



From the Front

October 1917

At the beginning of October it appeared that the British momentum was unstoppable, accordingly another offensive, following the bite and hold policy of Plumer, another assault was planned for the 4th October. This attack was designed to take the rest of the Gheluvelt Plateau and the Broodseinde Ridge. Eight British divisions were to be involved in the offensive as well as the 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions of the ANZAC Corps and the New Zealand Division of II ANZAC, commanded by Lt. Gen. Sir W.R. Birdwood. Tanks were to be deployed for the first time in Plumer's line up.



The attack was launched at 06.00 hours on the 4th of October and this deadline had in fact been brought forward 2 days because of Haig's concerns about the prospect of inclement weather. However, in spite of these precautions the forces suffered heavy rainfall during the night of the commencement of the engagement and the battlefield started to get waterlogged again. The attack, however, was successful.



The German counter attack was deliberately held back for a day to allow them to regroup and hopefully confuse the British by a lack of immediate reaction. The Allied Offensive was once again a success and believing German morale to be at an all time low Haig was determined to press on and even ordered the cavalry to move up in readiness to exploit any breakthrough that might come about. Sadly, once again, this did not happen.

For the second offensive the Second Army was to make further strikes against key objectives the most significant being against Passchendaele Ridge. This objective was to be supported by two extra divisions, the 66th (East Lancashire)



and the 49th (West Yorkshire Division). This was the line up for the Battle of Poelcappelle which began on the 9th October at 05.20 hours; the 49th Division had actually started out on the 8th of October and was expected to reach the jumping off point by midnight allowing 5 hours of rest before the order to go over the top was given. However, this time schedule could not be met as the duckboards were wet and slimy and even submerged or shattered every few yards. The men of course were hampered by

the weight of the packs on their backs which weighed up to 60lbs per man and to fall off the duckboards meant landing in water filled bomb craters. Some men perished in such conditions whilst others were rescued by comrades which meant that the columns lurched forward, halted and then lurched forward again. Under these atrocious conditions the men, covered from head to foot in mud had barely covered 400 yards each hour. In

addition to this problem of exhausted troops the crushing artillery barrage, so effective in previous encounters was now completely ineffective, many of the guns could not be brought into focus whilst others were placed on a shifting platform of mud which rendered accurate firing impossible. Some of the guns were up to their axles in mud and some even



had their muzzles blocked by this gelatinous substance. A contemporary report states that "It was a black and dreadful night raining more heavily after heavy rains. The wind howled and raged across Flanders with long sinister wailings as it sped and raced over the fields. Heavy rainclouds hiding the moon and star broke and a deluge came down, drenching our soldiers who marched along the roads and tracks making ponds about them as they stood. And it was cold with coldness cutting men with a sharp sword of the wind and there was no glimmer of light in the darkness. To those who know the crater land of the battlefields it might seem impossible that great bodies of troops could go forward in assault over such conditions it is one more proof that our men have it within them a

heroic spirit of life above the normal laws. Yet our men were confident today and backed each other with astounding courage to take the ground they were asked to take. This was on the night when the Lancashire and Yorkshire men made their march through the mud taking eleven hours' before they reached their starting line. They did not go as far as they might have hoped but, in their exhausted state they did far more than anyone might dare expect for the men in today's battle depended for success upon the starting line gained by their comrades from the North of England" (Philip Gibbs Daily Telegraph 13th October 1917"

On the other hand the Germans from the safety of their gun emplacements which had been constructed in good weather were able to inflict heavy



casualties on the Allie infantry as they were firing from a position of height. Added to these horrors was the fact that the enemy counter barrage often unearthed previous

site of conflict with the result that bodies of the dead, buried where they had fallen, were now being unearthed and decaying bodies could be seen flying through the air, disintegrating as they travelled! At the end of the day some 7,000 casualties had been inflicted on the Allied troops.

Despite these conditions Haig decided to press on, his main objective being the once picturesque village of Passchendaele now a devastated area, some 150 feet above sea level. The plan to take on this objective would commence on October 12th and this phase of the campaign was labelled The 1st Battle of



Passchendaele. The honour of capturing the village was entrusted to the 3rd Australian Division. Already the seeds of disaster were present; the divisions involved in the Battle of Poelcappelle were left with just two days to prepare for another offensive, quite simply not enough time! Due to the mud the logistics of emplacing the artillery and bringing up ammunition had become acutely threatened. The ANZAC forces who were to spearhead the assault reported that the Germans had installed a very dense network of barbed wire to the front of their defensive positions. Additionally the troops being deployed forward to the jumping off positions were being heavily shelled by the German Artillery, producing heavy casualties. What followed was an unmitigated disaster as a human tragedy emerged.



