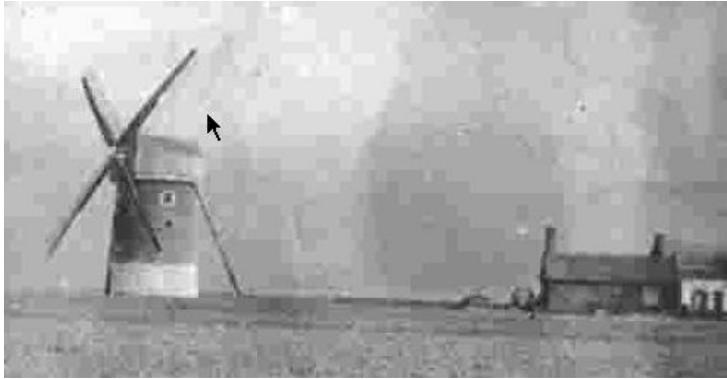
Although regarded as a failure the British learned important lessons about the need for close liaison between tanks, infantry and artillery, which would be employed at the forthcoming Battle of Cambrai.

Meanwhile after the initial assault around Bullecourt had been repulsed and the village itself reduced to brick dust preparations were made for a second assault and at 03.45 am elements of the 2nd Australian Division attacked east of Bullecourt, intending to pierce the Hindenburg Line and capture Hendecourt-les-Cagnicourt. At the same time troops from the 62nd Division (2nd West Riding) attacked the village of Bullecourt which was finally taken by the British 7th Division and despite determined efforts by the Germans it was held by the 62nd Division. May the 2nd had been a hot clear day and tapes had been laid out to guide the troops to their assembly points. Last minute problems arose caused by the German Artillery cutting telephone lines, but these were replaced shortly before zero. The night was dark, the moon became obscured at 2am, but the Germans must have suspected something was taking place for they started shelling the British front line. The British “creeping barrage” moved slowly forwards at a rate of 100 yards every three minutes and the infantry followed the wall of shells as closely as possible, despite being laden with the usual paraphernalia such as mats which were being carried to be laid across the belts of barbed wire. An unexpected problem arose, due to the dry weather of the preceding days the British barrage was causing dust clouds to rise up and coupled with the smoke from the shells caused the troops to lose their way. This prevented observation of progress from HQ which led them to believe that the initial attack was progressing favourably; there was however, a growing realisation of failure. By 1pm it was acknowledged that attack had been a failure “our troops having been unable to consolidate even in the enemy’s first line of defence on account of heavy machine gun fire.” It was reported that the attacks south of the Scarpe had been fought over old ground and despite lack of cover



and the fact that the Germans stared across the landscape from good cover, and has every inch of earth registered by his guns with a clear field of vision from his machine guns of which he has great numbers in enfilade positions. English and Scots troops refused to give way under a terrific fire but fought forwards in small bodies until they gained a line on the crest of Infantry Hill.

North of the Scarpe great fighting took place around Roeux, Gavrelle and Oppy which had been the scene of many attacks and counter attacks. During April the Germans had advanced time after time in close waves only to be scythed down



by our own machine guns so that heaps of field- grey dead lay out there on the barren land. When our own men advanced they were met by masses of German and once more the line of battle had an ebb and flow as both sides passed over the dead and

wounded in assault and retreat. The report of the battle in the Telegraph dated 4th May continues, “Four times an old windmill beyond the village changed hands. Four times the Germans who had dislodged our men were cut to pieces and thrust out. Men are fighting here as though these bits of brick and wood are worth a king’s ransom or a world’s empire and in a way they are worth that for the windmill of Gavrelle is one point which will decide a battle or a series of battles upon which the fate of two Empires are at stake, they are they the prize of victory or the symbol of defeat.”



