



From the Front

August 1917

Part 1

The Third Battle of Ypres had begun on the 31st July 1917, and is known as the Battle of Pilken Ridge, following a continuous heavy artillery bombardment which had commenced on the 18th July. This made use of some 3,000 guns and expended four and a quarter million shells, across an 18 kilometre front. Whilst producing terrifying phenomena it also gave the Germans an advanced warning of the imminent attack and alerted their defences.

Haig had appointed Gough to lead the assault rather than the more cautious Plumer who advocated a policy of “bite and hold” Gough, at 47 was a protégé of Haig and a cavalry officer who dreamt of a sweeping attack through the German lines only halting after four miles in front of the village of Passchendaele, where another bombardment could be launched to carry the impetus through the village, onto the ridge and out into open country wherein the cavalry would take charge. Unfortunately, although this was theoretically possible over the Gheluvelt Plateau but, unfortunately Gough failed to pay attention to this key area of German defence in the Salient. During their preparations for defence the Germans had constructed a series of pillboxes or blockhouses instead of constructing trenches, which could not be kept dry due to the high water table of the area. These were built in a stepped overlapping fashion which made enfiladed fire a major defensive tactic and cost thousands of lives on the Allied side caught in the lethal cross fire.

Another unfortunate side effect of the bombardment was that the delicate system of dykes and drainage ditches was utterly destroyed; there was therefore no barrier to prevent the low lying land from flooding.



The attack had commenced over a 10 mile front and the lead troops went over the top at 3.50 am, at first the men reached their primary objectives with comparative ease, this was attributable to the thinly held nature of the outpost line. Additionally the Allies were assisted by the adoption of new tactics in which they were divided into four specialist sections of riflemen, bombers, rifle bombers and Lewis gunners capable of fire and movement tactics and of giving each other mutual support. Over 35,000 German soldiers were taken as prisoners of war. After a mile or two the German resistance increased significantly and Allied troops found progress much more difficult, for once the main line of resistance was reached they were mown down by the enfiladed fire from the machine guns in the pillboxes.

It has been argued since that these should have been destroyed prior to the sending over of the infantry but due to the bad weather in the days leading up to

the assault the R.F.S.'s spotter planes had been grounded and unable to pinpoint accurate targets for the artillery. As a consequence the attack slowed down and at 1.00pm a steady drizzle began which, by 4.00pm had turned into heavy rain, with the destroyed drainage system the water had nowhere to go and simply stayed on the surface until the battlefield became a swamp and all forward

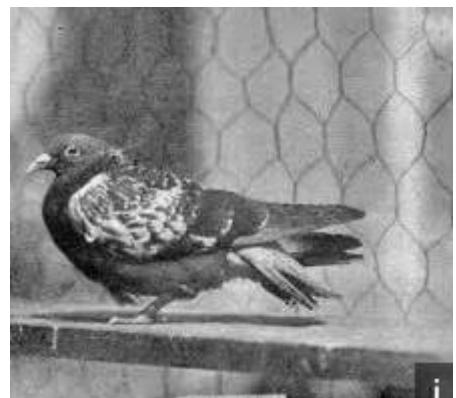


movement stopped. The slow moving tanks, which to many had promised salvation were hopelessly left foundering in the morass of mud, many irretrievably bogged down. Meanwhile the artillery proceeds with the creeping barrage at a rate of 25 yards per minute and left the infantry stranded far behind and unprotected. To add to this misery the German bombardment cut the British telephone wires leaving communication in the hand of runners and carrier pigeons.

However, it was the Germans who suffered most; they were forced to launch counterattacks by small groups of storm troopers which proved to be hopeless sallies by men going into battle without a coordinated plan, hampered by the lack of direction due to the reconnaissance units being out of action.

These small groups ended lying out in open ground or in woods where there is no cover from the British assault. Despite this the groups were forced forward and the Lehr-regiment, known to the Kaiser as his brave Coburgers during the Somme offensive were severely mauled on the 1st of August and suffered heavy losses. Both the 235th Division and the 3rd Guards have been shattered and so great is the menace to the German lines that they have been rushing up reserves in omnibuses and light railways, to the firing line, over tracks which have been shelled night and day.

