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# THE BATTLES OF THE RIDGES ARRAS - MESSINES MARCH - JUNE, 1917.

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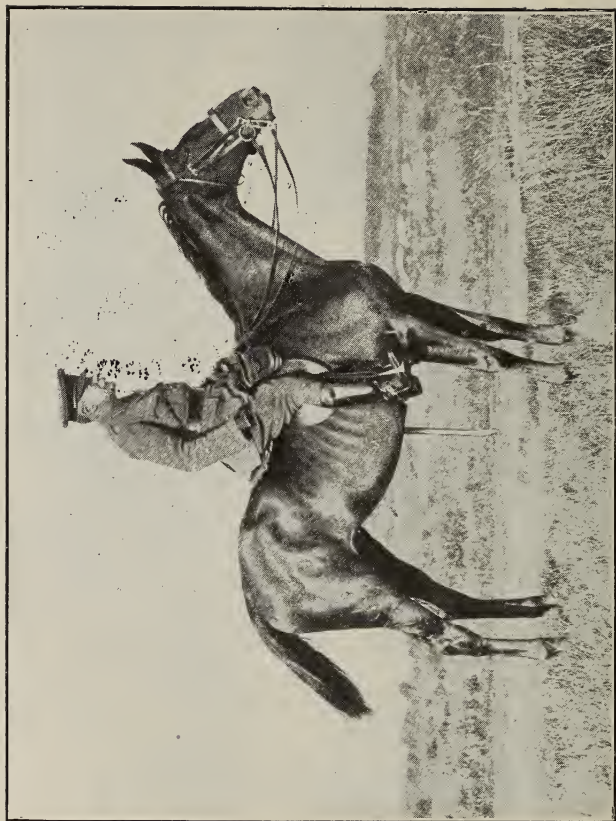
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THE BATTLES OF THE RIDGES







THE BRITISH COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, SIR DOUGLAS HAIG.

[Frontispiece.]

THE  
BATTLES  
OF  
THE RIDGES

ARRAS — MESSINES

March—June 1917



BY  
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&c., &c.*

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## CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
FOREWORD .. .. .	7
I.—THE POSITION, SPRING 1917 ..	9
II.—THE BATTLE OF ARRAS: THE PREPARATION .. .. .	17
III.—THE BATTLE OF ARRAS: THE PUSH	27
IV.—THE BATTLE OF ARRAS: THE PRIZE	40
V.—FIGHTING ON A FORTY-MILE FRONT	51
VI.—USING UP THE GERMANS .. ..	62
VII.—THE MAY FIGHTING AND THE M.E.B.U.s .. .. .	76
VIII.—MESSINES RIDGE: THE PREPARA- TION .. .. .	88
IX.—MESSINES RIDGE: THE VICTORY..	98
CONCLUSION .. .. .	112

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	FACING PAGE
THE BRITISH COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, SIR DOUGLAS HAIG .. .. . <i>Frontispiece</i>	
ARRAS CATHEDRAL TO-DAY .. .. .	32
A TANK GOING INTO ACTION .. .. .	33
GERMAN PRISONERS, HAPPY TO BE CAUGHT	48
USING A GERMAN GUN AGAINST GERMANS..	49
A WOOD AFTER BOMBARDMENT .. .. .	64
MULES BRINGING UP AMMUNITION .. .. .	65
A MINE CRATER, MESSINES .. .. .	80
BRITISH SOLDIERS OFF FOR A REST .. .. .	81

### MAPS

1. THE BATTLE OF MESSINES .. .. .	..	..	99
2. THE BATTLE OF ARRAS .. .. .	..	..	} <i>At end of book</i>
3. THE BRITISH WESTERN FRONT .. .. .	..	..	

## FOREWORD

**T**HE events of the Great War on the Flanders—Artois front from March to June, 1917, are as yet too recent to permit of their full discussion without prejudice to current military operations. But, marking as they did a very definite stage in the development of the war, they call for an attempt to put clearly in a collected form the information (which is not at all scanty) now available to the public. This little book makes that attempt. Its facts are accurate. Where a conclusion has been ventured from the facts, that conclusion is not official nor authoritative, and the reader may judge for himself as to its soundness.

FRANK FOX.



# THE BATTLES OF THE RIDGES

## CHAPTER I.

### THE POSITION, SPRING 1917.



THE Spring of 1917 was evidently recognised by the Germans as marking the turning-point of the war, as offering the last chance of securing a peace which would save the German aggression on the world from punishment and allow the German Powers a term of recuperation to prepare for a new and greater attack. In the Spring of 1916 the Germans had sought a decision by the great attack on Verdun, an attack by which it was hoped either to beat France into submission or at least to break up the formidable British offensive known to be preparing by bringing it to a premature explosion. Neither result was obtained. British and French, working in perfect

## The Battles of the Ridges.

unity, first held the German attack and then launched the great Somme offensive, which proved definitely that the German trench line was vulnerable and that superiority in the field had passed from the German Army to the British-French Army.

The German military leaders read the writing on the wall. They might, at home, whistle to keep their courage up and circulate confident mendacities in neutral countries; but they knew. One ingeniously reassuring German statement (which found publication in an American magazine that under a renegade Englishman played up for the Hun by attempting to deceive the United States people) "proved" by maps that the Germans had lost less territory on the Somme in three months than the French had lost at Verdun in three weeks. But the German knew.

His first answer to the Somme offensive was his peace offer of 1916, in which the burglar, covered by the householder's revolver, offered to go out quietly with the loot in his bag. When that was rejected by the Allies, the German policy showed a frenzy of desperation. The first sign of this was in sea policy. Ruthless submarine murder

## The Position, Spring 1917.

of non-combatants, regardless of whether they were of belligerent or neutral countries, and indiscriminate destruction of property, whether belligerent or neutral, was announced and practised. Like a nest of anarchists cornered in their lair, the Germans decided "to shoot up the town." They would die killing.

On land the German policy was marked by a kindred desperation of purpose and ruthlessness of cruelty, but it was of more direct military value. After all, the chief immediate result of ruthless submarine war was to convince the United States that Germany must be fought by all civilised Powers, and its final result will probably be the starvation of German factories and German cupboards after the war, when the world faces a serious shipping shortage and the "mad dog" Hohenzollerns can expect to have their needs satisfied last. But the immediate effect of the German land policy was a great access of strength both in man power and in strategic position. The Somme battle-line, which it was hopeless to attempt to hold, was given up, and the German forces withdrawn to "the Hindenburg line." The territory evacuated was devastated after a fashion that Europe had not known since

## The Battles of the Ridges.

the days of Attila's Huns. A levy in mass of the German population was made to reinforce the German Army and the vital German war industries. The populations of the occupied territories were submitted to an undisguised slavery; from Belgium and the North of France civilians were deported to Germany to work there as slaves, and thus release Germans for the fighting ranks.

It is necessary to have before the mind these facts as to the general position of affairs in the West before turning to a consideration of the Battles of Arras and Messines. German ruthlessness on land had interposed a strip of desert between the victorious and on-pressing Allied armies on the Somme, and had by a levy of its own civil population and the enslavement of the civil populations within its grip added vastly to its armed resources. It was known that in March the Germans had 49 Divisions in reserve on the Western front and 20 more reserve Divisions in the course of formation, in total a force of, say, a million men in addition to those then in the fighting line. The German plan was, after the withdrawal from the Somme had broken off a lost battle, to form a great army of attack for an offensive at some vital point.



## The Position, Spring 1917.

Whilst there can be nothing but horror for the barbarian ruthlessness with which the Germans sought the means to snatch victory from defeat on land, the boldness of this plan compels a certain admiration. Without a doubt it was the only way promising a chance of an advantageous peace.

If a striking victory could be gained at some point by throwing the last of the nation's reserves, and the last of the nation's scruples, into the contest—if thus Paris could be seriously threatened or Calais gained—a German peace might be possible, even though the whole world was outraged by German ruthlessness.

Events came to the aid of the German. On March 12th the Russian revolution broke out, and thereafter the Russian arm was practically paralysed. The German could reinforce his army on the Western front with men and munitions from the Eastern front, and could revive the drooping spirits of his home population with bulletins of cheap victories won against armies in which the tongue had sought to take the place of the sword.

Such was the position facing the Allied Command in April 1917. It was a position full of

## The Battles of the Ridges.

difficulties and of dangers. The German was preparing a great blow in some quarter. He had ready, or on the point of readiness, a fresh horde or about a million men in reserve to be poured through any gap which his armies already in the battle-line could make. For the first time in the history of the war he had only the one front to trouble him, as a sustained Russian offensive was impossible.

On the other hand, the United States had declared war, and her giant force would in time come to the aid of the Alliance. There was an obvious temptation for the Allies to fall back upon a defensive policy; to await and resist, as well as could be, the German attack; to be content if the line could be held. Fortunately a bolder, wiser spirit animated the High Command.

The British Army, flushed with its victories on the Somme, confident in the new skill it had gained in that giant battle, and renewing its strength day by day with men and guns, undertook the offensive. The fine plan built up by German boldness crumbled before a greater boldness. The victories of Arras and Messines wrested from the German the *points*

## The Position, Spring 1917.

*d'appui* on which he might rest his efforts to breach the Allies' line ; used up his mighty reserves, forced him back to a demoralising defensive, and marked the end of all his hopes on the Western front. By the end of June the German had to withdraw 96 Divisions from the firing line to refit ; his offensive was out of the question ; his defensive was faring so badly that the British forces were in possession of almost every mile of that trench line in Flanders and Artois which the German had fixed on in 1914 for his defensive stand.