The Opposition was fierce and when the offensive was finally called on the 17th May few of the initial objectives had been met. The Australians were in possession of the German trench system between Bullecourt and Riencourt-les-Cagnicourt but had been unable to capture Hendecourt. To the West British troops managed to push the Germans out of

Bullecourt but incurred heavy losses, and failed to advance to Hendecourt. Lt-Gen Sir George Fowkes, Haig’s adjutant-general is the most quoted source of casualty figures as they collate the daily tallies kept by each unit under Haig’s command. The First Army lost 46,386 (including 11,004 Canadians at Vimy Ridge) 3rd Army losses were 87,226 and the Fifth Army casualties amounted to 24,606, a combined total of 158,660. German losses are more difficult to ascertain but Gruppe Vimy and Gruppe Souchez suffered 79,418 casualties and the figures for Gruppe Arras are incomplete. Locally 32 men from Dewsbury lost their lives during the month of May 1917, including 13 on the 3rd of May

when the local Regiment, the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment were heavily engaged on the first day of the battle four of the men came from Ravensthorpe which was heavily affected.



Although Haig paid tribute to Allenby for the “great initial success” his subordinates objected to the way he handled the “attritional stage.” Consequently he was sent to command the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Palestine. He regarded the transfer as a “badge of failure,” but he more than redeemed his reputation by defeating the Ottomans in 1917 – 18 and entering Jerusalem in triumph. He later became Field Marshall and died in 1936

ASK May 2017



From the Front

May 1917 Part Two

News continues to pour in concerning the recent offensives in North East France in the Pas de Calais. On the 10th May it was reported that the heavy bombardment of the previous evening had had been the precursor of the attack



upon our positions around the village of Fresnoy. The Hun threw just about everything he has in the way of high explosives and included some gas shells for good measure. This has been a difficult place to hold since the Canadians took it on the 3rd May and the fact that it stood in isolation determined the resolution of the Germans to recapture this salient. The

German troops in the area were reinforced by the Fifteenth Reserve Division and fresh troops from the Fifth Bavarian Division were thrown like a battering ram against the English Troops. The latter, mainly from the agricultural south of England held on to the last, firing their machine guns, only fell back when the village became a heap of ruin and a veritable death trap in which no man could stay alive. Already the British have fought back and gained back part of the lost ground. It is regarded as significant that the enemy has chosen to stand and fight rather than retreat beyond the Hindenburg Line and is seen as a desperate way of fighting since our successes on April 9th threatened them with supreme disaster.

Fresnoy was virtually destroyed in 1917 during the First World War.

After their successes in the spring campaigns (including the taking of Vimy Ridge), the Canadians and British pushed eastwards across open country until

they reached German defence lines that, in this sector, ran north to south from Arleux, on to Oppy and then down to Gavrelle.

Following a successful push by the Canadians through Arleux in late April, German positions in and around Fresnoy became the scene of fierce fighting on April 28, 1917. Ernst Jünger, who wrote *Storm of Steel*, recalled the barrage on the village:

'Fresnoy was one towering fountain of earth after another. Each second seemed to outdo the last. As if by some magical power, one house subsided into the earth; walls broke, gables fell, and bare sets of beams and joints were sent flying through the air, cutting down the roofs of other houses. Clouds of splinters danced over whitish wraiths of steam. Eyes and ears were utterly compelled by this devastation.'

A few weeks later, on May 5, the Canadians managed to capture the village. It was lost, however, when ferocious German counterattacks were launched on May 7 and pushed the Canadians and British back. The frontline then stabilised just outside the village.

At the beginning of the month news came through of the British offensive in the Balkans. By 1917 a multinational Allied force under French General Maurice Sarrail numbering 500,000 troops faced the Bulgarian Army and German, Austro-Hungarian and Turkish units, totalling 300,000 men. The front line stretched from Albania to the mouth of the River Struma in Greece. By March 1917 the British Salonika Force (BSF) under General George Milne held 90 miles (144 km) of front, including the key strategic position at Doiran.



Sarrail launched an offensive in April 1917, with French, Italian, Russian and Serbian troops. In support, the BSF attempted to capture Bulgarian positions around Doiran. When this offensive failed, static trench warfare continued until autumn 1918. Living conditions for soldiers on both sides were harsh. Winter and summer brought extremes of climate and disease - especially malaria - caused many more casualties than fighting.

This took the form of a direct attack upon the Bulgar positions along a three mile front on the Western side of Lake Doiran during the hours of darkness; a three day artillery bombardment had preceded the attack. By 5.30 a.m. more than 1,500 yards of the enemy's front line trenches had been occupied by our

troops who along the western part of the captured position advanced beyond it and dug themselves in on a new line.