Even where the German infantry has attacked en masse it has been swept down by artillery and machine gun fire, at one stage the German attack penetrated



about three hundred yards, but the Allied guns poured shells on to this ground and at nine o'clock British Troops went behind the barrage and regained this position. There have been many instances of outstanding



bravery, both individual and collective, one instance was the strong point known as Stirling Castle, once a French chateau surrounded by parkland but

now ruined and reinforced by concrete emplacements. Rapid machine gun fire emanated from this place against our men but it was captured after several rushes. The trenches in front of it were also gained by some Scottish and North Country lads, later a counterattack was launched and some of the land re-taken but not before the area was secured for the Allies. At the end of the day the position became clear, we had made and held all the ground that we intended and the men dug in when the rain grew heavier and all the foulness of the Flanders winter is upon them. The walking wounded trudge back over miles of churned up ground, dodging shells and when they reach the clearing stations they are caked in mud and bone achingly weary. War is not a happy business even when the sun is shining but in this gloom and filth it seems even more miserable.

British attempts to renew the offensive over the course of the next few days



were severely hampered by the heaviest rains in over thirty years and as a consequence no major offensive could even be contemplated until the 16th of August when the Battle of Langemarck saw four days of fierce fighting resulted in small gains for the British but with heavy casualties.



In a separate attack on this morning, at dawn the Canadians captured Hill 70, attacked and gained a maze of streets and trenches forming the mining

colonies of St. Laurent and St. Emilie and commenced fighting on the outskirts of Lens. This had been ordered by Haig on the 7th July and initially the objective had been the town of Lens in order to create a diversion away from Ypres. This was to be led by Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Curries Canadian Corps but

when Currie visited the proposed site of the battle he argued that the objective should be Hill 70 which had been captured by the 15th Scottish Division during the 1st Battle of Loos in September 1915. He considered that this objective would be an easier option for his troops whilst still tying down German reserves. He approached General Horne and the two men then approached Haig who gave permission for the change but with the caveat that the Germans would not easily give up this position. However, the Hill has been taken and is once again in Allied hands two years to the month after it was lost.



On the 25th August it was announced that to the south of Lens there is a slag heap, overgrown with weeds, called the Green Crassier. On the previous morning it had been the scene of ferocious fighting led by the Canadian forces that showed an indomitable spirit after 10 days of most furious attacks and counterattacks that launched an assault on this position and seized it. Later in the day the enemy retaliated and after violent efforts succeeded in thrusting the Canadians off the crest of this old mound of cinders, although they clung tenaciously to the western side. This is yet another incident in a long series of fierce and bloody encounters which have surrounded the City of Lens since April. The Canadians have fought here with astounding resolution, hurling themselves against fortress positions and by sheer courage have smashed their way through streets entangled with quick et hedges of steel, through houses alive with machine gun posts and through trenches dug between concrete forts, down railway embankments and down sunken roads until they have broken a route through frightful defences to the western streets of the inner city. It is estimated that German losses have been between 12,000 and 15,000 men. The

Canadians have been hard pressed at times and endured much privation, which has drained them to the last limit of mental and bodily resistance. Their faces are haggard and drawn, their eyes heavy, their skin is grey as burnt ash, and some walk like drunken men, drunk with sheer fatigue.

A legion of stories has emerged from the charnel house that is Lens: As the Canadians were preparing themselves for the coming battle they suddenly came under German artillery fire at 0400 hours. Immediately prior to the Canadians' own Zero the Germans launched an attack against the 29th (Vancouver) Battalion on the left of 6th Brigade. The two parties collided in no man's land and after much bitter fighting the Canadians pushed the Germans back.

The battalion reached Cinnabar Trench but suffered heavy casualties in the act including all of their officers; killed or wounded. Company Sergeant Major



Robert Hanna assumed command of the remaining force and led them against a German strongpoint that was holding out against all attempts to seize it. Hanna managed to kill all four defenders, silence the machine gun and capture the position. Having occupied the top end of *Cinnabar Trench* he held it against repeated counter attacks. His act of leadership and courage was recognised with the award of the Victoria Cross.

A native of Kilkeel in (Northern) Ireland, Hanna survived the war and reached the rank of Lieutenant. A member of the Orange Order he returned home on a number of occasions and his personal sword still hangs in the Royal British Legion in the town. He is buried in Burnaby, British Columbia.