Writing early in April 1917, Captain von Salzmann, the military expert of the "Vossische Zeitung," bewailed the mechanical superiority of the Allies, but took comfort in the mighty strategic reserve which the genius of General Hindenburg had built up.

"In the struggle," wrote this German expert, "for the great initiative, victory will belong to the side which can hold back its reserves longest."

In July 1917, if still of the same strategic opinion, that German expert was no longer in doubt as to the side to which victory belonged, for the German reserves had vanished

## The Battles of the Ridges.

in the furnace of the war, and the Germans had nothing to show for their use but a series of strategic retreats, "in accordance with plan," from the dominating positions which they fortified when the trench war began to the inferior positions which they are now allowed to occupy until it suits the Allies to turn them out.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE BATTLE OF ARRAS : THE PREPARATION.



JUST as the full significance of the Battles of the Ridges in the Spring of 1917 cannot be appreciated without a glance first at the general strategic position, so the actual extent of the achievement in the Battle of Arras cannot be understood without a glance at the difficulties of the country in which it was fought.

The Artois, in which the Battle of Arras was fought, is a tableland walling in on the left the Douai Plain, which is of the Flanders type of country, low-lying and over-watered. The Artois tableland is not lofty, but rising from it are many hills and ridges, of which the Vimy Ridge is the most important. These ridges and the frequent woods and copses give the landscape variety and charm, conquering even the ugly pit-heads and

## The Battles of the Ridges.

slack-heaps, and the *corons*, or workmen's villages, which mark the Artois as a coal-mining district. The main roads skirt the ridges or pass along their slopes. Away from the main roads the country is traversed by a net-work of sunken roads, sometimes of a great depth. It would seem that the farmer of past generations made cart-tracks to the main roads by scraping the soft top-soil away, and continued to do this year by year until the track became a great, broad ditch paved with the hard sub-soil, lined on each side by embankments of a height, often, of from 12 to 20 feet. When a more permanent road was made it most often followed the old sunken track, macadam metalling being placed over the sub-soil.

The frequent ridges, the little woods, the sunken roads, give this Artois country special facilities for defensive military operations. The sunken roads are, to all intents and purposes, communication trenches, able to take wheeled traffic as well as foot traffic. The chief industry of the Artois, coal-mining, adds to the resources of an army carrying on a defensive campaign. The galleries of a coal-mine are obviously very safe store-places, and the slack-heap offers itself as

## The Battle of Arras.

a great earth-work already reared. The colliery workers' villages, locally called *corons*, add yet another defensive feature. They are almost always built on the same plan, of long parallel rows of two-storied cottages, set back to back. Figure a plot of ground on which, at wide intervals, a series of thick brick walls, each 400 yards long, has been built. To both sides of the wall is attached a continuous row of small two-storied houses, to each of which it acts as a back wall. That is the typical Artois colliery settlement. These settlements have a military simplicity of design, and, with the aid of sandbags and machine-guns, have a military value which can only be properly appreciated when you come to attack one. These *corons* are in truth crown-works of fortifications.

With its ridges, its sunken roads, its slack-heaps, its *corons*, the Artois had defied every Allied offensive since 1914, whether attempted by the French or the British. In April 1917 the nut was cracked at last.

The Battle of Arras in popular estimation begins with the seizure of Vimy Ridge, one of the events of April 9th. Indeed, to many casual students of the events of the Great War, the

## The Battles of the Ridges.

seizure of Vimy Ridge *was* the Battle of Arras, its beginning, its end, and its whole accomplishment. That is very far from being the case. It was an incident of the battle—a most important incident—but not by any manner of means the whole battle.

During March the British Army, which had taken over from the French the southern section of the Somme line, was busily engaged in "cleaning up" the Somme down to our point of contact with the French in front of St. Quentin. The probing of the German line showed that the enemy had given up in the Somme district all the territory that he was likely to sacrifice without a great struggle—that, in fact, he was back to his Hindenburg line; and the Intelligence Department was made aware of the massing of a great reserve army behind the German lines for a big offensive. The decision was made to hit first, and to strike the enemy at the point from which his retreat from the Somme had been pivoted. Before the Somme offensive the German line had run from in front of Lille, south-south-west to behind Arras, and had then bulged out in a salient westward. The Somme offensive captured for the Allies that salient, and in withdrawing their line the Germans



## The Battle of Arras.

made the point of their old line east of Arras the pivot. From that point their new line stretched down to a point in front of St. Quentin.

Without ceasing the pressure on St. Quentin—we were within two miles of the town on April 1st—the British Army collected forces for a blow on a wide front, of which Arras would be the centre. The first moves seemed to indicate only a northern extension of the Somme—Ancre Battle. On April 2nd we seized Henin in the valley of the Cojeul, about 5 miles south-east of Arras, and other villages up to Doignies, improving our line on a 10-mile front from Beaurains, south of Arras, to a point near Beaumetz on the Bapaume—Cambrai Road. This preliminary engagement was fought in a snow-storm, and throughout the Battle of Arras the weather was hostile. Winter put up a stubborn defensive before the coming of Spring, and the severity of the season established a record for nearly a hundred years.

To the air service this lingering of the winter was a special hardship. It has come to be established as a principle of British tactics on the Western front that an air offensive to establish superiority in the air should precede the artillery preparation and the infantry attack in a “big

## The Battles of the Ridges.

push." Our airmen, to whom was given the task of winning the first stage of the Battle of Arras, had to do their work in spite of gales and snow-storms. They did it, however, with a completeness, a thoroughness, that marked the highest point up till then attained in air warfare. From dawn on April 5th to dawn on April 7th, night and day, the battle in the air continued with hardly an hour's intermission. We crossed the German lines to search out the German air fleets and destroy them. If the enemy aeroplanes showed a disinclination to fight, we forced them to come up in defence of their observation balloons and aerodromes. We sent out, night and day, squadrons of bombing aeroplanes, which did not seek targets in the streets of open towns, but attacked the German aerodromes, railway stations, ammunition dumps and encampments, making light of anti-aircraft guns and of defence squadrons. In all 17 great bombing raids were carried through, and over eight tons of bombs were dropped where they would be most effective.

This direct fighting in the air and bombing of hostile works was the most exciting, but not the most useful, part of the air task. It was really only the preparation for the next step when

## The Battle of Arras.

aeroplanes swarmed up in the air with the camera as their chief weapon, anxious only to take pictures of the Hun and his works. In all, 1,700 air-photographic panoramas were taken in preparation for the Battle of Arras—pictures which exposed to us not only the German's trenches, his gun-pits, his light railways, his roads or tracks, but also indicated to what extent he was using particular roads and trenches, at what points he was diverting traffic from one track to another. The number of things which a good air-photograph will tell to the General Staff justifies the arduous effort to get it. An example (chosen at random, and not more like a fanciful instance of modern detective romance than many another that could be cited):—An air-photograph shows at a spot which is identified on the squared map of — area markings which on close examination prove to be new horse or mule lines. It is clear that they are lines for horses and mules from the well-worn tracks to the watering troughs. But it is a very advanced spot for animals to be tethered, neither comfortable nor safe; and there are no wheel tracks, no trace of ammunition wagons. Not to follow the examination through all its steps, the ultimate conclusion (which is

## The Battles of the Ridges.

proved afterwards to be right) is that the enemy has established one or more batteries in a very forward position near there, and is going to supply them with ammunition by pack-horses.

After the air-photographer has had his innings the air-spotter lumbers up in his machine. He also has no thought of bombing or fighting. All he wants is to be let alone while he guides our batteries to score direct hits on the targets which the air-photographer has discovered. A patient and long-suffering man is the air-spotter (and also his pilot). As he quietly circles around the target which he is observing and sends by "wireless" his observations, he is stormed at with shot and shell, often attacked by aeroplanes, but never attempts to retaliate—just goes on making his not altogether harmless observations. And it is wonderful how much shooting an air-spotter machine will withstand without giving up. Often a machine comes home with its wings actually riddled with shrapnel and rifle bullets. Unless the petrol tank or the pilot's head is pierced the air-spotting machine usually carries on until the task in hand is finished.

The air fighting in the Battle of Arras was marked by some incidents of almost ridiculous

## The Battle of Arras.

daring. After the first direct fighting in the air, the German airmen showed an inclination to keep to their harbours and to refuse combats. That was not agreeable to our plans, which demanded a great destruction of enemy machines, so as to give our mastery of the air as much permanency as is possible in that element. So the German airmen were taunted into coming up by daring attacks on their infantry. Our aeroplanes would sweep down on to a road just over the heads of a marching column, sprinkling it with bullets. Once a German Staff motor car was chased along a road for some miles and peppered as it sprinted, until one of the staff officers was wounded or killed and the car was then run into a ditch and the other officers took to earth.