The artillery barrage intended to support the infantry was weak and erratic at the start and became even thinner and more ragged as the troops commenced their slow advance through the mud. Howitzer shells merely landed in the morass splashing the blockhouses with mud but doing no real damage. The attackers found themselves still impeded by thick belts of barbed wire, the 1st New Zealand Corps, for instance lost 100 officers and 2,635 men within a few hours of the commencement of the offensive.

The 35th Battalion of the Australian Division did, however, manage to reach the village of Passchendaele and found it largely deserted, despite this the Australians were so depleted and so isolated that they were compelled to withdraw almost to the start lines. The Australian 10th Brigade was chopped to pieces by enfilading machine gun fire. The British fared no better, much of the assault lines were halted within 100 yards although those advancing along the Ypres-Staden railway made headway and the Guards gave a good account of themselves by taking the German strongpoints at Angle Point and Aden House.



In summary the day which commenced dreadfully concluded in the same vein. The high ground remained in German hands despite the Allies having a casualty toll of between 13 and 15,000 men. But still Haig wished to carry on insisting that the German Army was on its knees (documents written by Ludendorff demonstrated that Germany was scarcely capable

of providing replacements and reinforcements to their army in the field). Haig, in his doggedness replaced part of the exhausted Australian and New Zealand forces with four divisions of the Canadian Corps commanded by Lt. General Sir A.W. Currie. The latter agreed with Plumer's dictum of a series of short steps, supported by the artillery, he also concentrated on improving the logistics of munitions.



The Second Battle of Passchendaele was launched on the 26th October 1917 and it should be noted that the French had launched an offensive along the Aisne on



the 23rd which necessitated a German withdrawal across the Oise-Aisne Canal costing them thousand of men and a great deal of equipment. In the Salient heavy rain continued to fall but the artillery barrage was delivered more accurately than in the previous offensive. The Canadians reached their red line objectives but the casualties mounted at a horrific rate especially on the flanks where little

progress was possible.

The next push came on the 30th October which began with the attackers emerging under a creeping barrage at 05.50 hours and during the course of the day the Canadians, showing epic levels of persistence and determination, pushed up to the very outskirts of the village overcoming such immortalised names as Vienna Cottage, Snipe Hall, Duck Lodge, Source Cottage and Vapour Farm.

Canadian losses were put as high as 12,924 sin their arrival in France. During the month of October 1917 Dewsbury sacrificed forty three of its gallant sons.



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Part 2

Mixed reports are emerging from Russia regarding the present status quo, the new Government is said to be in a difficult position, although it is no better and no worse than previous coalitions. The proportion of Socialists and non-Socialist is about the same but there is said to be a marked absence of prominent party leaders, none can be regarded as aggressively left or right wing, leading to the Coalition as being described as a business Ministry. However, because it is a coalition it is exposed to violent attack from the extremists who are



energetically mobilising their forces. In the Petrograd Soviet the Bolsheviki have gained a complete victory. Leon Trotsky (or Bronstein) has been elected President in place of Cheidze and a resolution has been passed refusing support to the Coalition Government. The question remains as to whether the Petrograd Soviet retains its influence over the soldiers and workmen. Absenteeism is a marked feature of the meetings and the victory of the Bolsheviki was won in an attendance of

400 out of 2,000.

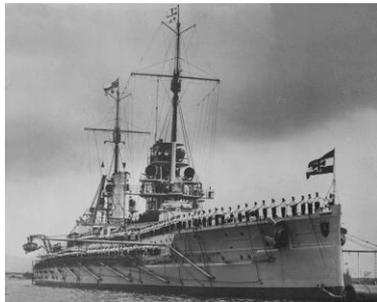
It must be noted that the Bolsheviki remain active while the masses generally have grown apathetic and indifferent to the noisy game of politics. The Petrograd has a key role to play as the new Government attempts to assert itself in that it remains the one place where the parties can meet and offer the opportunity to discuss their differences face to face. Meanwhile the Government is hoping to be able to summon the preliminary Parliament in its complete form towards the end of the week.