In 4th Division's sector the 10th Brigade attacked with three battalions. On the right the 47th Battalion escaped the Germans' shelling but still had a desperate struggle amongst the ruined buildings.



During the course of the day their Ukrainian Corporal, Filip Konowal (who had served previously in the Imperial Russian Army) knocked out one machine gun crew, capturing the weapon; he then went on to distinguish himself in single handedly taking on numerous Germans and topping off his endeavours with the capture of another machine gun on the morrow.

There is a bronze plaque dedicated to Konowal, the only

Ukrainian to be awarded the Victoria Cross, on the Béthune Road. It is thus quite some distance from the location of his deeds of valour. Konowal would survive the war.

The Third Battle of Ypres stands out as one of the epic battles of all time, the loss of life was proportionately smaller than the Somme, which is perhaps a testimony to the High Command who showed a more humane concern for those under their command. The invention of the creeping barrage and the wearing of bright triangular metal plates on the backs of some men meant that there were fewer cases of casualties caused by “friendly fire”. However this has to be offset by the introduction of mustard gas and the more efficient production of flame throwers which were used mainly by the Germans. During the month of August 1917 thirty four men from Dewsbury lost their lives and are solemnly commemorated on the Town’s War Memorial





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Part 2

Russia's Peril

The situation in Russia both as regards the army and the Government still gives rise to anxiety. In the capital anti- Revolutionary forces are at work and at the front, particularly in Galicia the morale of the troops has deteriorated to such an extent that complete disorganisation of the Second Army is threatened.



This position is underlined by a resolution passed by the Council of Workmen's and Soldier's Delegates and the Council of Peasant's Delegates which, after declaring that the country and the Revolution are in danger confers upon the Provisional Government unlimited powers to restore the discipline of the army and to wage war to the knife against Revolution and Anarchy. Whether or

not M. Kerensky will be able by sheer force of character to reorganise the army and restore public order at home remains to be seen.

A strong proclamation to the Army threatening vengeance on traitors and cowards has been addressed to the army by the two Councils, declaring that only by stubborn fighting will Russia win peace and appeals to the troops to avert her



humiliation and ruin. According to information received yesterday at the Russian Embassy in London the recent rising in Petrograd may now be regarded as suppressed. Reuters Agency has been informed that the regiments which took part in the disturbances are being disarmed and disbanded and the city is being patrolled by troops. Isolated instances of shooting from house windows have occurred but order is being energetically restored and all suspects are being arrested

News is freshly arriving from Russia concerning a unique development. An

English lady residing in Petrograd has forwarded an interesting account of Marie Boshkareva, commander of the Women's Battalion who has just been wounded for the fourth time in the fighting on the Vila Front.



Russia has just passed through such a tremendous upheaval that men here appear to have forgotten that they are at war with the Germans. It has therefore fallen to the lot of women to remind man that the ruin of the country is at stake if the outer foe is not conquered and that internal quarrels can be settled when the frontiers are at least guaranteed against

German invasion.

The woman who saved France was Joan d'Arc a peasant girl. Marie Boshkareva is a poor immigrant from the wilds of Siberia and appears to be her modern parallel. Yashka, as she is more popularly known appears to have inherited her warlike spirit from her father who fought throughout the whole of the Turkish war and was left a cripple. Her mother was a hard working woman with five children of whom Yashka was the eldest and she had to go out washing and cooking to earn enough to clothe and feed this flock. At the age of five Yashka was sent out as nurse to a baby of three. From that time she has never stopped working. Finely yet strongly built with broad shoulders and healthy complexion she can lift 200lb with the greatest of ease and has never known fear. She once remarked that there remained but one danger for her to experience i.e. that of flying. Just as she was



uttering these words and aviator approached her and offered to take her for a flight. Before the day was out she had exhausted her list of perils.

When she was 16 years old her parents seized the first opportunity of getting her married. She had never known the man but luckily they grew very fond of each other and were very happy. At first they both served in a shop and due to their perseverance and frugality they were soon able to open a shop of their own. However, war broke out and he was one of the first to be called up. She was very keen to accompany him but he begged her to remain behind and work for her parents. On May 28th 1915 news came that he had been killed in action and she informed her parents that she had decided to go to the front and that they would either hear of her death or return to them in honour.