Of course all this was not done without breaking eggs. On April 5-6 we lost 28 machines, with their pilots and observers. Founding their mendacity on the incident of these losses, the German bulletins claimed "great air successes." But that yarn did not even deceive the Germans, who knew full bitterly which side had the air victory, as they went through the Battle of Arras blinded, flogged by artillery, to which their guns could only reply at random. It certainly did not

## The Battles of the Ridges.

deceive our men, who saw the sky dotted with our machines, and who, whether gunners or infantry, had, every moment, reason to bless the boys aloft, of whom a modern bard sings :

Then did the British airman's sea-born skill  
Teach wood and metal to foresee his will ;  
In every cog and joint his spirit stirred ;  
The thing possessed was man as well as bird.

A falcon among timorous fowl he flies,  
And bears Britannia's battle to the skies ;  
In vain the Hun seeks covert in a cloud—  
The riven dusk is made his shaken shroud.

From April 1st to April 9th the Battle of Arras was going through its preparatory stage. We swept the air clean of the German and carried through our aerial reconnaissance. We seized some preparatory points, and kept up a steady pressure all along our line from St. Quentin northwards. That a big blow was in preparation the enemy knew, but they knew not the time nor the place ; and, beaten out of the air, they had no means of finding out.

### CHAPTER III.

## THE BATTLE OF ARRAS: THE PUSH.



FASTER Sunday morning, April 9th, whilst the peasants of Artois behind the firing line were gathering in the village churches to worship and to pray for deliverance, the British Army of attack gathered for the battle of the morning. In Arras Divine Service was held in the cellars, as the town was being heavily bombarded by the enemy—the last bombardment that they would be able to inflict upon it, for the day of deliverance was at hand. The citizens had some idea of what was afoot, and there seemed a special fervour, one curé relates, in their prayers of intercession that day. In the afternoon, to mark the greatest festival of the Christian year, there was held a Vesper Service even in the shell-swept district.

## The Battles of the Ridges.

There was a note of hope in the appeal of the Benediction hymn—

O Salutaris Hostia,  
Quæ cœli pandis ostium,  
Bella premunt hostilia,  
Da robur fer auxilium.\*

Easter Sunday evening was spent within the British lines in a confident preparation. The greater part of the infantry brought up for the attack slept in bivouacs. The night was cold though fine; towards the morning rain came with a north-westerly wind. Dawn was anxiously awaited by the troops, dawn and the chance to get forward. The darkness was intensified rather than relieved by the occasional flash of a gun taking part in a feeble and desultory bombardment of the enemy's lines, a bombardment which seemed to mark the flickering out of a threatened attack, and to promise to the enemy a chance to repair his sorely shattered lines. From the evidence of prisoners it seems clear that the Germans did not expect an immediate attack, and that when the rain came it was taken

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\* A rough translation: "O Saving Host, guardian of Heaven's Gate, armed foes oppress us; give us strength, bring us aid."



## The Battle of Arras.

as another welcome sign of a probable pause in the British operations.

The dawn came, showing but a timid light through the clouded sky, until our guns, waiting for the appointed moment, gave it greeting. There was then no want of light. A fierce flame crackled and ran like chain-lightning for 15 miles along our front. A thousand and more guns, from the giant 15-inch howitzers to the 18-pdrs., began to discharge their mountains of shell at the German position. So quick was the rate of fire that that chain-lightning ran its direful course along the British line almost continuously; and along the German line there was a response in continuous sheet-lightning as the uninterrupted hail of shells burst.

There are two incidents of awe and horror which separate themselves from other impressions of the gigantic battles of this war in the minds of all observers; one is the oncoming of a poison-gas cloud—silent, stealthy, baleful; the other is the monstrous roar and flash of the guns when the final artillery preparation preludes a British or a French attack. This Arras preparation was the greatest that the war had known. It surpassed all the great bombardments of the Somme

## The Battles of the Ridges.

battles. It brought into action high explosive shells of terrible power and instantaneous detonation, monster shells which would deliver their shattering message at the touch of a bird's wing or of a single strand of wire ; which did not wreck trenches, but obliterated them ; which did not cut lanes through wire entanglements, but dissipated them into dust. Even observers long accustomed to the sights and sounds of this war were impressed by the intensity of the Easter Monday artillery attack.

“ The Times ” correspondent records his impressions of that dawn :—

In an instant, it seemed, the whole of the enemy line broke into flame. Beyond the flicker of our guns, brilliantly visible in the half-light, and amid the flash and swirl of our bursting shells, the enemy's rockets, calling for help, rose from the whole circuit of the horizon—red and white and green and tall orange-coloured fountains of golden rain. One could not guess what the signal meant, but plainly the German infantry everywhere were shrieking for aid from the supports and artillery.

Between our guns and the front trenches, from a small wood a great flight of rooks rose into the dim air and swung in panic round and round, silhouetted against the background of flames like a devil's dance above the eternal fires.

## The Battle of Arras.

Then other birds came, slowly droning, from behind us, flying very low and headed straight for the enemy's country—our aeroplanes, their outlines hardly visible against the grey sky, but going serenely through the storm as if there were neither wind around nor death ahead of them.

As daylight grew, the outlines of Arras on the right and the vague line of Vimy Ridge on the left began to define themselves, and the face of all the blood-stained country by Neuville St. Vaast to Thélus and La Folie Farm. Before 6 o'clock, however, the light drizzle changed to a heavy storm of rain which later became mixed with snow, and all the battlefield was sheeted in flying mist, driving before the wind.

“ The Morning Post ” correspondent wrote :—

I saw the beginning of the assault between Arras and Souchez, and the artillery concentration for this portion of the great offensive alone was the most stupendous yet made by any group of armies. The barrage which shielded the infantry sweeping forward in the grey dawn was a suddenly appalling spectacle. Throughout the night shells had poured on the German earthworks and the chain of concrete forts that crown the heights of Vimy and half encircle Arras, but suddenly this deluge lifted, and for half an hour the night was still.

Just as the first faint streaks of dawn lightened the eastern sky the guns were loosed again as though by a single hand, and the distant ridges were aflame. Coloured rockets spouted against the drifting clouds,

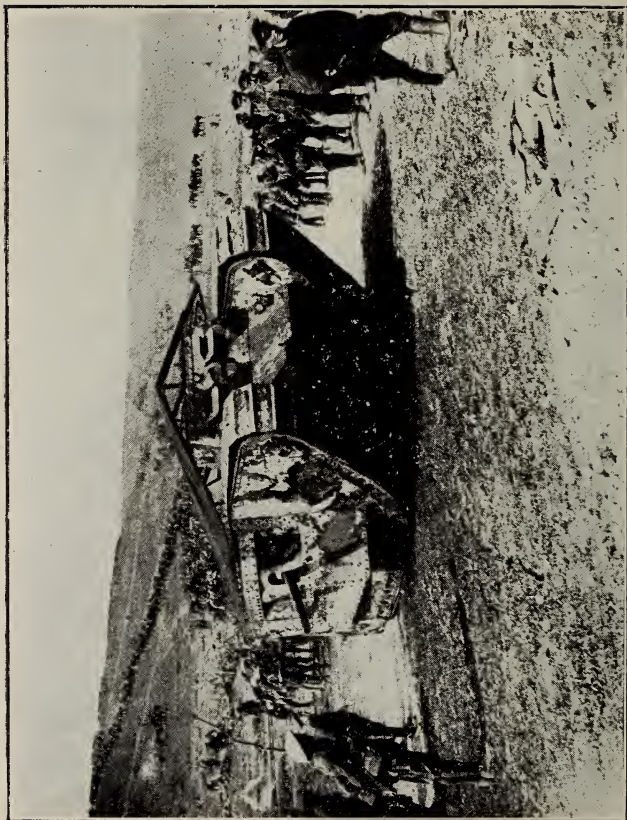
## The Battles of the Ridges.

and frantic signals blazed above the bursting shells—great cascades of golden rain and other lurid devices for proclaiming the fears of the garrison awaiting its inevitable fate. We could see waves of khaki following steadily in the wake of the fiery curtain; could even see them vanish into the labyrinth of trenches that was their goal; and all the while the German garrisons were inarticulate. There was nothing to stay their progress. Even after the first swift descent of this terrible wall of flame, the strange silence continued, and not until our men had begun the sifting of wrecked dug-outs did the enemy batteries reply, and then uncertainly and without enthusiasm.

To the infantryman waiting to “go over” the impression was more simple, but it was very warming and comforting. “Fritz is getting his iron rations,” would certainly be the remark of at least one out of four British soldiers as they waited in the trenches, sipping at their hot tea, and waiting for their turn to “go on.” The British infantryman does not like “iron rations” (the emergency ration of “bully,” biscuit, beef extract, tea and sugar); neither carrying them about (which he has to do always) nor eating them, nor explaining why he has lost them (which he has to do often); and his favourite cant term for shell is “iron rations.” “Tommy” no longer wastes any poetry or exalted language on an



ARRAS CATHEDRAL TO-DAY.



A TANK GOING INTO ACTION.

## The Battle of Arras.

artillery preparation. He takes its excellent dreadfulness as a matter of course.

“All you have got to do,” said a sergeant, coaching a young Londoner, whose first big attack this was; “all you have got to do is to hang on to the back wheel of the barrage, just as if you were biking down the Strand behind a motor ’bus; carefully like, and not in too much of a hurry; and then when you come to Fritz, and he holds up his hands, you send him back to the rear.”