During this week of waiting the reconstituted Government has issued a declaration in which it states: -

Profoundly conscious that universal peace will alone allow of our great country, marshalling all its creative forces the Government will pursue indefatigably an active foreign policy in the spirit of the democratic principles proclaimed by the Russian revolution and now become national and laying aside all thought of violence will strive for the conclusion of a universal peace. In perfect accord with its Allies, the Government will shortly take part in a conference of the Allied Powers at which it will be represented by, in addition to its ordinary democratic organisation, a person enjoying the special confidence of the democratic organisations. At this conference, while discussing the settlement of questions connected with the common war of the Allies our representatives will seek to reach an understanding with our Allies on the basis of the principle proclaimed by the Russian revolution. The Government will exert its whole strength to support the common cause of the Allies, to defend the country, to oppose vigorously every attempt at the conquest of the territories of other nations and will strive to expel the enemy troops from Russia.

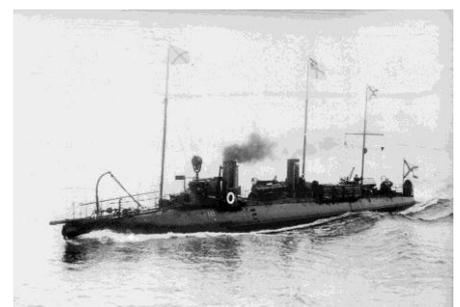
Meanwhile, on October 14th an official communiqué was issued stating: -

“Patrol squadron off Soelo Sound, consisting of four torpedo boats and two



gunboats was shelled by a German Dreadnought. The torpedo boat was severely damaged. Following the 12 (and afterwards more) German torpedo boats of the newest type forced their way through into the Soelo Sound under cover of the German battleship. The enemy fire was principally directed on the Khrabry as she tried to take the torpedo

boat Grom under tow. The guns of the latter vessel were put out of action and the boat set on fire. The Khrabry again tried to take the damaged ship under tow but without success, the Grom sank but the bulk of her crew was saved by the Khrabry.



Simultaneously one of the enemy torpedo boats was sunk by the action of the Khrabry and when other warship appeared on the scene the enemy turned back, the rest of our (Russian) warships were only slightly damaged.

Admissions of a most extraordinary and sensational nature concerning a revolutionary plot were made in the Reichstag on Tuesday 9th October by Admiral von Capelle, the Minister of Marine: -

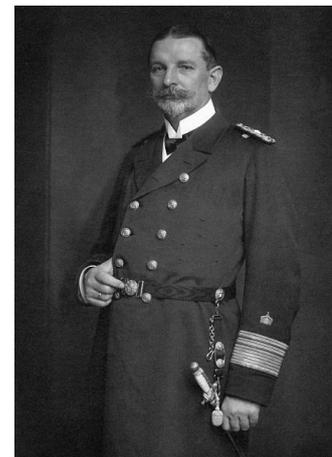
“It is unfortunately a sad fact that the Russian Revolution has also turned the heads of a few in our fleet and introduced revolutionary ideas.



According to the crazy plans of these few, some leaders were selected on board all vessels to incite the crews into disobedience, if necessary by force, in order to paralyse the fleet and enforce peace. It has been established that the chief agitator explained plans

to members of the Reichstag in the rooms of the Social Democratic Party who approved them. The deputies pointed out the dangers of such procedure and advised the greatest caution, but promised their full support by the supply of seditious material for the incitement of the fleet.”

Accordingly the first task was to prevent the promised material from reaching the fleet and the naval authorities alerted to prevent its circulation. A few unprincipled and disloyal persons who committed a severe offence have met the fate they deserve and it is stressed that the current rumours are immensely exaggerated. The preparedness of the fleet was not in doubt for a single moment and thus it shall continue so to be.”



Apparently the mutiny of the German fleet arose amongst the crews of four German battleships in Wilhelmshafen. One of these was the Westfalen whose captain was thrown into the sea by mutinous sailors and his body was not recovered for eight days! The mutinous crews then left their ships and went ashore; marines were ordered to attack them but refused. An Oldenburg regiment then surrounded the mutineers who surrendered.

Besides the crews of the four battleship who mutinied the crew of a light



cruiser, Nurnberg, which was at sea at the time, also revolted. The commander of the flotilla grew suspicious that the Nurnberg had not answered his signals and was then instructed to stop

or sink the Nurnberg, the crew of which, seeing themselves surrounded, then

surrendered. The Kaiser with Dr Michaelis came to Wilhelmshafen and ordered that one of every seven



mutineers should be shot, Dr Michaelis objected on the grounds that he could not assume such a responsibility before the Reichstag. Eventually only three men were shot and heavy sentences of penal servitude were imposed on others. It seems that the spirit of revolution is



in the air.