For two years she lived in the trenches and fought like a man. She was wounded three times, in her arm, leg and back. The last injury affected the spine and left her immobilised for two months. In the Lake Naroch battles there was a time when all the officers were killed and the men lost courage and lay down too frightened to attack. Yashka rose up and dashed forward calling upon the men to follow her and the trench was captured. She has received two St. George's Medals and two St George's Crosses, at the end of two years she was legally admitted into the 28th Polozk Regiment.

In July 1917 she was given leave to go home for a holiday but when she reached Petrograd she found so much that had to be done for the good of her country with so many men strolling about not doing their duty that she forgot home, parents and everything and set to work for her "Rodina". She was presented to M. Kerensky for her bravery and after hearing her experiences he asked her what her wish would be.

Unhesitatingly she replied she want to form a Women's Volunteer Battalion



which is to lead men into battle if they will not go themselves. The idea was approved by Kerensky and the battalion was formed.



Volunteers came every day and names are still being put down, Yashka is the commander of this

battalion whose badge is the skull and cross bones and the regimental colours red and black, symbolising blood and death. They have even sent a petition to General Brusiloff requesting they be sent to the most dangerous spots where their moral influence will be of most use. Women from all classes are accepted, Yashka's aide de camp is an admiral's daughter who speaks four languages whilst Yashka herself can barely read and write. Married women are accepted but not those with children. The Battalion left for the front on 6th July 1917 led by a sailor's band whilst thousands cheered them on and flowers were strewn in their path.

Historical Note

In April 1919, she returned to Tomsk and attempted to form a women's medical detachment under the White Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, but before she could complete this task she was captured again by the Bolsheviks. She was sent to Krasnoyarsk where she was interrogated for four months and ultimately sentenced to death as an enemy of the working class. She was shot by the Cheka on May 16, 1920.



News also comes from Italy of a brilliant attack and victory. Around the Isonzo River there are indications that important changes have taken place. The Italian infantry are settling into their newly won positions spelling out a story of victory for

now, as in May last the Italian front has blazed into action over a span of forty miles from the Upper Isonzo to the Adriatic. The battle whose first stage commenced early on Saturday morning with twenty four hours of intense bombardment and whose second stage began in the dark of Sunday morning with the crossing of the river at a number of point has already yielded its first fruits in the form of nearly 8,000 prisoners including about a hundred officers and a still uncounted booty of machine guns and cannon.



It was before dawn on Sunday that the final throwing of the bridges across the river was achieved. The river here runs swiftly as it is squeezed between narrow banks with high abrupt hills on either side. The

operation had already been successfully practiced in May but it was not much the easier for that. The Austrians were nervous; a day of intense shelling had warned them and their guns were busy all night searching the banks and the slopes while the pontoon sections and engineers laboured along the shores linking up their bridges and floating them into place.

It was still short of daylight when the Italian troops streamed across and through the darkness the sudden flurry of the Austrian machine-guns shrill through the monotone of the guns and the chorus of the great trench mortars announced that the Italians had joined up on the further bank and that the great attack was under way. Out of the darkness there sounded unceasingly the uproar of furious fighting.



The Austrians were in strength and, as always their organisation of ground was technically perfect. They were especially strong in machine-guns; even before the battle their Brigadier commanding on a portion of this sector informed our correspondent that "every rock, almost every tree, seems to be a machine-gun".

News emerged slowly but when it came it was good. New names, not hitherto known to our geography of battle were being added to the front. Long before noon there arrived, coming at a crawl up the steep hillside from the smoke and grimed in that strange squalor or dirt that seems to go with defeat and capture, the first gang of prisoners.

News of the Italian successes on the Julian front is greeted with enthusiasm all over Italy. It comes at an opportune moment when the Italian nation has been asked by its Government to make another great effort. Fresh reserves were called upon in a decree issued on the 14th August summoning all recruits to belong to the whole 25 classes liable to military service from the year 1874 to 1899 who have been exempted in previous examinations to present themselves again.

A despatch to the Corriere Della Sera from Rome state that information has been received that the Austrians have been for weeks preparing to evacuate Trieste. All the State archives and most valuable objects in the museums,



libraries and churches have been removed and their destination is mainly Vienna. Orders for the internment of numerous inhabitants were given and many houses searched, the police ransacking the attics and cellars in the hope of finding hidden Italian flags or documents and the inhabitants have been subjected to a reign of terror.