It worked out like that, very nearly. At half-past five the infantry went over on a front of 12 miles with Arras as its centre, marched behind the barrage and, so far as the first German line was concerned, found it a matter mostly of taking prisoners. What was left of the German garrison was a trembling nerve-shattered mob.

But, afterwards, then the hard work of the infantry, “the Queen of Battles,” began: the work of subduing one by one the little forts, untouched by the guns, of making way through wire entanglements to get at the garrisons of the enemy, with always the machine-guns spluttering their damnable, querulous “tut-tut-tut,” contemptuously, as it were, imposing silence on life.

## The Battles of the Ridges.

The song of the guns war correspondents can note, and can tell of it in fine phrases; but how hard it is to give any real idea of that miraculous British infantry in the attack—fighting its way, not so much gaily, or cheerfully, as *good-humouredly*, through horrors and terrors unspeakable. He is care-free quite, the British soldier of the line, and reckless; he is good-humoured quite, killing only as a matter of sheer necessity; and yet withal no plaster saint, but having a piquant human flavour of cantankerousness, “grouching” about his breakfast bacon as he goes stubbornly on earning Military Medals by the dozen.

Not in this charge in front of Arras, but in one quite near by, I recall a soldier taking shelter for a moment in a shell-hole as we strolled through a singularly poor specimen of German barrage.

“Here, Hawkins, what are you hanging back for?” called out his sergeant.

“Who’s hanging back?” retorted Hawkins, as he came on; “can’t a fellow light his blinking fag? Who’s got all the matches that a fellow can’t get down out of the wind a half-mo’?”

Hawkins (that is not his name) did a very good day’s work, and was complimented by his platoon commander and his name “sent on” for further



## The Battle of Arras.

notice. But he was still in an injured frame of mind that evening about "lighting his fag." He was a typical English "Tommy," and, whilst I have been digressing, some thousands like him—with Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Newfoundlanders, South Africans assisting—in a line twelve miles long, have been walking up behind the barrage and giving the German Army the greatest blow it has yet experienced.

At 5.30 a.m. the infantry started. By 9 a.m. the fate of the day was practically decided, and we were in possession of German positions along the whole front of attack that included Vimy Ridge, perhaps the chief strong-point of the fortress line behind which the enemy had taken shelter. By nightfall the Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Douglas Haig, could report:—

We attacked at 5.30 a.m. this morning on a wide front. From south of Arras to south of Lens our troops have everywhere penetrated the enemy's lines, and are making satisfactory progress at all points.

In the direction of Cambrai we have stormed the villages of Hermies and Boursies, and have penetrated into Havrincourt Wood (both villages are south of the Bapaume—Cambrai Road in the neighbourhood of Beaumetz and north of the wood).

In the direction of St. Quentin we have captured Fresnoy-le-Petit (two miles west of the Cambrai—

## The Battles of the Ridges.

St. Quentin Road) and have advanced our line south-east of Le Verguier (nearly four miles north-west of Fresnoy).

Our troops have everywhere stormed the enemy's defences from Henin-sur-Cojeul to the southern outskirts of Givenchy-en-Gohelle to a depth of from two to three miles, and our advance continues.

The enemy's forward defences on this front, including the Vimy Ridge, which was carried by Canadian troops, were captured early in the morning.

These defences comprise a network of trenches and the fortified localities of Neuville-Vitasse, Telegraph Hill, Tilloy-lez-Mofflaines, Observation Ridges, St. Laurent, Blangy, Les Tilleuls, and La Folie Farm.

Subsequently our troops moved forward and captured the enemy's rearward defences, including, in addition to other powerful trench systems, the fortified localities of Feuchy, Chapelle de Feuchy, Hyderabad Redoubt, Athies, and Thélus.

Up to 2 p.m. 5,816 prisoners, including 119 officers, had passed through the collection stations, and many more remained to be counted. Of these a large number belong to Bavarian Divisions, who have suffered heavy casualties in to-day's fighting.

The captured war material includes guns and numbers of trench mortars and machine-guns which have not yet been counted.

In the direction of Cambrai further progress has been made in the neighbourhood of Havrincourt Wood. We have captured the village of Demicourt.

In the direction of St. Quentin we have captured the villages of Pontru and Le Verguier.

## The Battle of Arras.

The Commander-in-Chief's report the next day was equally cheering :—

During the night there was severe fighting at the northern end of the Vimy Ridge, where the enemy had retained a footing. He was ejected, and an attempted counter-attack failed to materialise. The eastern slope of the ridge has been cleared of the enemy, and counter-attacks repulsed.

Our troops advanced and seized the village of Fampoux (east of Athies, captured on Monday, and nearly four miles east of Arras) and neighbouring defences north and south of the Scarpe.

The number of prisoners taken yesterday exceeds 9,000, and over 40 guns have been captured.

In the neighbourhood of St. Quentin the enemy has been driven from the high ground between Le Verguier and Hargicourt (two miles north of Le Verguier and both north-west of St. Quentin).

Our operations have been continued energetically to-day in spite of heavy snowstorms and generally unfavourable weather.

We have reached the outskirts of Monchy-le-Preux, five miles east of Arras, and have cleared Farbus and Farbus Wood (east of Thélus).

Hard fighting took place again this afternoon on the northern end of the Vimy Ridge, in which we gained further important positions and took a number of prisoners and machine-guns.

In the direction of Cambrai we have advanced our line north of the village of Louverval.

## The Battles of the Ridges.

Such counter-attacks as the enemy has attempted at different points along our front have met with no success.

The number of prisoners taken by us since the opening of our attack yesterday morning now exceeds 11,000, including 235 officers.

We have also captured over 100 guns, among them a number of heavy guns up to 8-inch calibre, 60 trench-mortars, and 163 machine-guns.

Our aeroplanes performed valuable work yesterday in co-operation with our infantry, and in a number of cases inflicted casualties with machine-gun fire on hostile reinforcements.

And the next day's report (it will be convenient to give together these three official despatches, describing the first phase of the Battle of Arras) recorded :—

The weather continues to be wet and stormy. Early this morning we attacked and captured two important positions in the enemy's lines north of the Vimy Ridge, astride the River Souchez. A number of prisoners were taken by us. Later these positions were secured and strengthened.

During the night two hostile attacks upon our new positions on the northern end of the Vimy Ridge were driven off by our machine-gun fire with heavy German losses.

Some progress has been made south of the River Scarpe.

South of the Arras—Cambrai Road our troops this

## The Battle of Arras.

afternoon stormed the villages of Heninel and Wancourt, with their adjoining defences, and crossed the Cojeul River and occupied the heights on the eastern bank.

Further progress has also been made during the day north of the Scarpe and east of the Vimy Ridge.

In the course of patrol encounters last night north-east of Épéhy, in which we secured a few prisoners, a large enemy detachment came under the effective fire of our infantry and suffered heavy casualties.

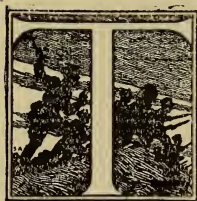
During the fighting of the 9th and 10th instant we captured prisoners from all infantry regiments of six German divisions, *viz.*, 79th Reserve Division, 1st Bavarian Reserve Division, 14th Bavarian Division, 11th Division, 17th Reserve Division, and 18th Reserve Division.

The number of prisoners of each of these divisions exceed a thousand.

That is the bald, but certainly not unconvincing narrative. It may be filled in with some explanation of the prize we had gained, and some incidents of the fighting.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE BATTLE OF ARRAS : THE PRIZE.



THE harvest from the Battle of Arras was rich in strategic and moral advantage, and not wanting in material advantage. We had dealt a first staggering blow at the German plan of massing a big strategic reserve for a theatrical offensive somewhere. Further, we had prejudiced the German defensive line seriously. There are indications that the enemy designed a further withdrawal. From a pivot east of Arras he had already wheeled back his line to abandon the salient of the Somme. Probably he had contemplated then a northerly swing back from St. Quentin, giving some ground in Artois, but keeping his hold on the Vimy Ridge, without which he could not hope to hold for long the valuable coal district around Lens. Probably a German line Vimy—Oppy—

## The Battle of Arras.

Rœux—Monchy—Quéant was contemplated. Hope of that was gone. Its strong points were now either in our hands or gravely threatened. The enemy not only had to face the fact that we had taken the initiative and chosen his summer campaign ground for him, but also that at the very moment we made the choice we had seized points which forced him into an unfavourable position. Vimy Ridge was ours, and we commanded the valleys of the Souchez, of the Scarpe, of the Cojeul and the Sensée rivers at the points where those valleys began to slope down into the plain of Douai.

The moral advantage was no less considerable. Just when the great Hindenburg had " saved the whole situation " by a masterly retreat, and had proclaimed his success in getting together a great strategic reserve whilst paralysing any possible offensive on the part of our troops, entangled in the desert he had made on the Somme, we inflicted the greatest defeat the German forces had met with since the Marne, proving our freedom to strike and drawing peremptorily a huge draft on the German reserves.