From another allied front comes further evidence of determination amongst the Allies to increase the all out effort against the Central Powers. In Italy there has been evidence that the fledgling Air Force is starting to make an impact with news of an emerging ace pilot to wit Fulco Ruffo di Calabria who had shot down Austrian planes whilst rescuing his fellow pilots from tight situations. “Guns are roaring all around me. Flight squadrons dash through the sky heedless of fire and shells. Our scouts are tireless. Our anti – aircraft guns fire without intermission.

Two Austrian Albatross machines steer for Punta Scobba and are headed off immediately by two swift Italian Planes. Instantly there is a fight between one of our Farman’s and an Austrian. Lieutenant Ruffo comes to the rescue, swings up a thousand feet higher and drops between both, discharging his machine guns on the enemy, who is crippled and disappears.



When Ruffo lands he is handed a despatch from his comrade thanking him for

his intervention. Another Farman is attacked and Ruffo is again on the scene down comes the Austrian. It is the seventh machine hit by Ruffo. He hardly has time to breathe when at dusk he sees three Austrians attacking a lone Farman and once more he dashes to the rescue. He discharges his machine gun on the first Austrian machine which turns a somersault and fall out of the sky. This is Ruffo's eighth victory" (War correspondent from an observation post). He is rapidly becoming a National Hero with his aristocratic charm and good looks, he volunteered for service in the 11th Foggia Light Cavalry Regiment in 1904, just prior to his twentieth birthday. Six months later he was promoted to Caporal and on the 30th November became a Sergente. He was commissioned on the 20th February 1906. For a time he worked in Africa but returned to Italy just as war broke out. He was assigned to the Battaglione Aviatori in December and after fighter pilot training he was posted to the 4a Squadriglia Artiglia, where he won two medals for valour and adopted his personal emblem of black skull and crossbones painted on the fuselage of his plane. He fought in Nieuports and later Spad aeroplanes. By the end of the War he had shot down 20 aeroplanes in 53 combats which made him the fifth highest scoring Italian flying ace of World War 1



ASK 30 May 2017



From the Front

May 1917 Part Three

The position in Russia appears to be even more confusing than ever. Within days of arrival back in Petrograd (as we must now call



St. Petersburg) M. Lenin denounced the War and demonstrated that he has returned breathing fire and demanding the immediate and unconditional conclusion of peace, civil war against the army and the Government and vengeance on M. Kerensky who he describes a traitor to international Socialism. However, his action in accepting , from the German Government a passage from Switzerland through Germany has caused intense

indignation in Russia. His wild rant delivered to a meeting of the Social Democrats was received in silence and then he was vigorously attacked not only by the more moderate Social Democrats but by members of his own faction leaving him without support.

This repulse is seen as a healthy sign of the growth of practical sense in the Socialist wing and taken as a general sign of the passing of the revolutionary fever. In the Petrograd factories the workers are now operating to the full extent of their opportunities and news of the spirit in the army is encouraging.

However the Germans and Austrians continue to throw down an enormous number of proclamations on the Front Line, either by hand or by aeroplane, describing England as the great enemy. "England made the revolution; England deprived the Russian soldier of his God-give Little Father, the Tsar& etc" It is also noteworthy that Germany's overtures for a separate peace are backed up in Russia by wild tirades of the extremists against the Provisional Government. The extremists however, are seen to be losing ground but still appear to be as a danger because they are able to excite the ignorant masses. M. Lenin in his

newspaper “Pravda” (or Truth” shows no moderation in his abuse of the



Provisional Government and does not spare the Allies! The balcony of the palace of Madame Ksessinsky, the famous ballerina has been appropriated

by Lenin for his own use and has become the centre of a wild pacifist agitation. From it Leninist orators preach “Brotherhood” with Germany and war on the Provisional Government and the bourgeoisie. It appears that most of the army and public are against him and his party forms a small diminishing minority in the Council of Workmen’s and Soldiers Delegates. This latter body appears to be speaking for the whole of the revolutionary movement and is emerging as a very powerful force.

On the 1st of May an interesting demonstration took place. Several thousand soldier invalids went to the Duma to demand war till victory and the dethrow of M. Lenin. “Send Lenin back to Germany” read one banner it was a touching sight to see the crippled, blind and lame with banners demanding that justice be done to their sufferings. It seems that there is no immediate likelihood of Russia signing a separate peace.