By the autumn of 1917 the Eastern Front was settling down. The quietness of this theatre freed up new possibilities for the Central Powers, who were now able to transfer three Austrian and four German divisions from the Austro-Hungarian sector of the front across to Italy. Growing political and economic



difficulties within the Hapsburg Empire meant that it was imperative to bring an end to the war as quickly as possible, while the success of previous joint campaigns in the Balkans suggested that a coordinated offensive was the best option. With this in mind, an ambitious offensive was planned under the direction of German general Otto von Below (1857-1944) whose successes on the Eastern Front and in Macedonia made him appear an ideal candidate to head the combined Austro-German 14th Army.

In the early hours of 24 October 1917 a major attack was launched in the mountainous northern sector of the Isonzo front, close to the small town of Caporetto (now Kobarid, in Slovenia) It had been clear for a few weeks that an offensive was imminent – troop and artillery build up had been observed while

information from deserters had in fact given the Italian command detailed intelligence on the location, timing and objectives of the operation. Cadorna had issued generic orders to prepare for the defensive in September 1917, though he believed that the main assault would come in the Trentino, with only diversionary actions in the upper Isonzo. The crucial sector of the front was held by Capello's II Army, composed of twenty-four divisions. Determined and stubborn, Capello was convinced that defensive preparations were unnecessary despite intelligence to the contrary, and indeed he hoped to launch his own offensive before the winter.



The troops in the front lines were taken by surprise when the joint German-Austrian attack began at 02:00 with a brief but accurate and intense bombardment, followed by the main infantry assault at dawn under heavy rain and fog. Fifteen divisions – nine Austro-Hungarian and six German – were involved in the offensive, with the Germans in particular achieving enormous success through innovative infiltration tactics (as previously trialled against the Russians at Riga) and the effective use of gas. They quickly managed to break through at Tolmino and at Conca di Plezzo, with the first troops across the river around 08:00, from where they could outflank whole areas of the Italian defences. By midday they were advancing on Caporetto and by the next day the



attacking troops had advanced over twenty-two kilometres and taken some 20,000 prisoners. Tired, demoralised and poorly equipped, the Italians were overwhelmed in many areas, while the Central Powers repeatedly managed to coordinate artillery and infantry to great effect. The vigour of the resistance varied: while some units fought bravely until their defeat was complete and unavoidable, others surrendered almost immediately or fled

in panic. Poor planning and organisation meant that the Italians had an almost total lack of reserves in the area and those that were available were not appropriately deployed.



In the course of the initial battle the entire left flank of II Army was forced to abandon its positions, and soon the whole army was in retreat. The lower reaches of the Isonzo were soon affected and III Army, which held this sector, was also forced to retire or risk being totally outflanked. On 27 October 1917, the Supreme Command abandoned its headquarters at Udine. The initial phase of the battle, marked by mass surrender and desertion, proved to be the cause of much controversy both at the time and subsequently. Cadorna, in his bulletin of 28 October 1917, blamed the defeat on "the inadequate resistance of units of 2nd Army, cowardly retreating without fighting or ignominiously surrendering to the enemy, has permitted the Austro-German forces to break our left wing on the Julian front." Politicised interpretations of the battle by contemporaries painted it either as an outbreak of wilful disobedience and defeatism from the insufficiently patriotic masses, or – in the view of the left – as a sign of class struggle and an attempted revolution seeking to end the war. The search for scapegoats took some time and the official inquiry, which was launched almost immediately after the defeat and which released its report in 1919, played its part in blaming Italian officers and men to varying extents. In fact, the Austro-German victory can be attributed chiefly to the successful operational planning and tactical innovations deployed by the attacking troops, as well as poor Italian leadership, staff-work and planning.

Cadorna ordered a full retreat to the line of the Tagliamento River and its bridges began to be destroyed on 30 October 1917, leaving several entire army corps trapped along with thousands of fleeing civilians. This phase of the retreat was extremely disorderly and chaotic, with many thousands of prisoners taken and there were substantial rates of desertion: many soldiers convinced that the war was over, downed their weapons and headed for home.



As the enemy continued to advance, crossing the Tagliamento in several places, it became clear that this new line would not hold. At the same time the overall situation was beginning to stabilise, units were returning to normal discipline and the retreat was becoming more orderly. The rout was at an end and a new phase of the battle began. By this stage the attacking forces were struggling with overextended supply lines and were beginning to lose momentum. On 4 November 1917 the Italian line withdrew to the Piave River, while IV Army was ordered to come down from the Cadore sector in the far north to join the new front.