The material advantage was not to be despised. Another great slice of French territory was rescued

## The Battles of the Ridges.

and the city of Arras freed from bombardment. German guns equal to the artillery of two Divisions had been captured, and in many cases were at once used, with their ammunition, against their late owners, who had the experience of knowing what a good destructive shell the 5.9 German howitzer can be with British observers and gunners to guide it on the right path. The German prisoners represented something more than the strength of a Division, and the wastage of German forces from killed and wounded was enormous, especially in the vain counter-attack which sought to win back the Vimy Ridge.

Vimy Ridge was the chief territorial prize of the victory. It had been fought for in many previous stubborn battles. The French tried to drive the Germans from it in December 1914 and again in May 1915. We failed to get it in the Autumn 1915 offensive, and in May 1916 the Germans, by a sudden attack, supported by great barrages of tear-shells—then a comparative novelty—managed one Sunday to improve their hold on the ridge at our expense. The ridge practically gives command of Lens, and its loss made certain the ultimate loss of the Lens coal basin. Canadian troops had the post of honour in



## The Battle of Arras.

this section. They took the first and second lines on the ridge without much trouble, except that of collecting prisoners. Taking the third line was a more stubborn task. Hill 145, on the north of the ridge, held out until nightfall. The ridge was found to be wonderfully well organised for defence. In addition to the usual shelters and dug-outs, there had been tunnelled two great galleries where men could shelter safe from any shell fire. But the men who could shelter there could not get up to the surface in time to fight, so perfect was the co-ordination of our infantry and artillery ; and they were the main contributors to the great bag of 4,000 prisoners from this section of the battle-line. Trenches and dug-outs were found by the conquerors to have been completely obliterated. It was hardly possible to tell where they had been. The German prisoners gave further testimony to the effectiveness of our artillery work, for they had been without food for two days, all communication with their supply train having been cut off by the pitiless curtain fire. The victory of Vimy Ridge was a proud achievement for the Canadian contingent of the Imperial Army.

The section south of Vimy Ridge fell to the

## The Battles of the Ridges.

troops from the Mother Country, and they had a hard task in subduing the famous Labyrinth, Neuville St. Vaast, Farbus, Thélus and Roclin-court. In their bag of 3,550 prisoners was included a German Brigade General and his Staff, bitterly mortified at being caught in a dug-out without a chance to put up a fight. Here again the effectiveness of the artillery work was manifest. Officer prisoners confessed that they and their men had been unable to get food for four days. The measure of safety, they felt, their holes in the ground had given them was rather a mockery, for they had been able merely to cower there, cold, hungry, thirsty, until they were captured when the British chose to come over. Similarly, batteries were found safely enough "dug in," but with the record of not having fired a shot for days, because of the impossibility of getting up ammunition.

The next section to the south, where English and Scottish troops were engaged, met with the hardest resistance of the first phase of the battle. The Germans had been established almost in the suburbs of Arras, and from house entrenchments at Blangy there came a murderous machine-gun fire. The banks of the Scarpe, too, were full of

## The Battle of Arras.

strong positions. At one stage the infantry seemed completely held up, but good communication with the artillery had been preserved, and the obstacles were beaten down by gun-fire. Cavalry had a little chance in this section, and one howitzer battery on the Scarpe was captured by a cavalry charge. In the taking of Monchy, too, the cavalry co-operated, at one stage dismounting and going forward afoot with their Hotchkiss guns.

The capture of Monchy—a plateau stronghold from which radiate a great number of those sunken roads which are a feature of the Artois—was a particularly fine bit of resolute work. The Germans hung on to it desperately, and it afforded them good opportunities for defence. It is doubtful whether the place could have been taken had not the cavalry proved so skilful and daring. The sunken roads in front were full of machine-guns, and the sunken roads in the rear gave the German garrison ideal means of safe communication with their reserves and supply trains.

Almost to the end fresh troops were being poured into the place from Douai and Cambrai. The difficulties of the attack were increased by the wretched weather, blinding snow-flurries sweeping the country.

## The Battles of the Ridges.

A "Morning Post" correspondent describes the capture vividly :—

We hold Monchy firmly, despite strong counter-attacks, thanks to the gallant English and Scottish lads, who stormed it at the point of the bayonet early Wednesday morning, and the cavalry squadrons that charged up the slope into the narrow streets, driving the fugitives of the garrison out on the eastern side into the shallow trenches beyond.

The taking of Monchy is a story of the splendid heroism and determination of troops who had been sorely tried by three days and nights of hard fighting, and marching in snow and rain, with little food and less sleep, constantly harassed by hidden machine-guns and shelled by German batteries. Some of these men came tramping back through the snow this morning, wounded, and I heard from them details of the struggle for this enemy stronghold. The Germans desperately desired to retain Monchy. The defeated Prussian Divisions, flung eastward along the Scarpe and the Cambrai Road by our first thrust, had been ordered by the High Command to hold the village and the high ground round it at all costs. It was a race against time by the opposing armies, and the British won. The impetus of our great advance carried the first waves of infantry so far beyond the broken front into the free country behind that by nightfall on Monday the first of them were resting in the fields below Monchy, within range of its machine-guns. Fresh German regiments were hurrying up from the rest billets in Cambrai and Douai to stiffen the

## The Battle of Arras.

exhausted troops already in the line, but they could not arrive in time. Their guns had fallen back as ours pushed forward over the new craters to the good roads behind.

British cavalry suddenly appeared on the fringe of this open country, riding down the nests of snipers and the pockets of machine-gunners, through a storm of shrapnel and heavy shell, and their advent hastened the inevitable retirement from the villages thus menaced by our horse and foot. Monchy, which was the divisional head-quarters on Monday, was reduced to a brigade centre on Tuesday, and as the British pressure increased and fresh troops could be seen by gunner look-outs in the church steeple swarming over the fields from the slopes by Arras, it was abandoned to a regimental commander, who presently found the tide of battle flowing to his very feet.

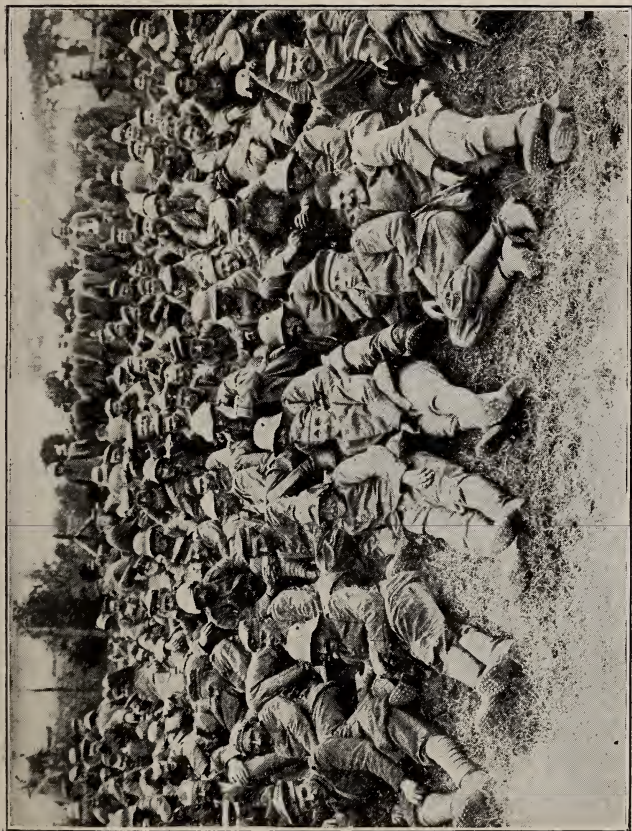
Machine-gunners hung stubbornly to their posts throughout Tuesday, while the houses and the chateau of Monchy were hastily prepared for a state of siege, raking the little hills and hollows between the roads with deadly thoroughness. They had the advantages in the matter of observation, for in the lulls between the blinding snow-squalls they were able to watch every movement of their opponents. The British infantry, imperturbable, dug themselves into the riddled ground and endured the fire with stoicism. They had losses, but there was no thought of turning back to a safer place. The cavalry, working along on both sides of the Cambrai Road, bivouacked on the broken ground beyond the ruined chapel-redoubt of Feuchy, and early on Wednesday morning the

## The Battles of the Ridges.

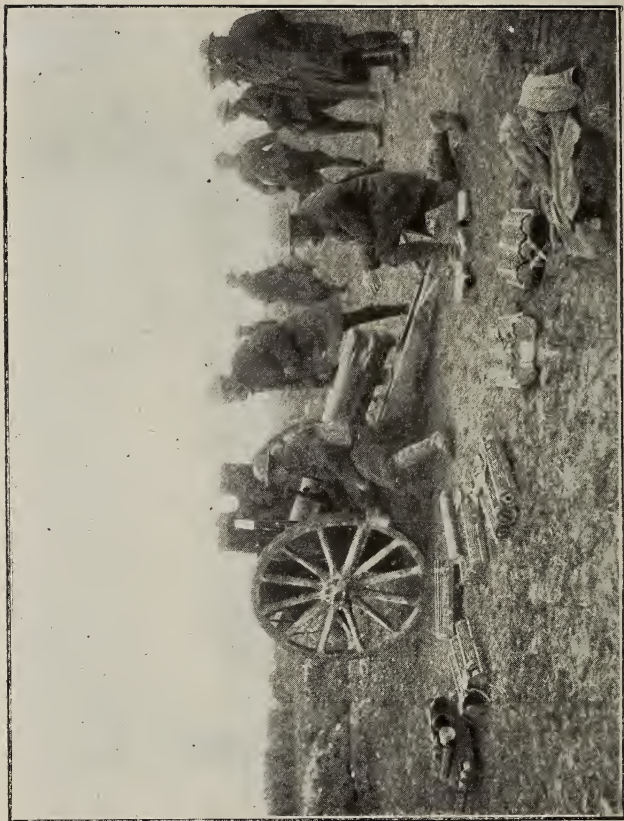
ordeal of the waiting troops had a glorious end. Infantry, cavalry, and a valiant Tank stormed Monchy just after daybreak, encircling it with such rapidity that the garrison were unable to check the flood that swept against them. The infantry took the southern end of the village. They stumbled over the fields, shaking the snow from their great-coats, their heads down against the double blast of cutting wind and deadlier bullets. Men fell, but others went on. Machine-guns clattered from windows and behind ditches. The red roofs of the cottages were dotted with the grey figures of prostrate Germans firing wildly down the slope. "The bullets were like raindrops," said a Londoner who survived the storm. "They couldn't miss us, but they couldn't stop us."