At the end of the month Kerensky departed for the front and it was seen that his

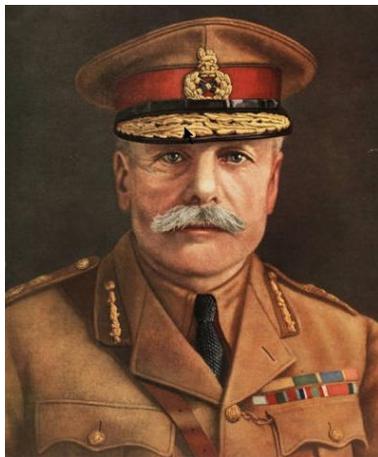


power was being put to the supreme test. The country looks to him to save it from ruin and shame. He carried that message that Russian democracy hates war, but it is clear that the war cannot be stopped by simply sticking bayonets in the ground, nor even the will of one of the fighting Powers. The New Government was called upon to direct the army not only to defend its own front but to prevent the

possibility of the Allied armies suffering a reverse for a defeat of one of the Allies would incur the defeat of Russia.

However, whilst the feeling in the capital is improved the same cannot be said of the front where the soldiers rarely come into contact with the responsible leaders of the Council of Workmen's and Soldier's Delegates and where, too often pacifist agitator are masters of the field.

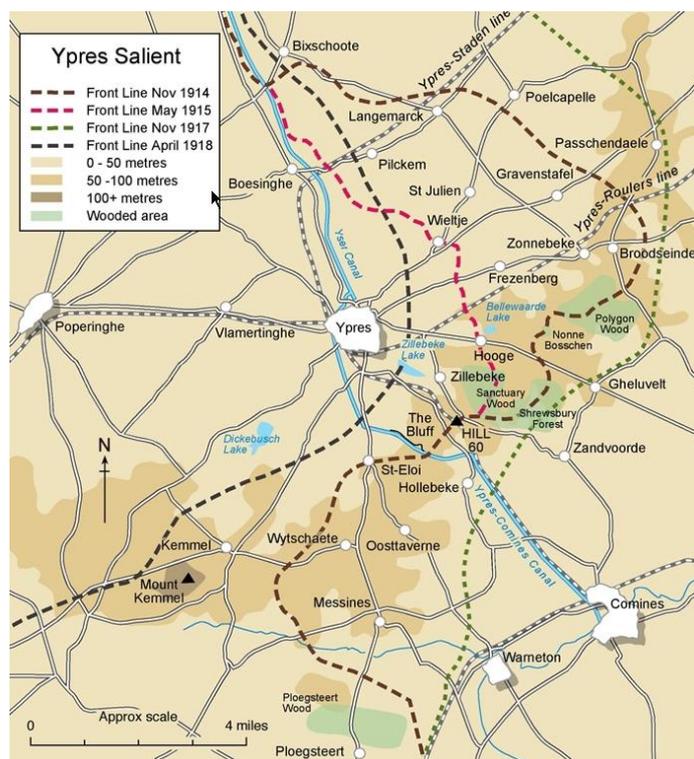
Meanwhile the Press Bureau issued the following telegram from the Headquarters of Sir Douglas Haig. In it was contained a statements which confirmed that the previous night successful raids were carried north Armentieres and that the enemy's artillery was active during the night east of



Bullecourt. During the afternoon British artillery destroy a large German ammunition dump on the Arras Cambrai road. Also confirmed was that a party of British troops had successfully raided the enemy's trenches east of Vermelles. It must now be asked why the great spring offensive which opened so brilliantly with most people anticipating a tolerably rapid march of events has become so slow. Truth to tell the High Command still view this as a War of Attrition which will only be resolved when breaking point is reached and this will only be when one side can no longer

stand against the blows of the other. One thing which has emerged from the interviewing of thousands of prisoners is that troops com into the line with good morale but, after a few days in the trenches this deteriorates rapidly and this is attributed to lack of sleep which is caused by the constant firing of the guns and the need to anticipate when the next attack is imminent.

One thing which is emerging is support of Haig's desire to switch the location of the offensive into the Salient and try and obtain the breakthrough



from Ypres itself. Developments are awaited.

ASK 30May 2017