The infantry were in among the cottages before the garrison had time to clear the roofs, and some of them looked down appealingly and rather foolishly from the gables. They were running up the narrow streets across the little central square. The eastern slope of Monchy was thick with flying Prussians. Meanwhile the cavalry was charging into the northern end of the village. They had formed under the lee of a slight dip in the ground under a hot fire. Horses wheeled into position and sabres flashed in the morning light. They came into view a moment later, and the charge of these troopers was witnessed by thousands of their dismounted comrades lying in the countryside for miles around.

You have never seen cavalymen like them. Mud-encrusted figures under flat metal hats, men with three days' beards and faces covered with grime, in



GERMAN PRISONERS, HAPPY TO BE CAUGHT.



USING A GERMAN GUN AGAINST GERMANS.



## The Battle of Arras.

no way suggesting the smart Lancers, Dragoons, or Hussars of other days. They had slept in shell-holes, and lain in mud and rain, with no protection save their great-coats ; they were unwashed, weary and cold ; but never have troopers ridden to a charge with greater willingness or deadlier purpose. " We went full tilt, like the devil himself," said a child with a subaltern's star on his tunic ; " full tilt, with a cheer, for a good half-mile into the funny old town itself."

They halted in the streets, with sabres and lances still shining, for not a single Prussian remained to meet them. Monchy was empty. Five dead Germans lay across the pavement, and two fallen British infantrymen were near them. Abandoned machine-guns awaited their search, the flag still hung before the door of the deserted regimental head-quarters, and the beds of the fleeing Prussian officers were hardly cold. The village was whole and unshelled when the cavalry and infantry went in. Tired as they were, the men remember having wondered at its peaceful aspect, the unbroken curtained windows of the houses, the neat village church, and the frightened chickens in the back-yards.

This pastoral scene vanished two hours later when the German guns beyond Sart Wood began hammering at the lost position as soon as enemy observers in the tree-tops were sure that the British were in occupation, and by nightfall Monchy had become the usual battered ruin.

Yet further south the fury of the battle diminished a little. The main attack in the first phase of

## The Battles of the Ridges.

the Battle of Arras may be said to have stretched from Souchez to Henin-sur-Cojeul. But south beyond that, down to St. Quentin, the German line was attacked and in many places strong points seized. The only untoward incident of the day was a great raid on a section of the line held by the Australians, which gave the enemy some prisoners. That account was to be fully squared a little later by the Australians at Bullecourt.

On April 12th the German was licking his wounds sadly ; so flustered that he even forgot to say in his *communiqué* that he had really wanted to be kicked out of the country east of Arras ; but consoling himself that the worst was now over. Then the Battle of Arras broke out again on an extended front.

## CHAPTER V.

### FIGHTING ON A FORTY-MILE FRONT.



ON April 12th, in wet and stormy weather, the Arras battle-line was extended northwards, and whilst steady pressure was continued east and south-east of Arras, the British front showed a tendency to develop its energy more particularly in this northern area. We were now strenuously engaged on a 40-mile battle front, and the German line was being nibbled at everywhere. During the day of April 12th we pushed on from the Monchy plateau. During the night we attacked between St. Quentin and Cambrai on a 9-mile front and captured the enemy's line from north of Hargicourt to Metz-en-Couture. On the morning of April 13th we moved down the north-east slope of the Vimy Ridge and debouched on the Douai Plain, taking the villages of Bailleul and Willerval and coming into touch with a German

## The Battles of the Ridges.

switch line passing through Oppy, and so known as the Oppy line. Further north we moved forward north and south of Lens, taking Angres on the Souchez River south of Lens, and, to the north of Lens, passing once more into the area of Loos, where in 1915 we had made our first great offensive against the entrenched Germans. And not to detail any but the main incidents of April 13th, we thrust forward from Monchy towards Cambrai, continuing the advance there of the previous day.

The character of the battle had changed. On the 9th, 10th, and 11th the British Army set out with a definite task, and accomplished it with a thoroughness that was something in the nature of an agreeable surprise. Now along a front of 40 miles we were "feeling" the enemy's line, with a view to finding where the next harvest of victory could best be reaped. It was necessary to guard against the temptation of a rash advance into some *cul-de-sac* that the Germans might have prepared, and to keep in mind the fact that Hindenburg's great strategic reserve, whilst much reduced in the effort to win back the Arras ridges, was still a dangerous factor. Nothing would have suited the German game better at this

## Fighting on a Forty-Mile Front.

stage than for a British Army to push forward until it was trapped into a Caudine Forks position and had to surrender. Hence the pathetic complaints in the German Press, about this time, that we could not claim a victory unless we "broke through." We were not out to break through, but to break up.

The war in the air took a new importance with this "reconnaissance-in-force" phase, and the Germans made a desperate attempt to show in the air again. The Navy sent some reinforcements to the British R.F.C., and these Naval airmen, rejoicing in the chance to work beside the military airmen, emulated them in courage and in that *diablerie* of venturesomeness which so impresses the enemy. Neither gales nor snowstorms kept our men out of the air, and they were harassing the Hun by day and by night, attacking anything that showed in the air or on the surface of the ground. The effect of this bold air-work and of the accurate artillery work which accompanied it, and followed up exact observation with exact destruction, could be best observed from the remarks of the German prisoners who came in. They were deeply demoralised by the fact that whilst they had to suffer

## The Battles of the Ridges.

under constant merciless artillery fire, and even from aeroplane machine-gun fire, their own guns were comparatively silent. The German infantry were obviously angry with the German artillery, and in the prisoners' cages there were frequent violent scenes between the two arms.

Another arm of our service—the Tanks—came again into prominence with the new phase of the Battle of Arras. In the great attack they had not been much used, though in some quarters they had carried out useful duties. Now they were kept busy in trimming the line, in supporting small local actions to reduce little German garrisons that held out in inconvenient corners. In the valley of the Cojeul they did particularly good service. The special German anti-tank gun, of which we had captured some specimens, did not seem to be particularly efficacious, though the Germans were at first inclined to trust in it. After a day when the Tanks had not come into action, they would congratulate themselves that the Tank was a definitely eliminated factor. But, as is the case in all other military tactics, the employment of Tanks is governed partly by consideration of surprise.

A new Tank tactic appeared in the Arras Battle

## Fighting on a Forty-Mile Front.

to perplex the Hun. Just as in modern cavalry tactics, a troop on meeting with an impassable obstacle can dismount and, with rifles, move forward as infantry, leaving the horses with horseholders, so the Tank has developed "dismounted" tactics. A Hun stronghold near Monchy was confident that a barrier it had constructed was proof against the coming of Tanks. And it was ; as a Tank discovered charging up at the rate of miles an hour (more than a mile an hour at any rate). Promptly the Tank Commander gave the order to halt and dismount. From the Tank emerged a party of Lewis gunners, who advanced and cleaned up the German stronghold. Then the Tank moved on to the next wasp nest.

The taking of Heninel and Wancourt on the 12th was to a conspicuous extent helped by the Tanks. Both Heninel and Wancourt were commanded by machine-gun fire from Guémappe and high ground to the south-east. Our men had to advance along the slopes in full view of the enemy. The Hindenburg trenches were very strong and well hidden behind sheaths of stout wire, and it was hard for the advancing infantry to see a position until they were actually upon it. The Tanks went right through Heninel to

## The Battles of the Ridges.

Wancourt and back while the infantry were still held up at the former place. German machine-gun fire slackened immediately the Tanks began to charge up the main street of Heninel, and although it resumed when they had vanished in clouds of smoke in the direction of Wancourt, it was less determined and more erratic. The Tanks found Wancourt alive with German machine-gun batteries, and they charged one after another, smashing them up. They went slowly up one street and down another, driving the garrison into the cellars or across the fields to Guémappe.

The resistance at Wancourt broken, the Tanks swung about and came back through Heninel. Meanwhile the infantry, bombing down the Hindenburg trenches, destroying the barriers of new wire, and blowing in dug-outs, reached Heninel, and the Tanks were cheered heartily. That company, squadron, covey, herd, quaggle, or whatever it may be called, of Tanks had been on continuous duty for 40 hours, and it deserved the cheer.

Credit must also be given—as the stock phrase goes—for the good work done in these days by the captured German artillery. Circumstances, as we have seen, had prevented the German



## Fighting on a Forty-Mile Front.

gunners in many cases from using their guns much in the captured area between April 5th and 9th. We gathered not only a great stock of guns, but some good ammunition dumps. The artillery, with some help from the R.E., at once organised a "German Artillery Division," which helped the enemy on his way to the Rhine with his own shell.

Meanwhile the enemy did not fail to "react." It was impossible for him to avoid counter-attacking, and British battle-plans are normally designed largely with a view to the wastage of the German Army following a series of counter-attacks, which he must undertake. In this particular battle we had developed an active threat along a 40-mile front with such vital points as Cambrai and Lens involved. Along a fourth of this front we then developed the intense section of the attack, driving a broad wedge into the German front. He had to make great sacrifices to stay the progress of this wedge or it would have gone in so deeply as to make his front between Lens and Cambrai untenable. The plateau of Monchy was the chief objective of the German counter-attacks, after they found it quite hopeless to attempt to restore the position at Vimy.

## The Battles of the Ridges.

The second phase of the Battle of Arras may be said to have ended on the night of April 15th, the eve of the great French attack in the Champagne district. The closing days were marked by notable successes. On the night of April 13th we took Fayet, north-west of St. Quentin, and left that city in a deep salient pushed into our lines and certainly doomed to fall. Further north we pushed on east of Le Verguier, and again further north, on the left wing of the battle area, we pushed down from the Vimy Ridge position, capturing an area of difficult coal-pit country, of which the centre was known as Fosse No. 6, and also the railway station of Vimy village. The harvest of this success included a battery of 8-inch howitzers.

On Saturday morning, north and south, in rhythmic succession, heavy blows fell on the German line. We went forward from Fayet to within a few hundred yards of St. Quentin and seized the village of Gricourt in this sector of the line, taking 400 prisoners there. A prompt enemy counter-attack was in vain. Further north the enemy did not resist so fiercely, and we made easier progress along a wide front on both sides of the Bapaume—Cambrai road. In the

## Fighting on a Forty-Mile Front.

neighbourhood of Monchy we were kept busy, not in taking territory, but in beating off, with excellent wastage results, the enemy's counter-attacks.

It was in the suburbs and environs of Lens, however, that the day's work was most bountiful. Liévin, a big coal centre, which is practically a part of Lens, fell to our assault, fell so suddenly and with such a fine yield of stores that it seemed that the garrison must have fled in panic at the last moment. It was pleasing to get Liévin cheaply, for the cost of progress in this area around Lens was usually heavy. Some idea of the nature of the country has been already given. For a radius of five miles round Lens there is not an acre of easy country from the point of view of an army of attack. Where there are not the steel towers and strong buildings of the pit-heads and the gigantic slack heaps, there are the *couronnes* or groups of colliery cottages at the disposition of the defenders. In a previous offensive in this district, these *couronnes*—generally running along the saddles and ridges of the ground—were found to be impassable obstacles. The enemy would pack tightly with earth the row of houses on the exposed side and use the row on the other side for

## The Battles of the Ridges.

machine-gun detachments, which would thus be sheltered behind an earth-work 20 feet high and about 25 feet thick. Fortunately the German, as the Battle of Arras developed, lost a great deal of his old determination, otherwise such cheap captures as that of Liévin would not have been possible.

On April 14th it seemed likely that Lens would follow Liévin in surrender, but afterwards the German resistance stiffened. By Sunday night, however, we had Lens encircled, and had seized some of its suburbs. It was apparently decided not to attempt the assault of the city, but to push round north and south, and wait for it to fall.

The Germans, pressed back on the north and south of the battle front, attempted on Sunday to retrieve their position by an attack in the centre, west of Cambrai. They attacked on both sides of the Bapaume—Cambrai road from Hermies to Noreuil. For a while the enemy met with some success at Lagnicourt, just north of the Bapaume—Cambrai road, but it was only temporary. We took 300 prisoners here, and the Germans left 1,500 dead in front of our lines. Besides beating off this counter-attack in the centre of the giant battlefield, the British troops

## Fighting on a Forty-Mile Front.

continued their advance in other sectors. At Lens we penetrated further into the suburbs, and in front of St. Quentin made some progress.

Sunday was marked by torrential rain, which emphasised the decision to bring the second phase of the Battle of Arras to a close. Looking back on the record of the fortnight's fighting, there was reason for satisfaction and confidence within the British lines. The enemy had entered battle with about 600 guns on the area of intense attack. We had taken 228 of them, and great stores of ammunition. The prisoners we had taken numbered 14,000. All the high ground south from Lens—Vimy Ridge, Monchy Plateau and Croisilles Height we had wrested from the enemy, and the Douai Plain now lay exposed before us. The ultimate conquest of Lens and St. Quentin had been made certain and the German defensive system—the Hindenburg line, the Oppy line, and the Drocourt—Quéant line—had been gravely compromised.

## CHAPTER VI.

### USING UP THE GERMANS.



FROM April 16th, during the “pause” in the Battle of Arras, whilst we watched sympathetically the progress of the French offensive on the Aisne, there was no active cessation of our operations ; simply a slackening of the awful intensity of the struggle of the previous weeks. On the German side of the line there was no illusion that they had reached the best line of retreat. The systematic destruction and looting of Lens and St. Quentin which could be observed from the British lines was proof of that. Regarding the looting of St. Quentin the “Morning Post” correspondent recorded :—

Although St. Quentin has not yet been wholly devastated by fire, several of the principal buildings have undoubtedly been deliberately destroyed by the enemy, as a threat of the fate which will befall the remainder. I am told that the German looted

## Using up the Germans.

paintings and fine Gobelins tapestries from Fervaques Palace, near the Cathedral. This structure, one of the finest in St. Quentin, housed the Municipal Museum and Library, in addition to the Law Courts. They also stripped the Lecuyer Museum, in the Rue Antoine Lecuyer, of its costly collection of antiquities and paintings, including Latour's pastels. According to civilian refugees who left the town some time ago, the work of spoliation began long before the Germans were threatened with the loss of the territory they held west of St. Quentin to Péronne. The fourteenth-century Town Hall, which they used as a hospital, is believed to be still intact, but the complete destruction of the smaller, though equally historic, municipal building at Péronne is sufficient proof that they have no intention of sparing this admirable specimen of mediæval architecture.

The Cathedral, which has become the artillery front-line head-quarters, contained many priceless examples of religious art.

The tombs of Saint Quentin and Saints Victoricus and Gentianus, his fellow martyrs, in the ninth-century crypt, were embellished with valuable carvings, and the shrines are said to have contained jewels which would not be overlooked by the vandals in their desecration of French tombs.

On my way to the front before St. Quentin yesterday, I stopped at Caulaincourt, the ancestral seat of the Marquis de Caulaincourt near Vermand, which is the completest ruin of any I have yet found in the territory pillaged by the retreating enemy. The old chateau—for many months probably a German

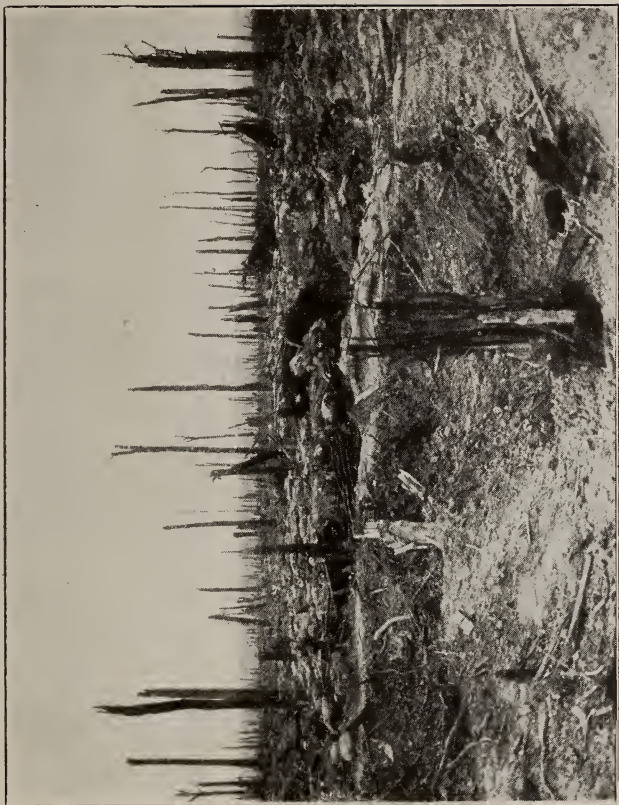
## The Battles of the Ridges.

corps headquarters—which stood within moated walls, was literally blown into the Somme with such force that it is utterly impossible to trace the outline of the building or to find sufficient remains to give any idea of its design. The elaborate mausoleum of the Caulaincourt family suffered the usual fate. The chapel has been defaced, and the circular crypt beneath broken open. The carved marble slabs have been torn away from the niches in which the bodies rested, and the coffins of two marquises, and that of Marquise de Caulaincourt (who was also Duchess of Vicenza and lady-in-waiting to the Empresses Josephine and Marie Louise) exposed, the lid of the latter having been prised up and afterwards reclosed.

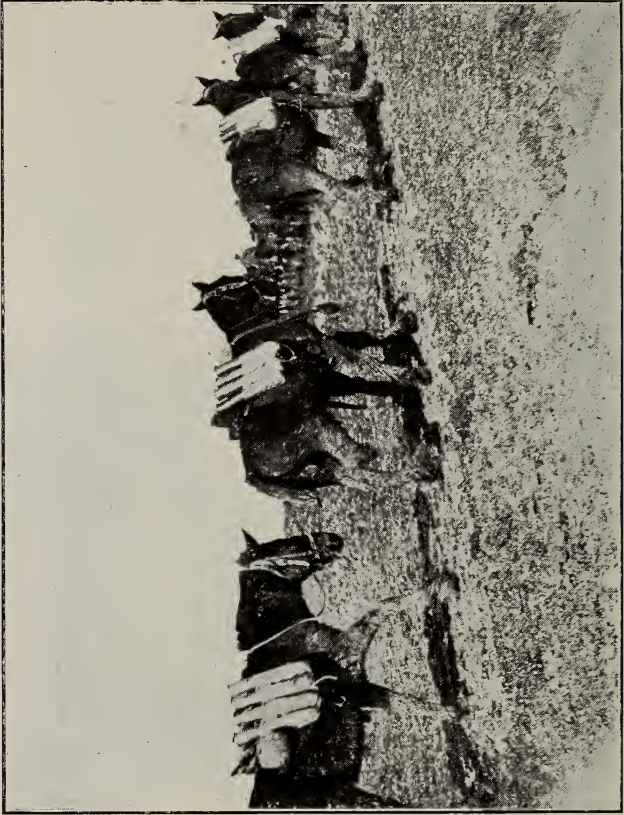
In the parish cemetery of Mons-en-Chaussée, which I also visited, the graves had been opened and the coffins exhumed in order that the lead might be removed. The quest for lead is believed to be the prime motive for this systematic rifling of cemeteries and mortuary chapels. At the same time, it is hardly likely that the Hun would spare the tombs of Saints, because they may contain jewels instead of lead.

St. Quentin has been a rich field for the rag-pickers of the German Army. Over 60,000 persons were thrown out of that important manufacturing town, allowed to take with them only what few possessions they could carry on their backs, and their homes became the spoil of the Hun, who impounded everything they had left behind. A German soldier who took part in the sack of St. Quentin wrote recently to one of his relatives: “ You ought to see the great piles of clothing of all kinds we have got here ; enough,





A WOOD AFTER BOMBARDMENT.



MULES BRINGING UP AMMUNITION.

## Using up the Germans.

I should think, to fit out all the people in our city. It makes one angry to think that all this is to be destroyed when there are so many at home who need clothes and cannot get them."

The troops "in rest" at St. Quentin employed their time dismantling the houses, turning out wardrobes and cupboards, stacking up furniture that had been marked for "removal," and breaking the remainder, tying up great bundles of men's clothes and women's garments, and even sacks of boots and shoes, which were assembled at the goods depôts for transport direct to Germany. Art experts went through the museums and picture-galleries superintending the packing of their treasures, while officers of the new military service which is devoted exclusively to the collection of copper and brass utensils and other metals, marked all loot of this kind, including the massive bronze statue in the market-place, other bronze statues that adorned the new canal bridge, the peals of bells from churches, thousands of copper candlesticks, and door plates, all destined for the melting pot.

As regards Lens, the continued destruction of the town could be noted day by day from the high observation ground in our hands. The Germans had, of course, no further hope of using the coal-pits (not even Reventlow, in his wildest frenzies of Pan-Germanism, nowadays dares to hint at an advance in the West), and they set themselves systematically to loot the machinery

## The Battles of the Ridges.

and to destroy what they could not take away. The German garrison left behind to hold the place with machine-guns had—and at the time of writing continue to have—a wretched existence. All the town's approaches and all its streets are dominated by our artillery and our machine-guns. The garrison must live always underground, and carry on with such scanty supplies as can be got through our barrages ; and on every favourable occasion we drench the area with gas, which filters down into the galleries and dug-outs. To live underground, always wearing a gas-mask, with scanty food and water, in constant fear of being buried by a shell-burst—it cannot be cheerful.

The record of the Battle of Arras from April 16th until St. George's Day (April 24th), when it flared up again with some of its old intensity, is of daring air work, ceaseless artillery activity and industrious nibbling by the infantry under weather conditions which were generally wretched. The engineers, the pioneers and the labour companies were meanwhile restoring the re-conquered country within our new line, pushing up the roads and field railways. The weather interfered with this work woefully. On the other hand, our air

## Using up the Germans.

mastery helped it by keeping the road-makers comparatively free from enemy artillery interference.

On April 20th there was a slight improvement in the weather, and we welcomed it with a little advance, capturing Gonnellieu, east of Gouzeaucourt station. The Germans tried in vain to recapture the village the next day. That day we advanced a little north of the Scarpe and also around Lens. The following days we nibbled a little way around Lens and also pushed east of Havancourt, towards Cambrai. April 23rd was a livelier day. We made attacks along almost all the line, not grand attacks, but useful and fruitful ones. A little was gained around Lens. We seized Gavrelle, a high village approached by nine sunken roads, and, pushing towards Rœux, got as far as the cemetery outside the town. Guémappe, south of Monchy, also fell as the reward of a raid from that centre.

April 23rd was also a day of great air battles. The enemy had reinforced his air squadrons and showed a tendency to dispute our right to cross his lines for reconnaissance. At this time it is calculated that we made about 400 aeroplane journeys daily across the German lines to

## The Battles of the Ridges.

reconnoitre, to guide our artillery, or to bomb his works and dumps.

On April 24th we attacked north and south of the Scarpe along a front of 9 miles, meeting with stubborn resistance, especially in the valley of the Scarpe, which was dotted with strong points, and where the enemy artillery had clearly been reinforced. Circumstances on other fronts had proved favourable to the enemy, and he was able to concentrate a very great force on our front. Especially had his Russian front been stripped both of guns and of seasoned fighting men.

The fighting of the 24th was perhaps the most stubborn of the Battle of Arras. Along the front of our attack the battle swayed to and fro all day, the enemy counter-attacking fiercely whenever he lost ground. In front of Gavrelle he made eight separate attacks, using in each from 5,000 to 6,000 men. In front of Guémappe the fighting was just as fierce. South of England men, West of England men, and Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders met the chief brunt of the day.

There were many picturesque incidents of a contest which was for strong points rather than for a definite trench line, and left the issue dependent largely on the initiative and courage of

## Using up the Germans

company officers. It was "open warfare" of a kind. A Middlesex regiment pushing on too far found itself quite "in the air," with the enemy on all sides and (as prisoners) in their midst. They formed a "square," but not in the Soudan warfare fashion, shoulder to shoulder; they occupied and held a rough square of shell-holes, their prisoners in the middle. This square they held against attacks on all sides. No attack was pushed home, and towards the end of the day they got back, with all their prisoners, to our main line.

In another case an English regiment pushed forward to occupy a little copse farther ahead and seized it, but then found itself quite isolated and a mile or so in advance of our line. They held on, however, and after three days the line came up to them. In another case a body of our infantry penetrated right into the German field batteries' line, did some bombing damage in the gun-pits, and then worked back.

The progress made on the 24th was continued on the 25th. During the 23rd, 24th, and 25th we took over 3,000 prisoners, including 56 officers, and pushed our line methodically towards the Drocourt—Quéant German trench system.

The uneasiness of the enemy was reflected in

## The Battles of the Ridges.

these days by his bulletins, which showed unmistakable signs of nervous debility. Frantic praise was showered on the "victorious German troops" for not having retreated farther than they were pushed; and the "terrible defeats" of the British troops, who had not "broken through," were enlarged upon. To give an air of stable verisimilitude to these German bulletins we were represented as having been beaten off in attacks on places miles behind the German line, which we had never dreamed of attacking, which were not within the scope of any possible attack on our part. It was not hard to conclude that the Germans were nervous of losing places that were actually within reach of our attacks, and thought it wise to place the sites of their "victorious defences" far in the rear of their own line, in localities which they could be reasonably sure of holding for a week at least.

On April 27th we made some progress in the centre of our front between Rœux and Gavrelle, due east of Arras. On April 28th our attack swung a little north, and, attacking between Gavrelle and Lens, we took the village of Arleux. South of Gavrelle we occupied Greenland Hill. The enemy reacted very strongly, as we were now



## Using up the Germans.

threatening his Drocourt—Quéant line. His reserves were rushed up, and there were many hours of bitter fighting, in which the Lincolns and the Northumberland Fusiliers were emulous in courage and resolution with a Newfoundland battalion. (The contingent from “our oldest colony” did remarkably well in other phases of the Battle of Arras.) The advantage of the day finally rested with us. We held all the land we had won, and sent back to the rear nearly 1,000 German prisoners.

In addition, we won a rich harvest of machine-guns. The Germans had literally lined the sunken roads with these. In some places they were found at 10 yards intervals. A deep sunken road is the ideal retreat for the machine-gunner. With a little spade work he can dig into the side of the road a safe dug-out. He plants his gun with its muzzle just clearing the crest, and, if time allows, he then burrows forward from his dug-out and cuts a shaft upwards, coming out on the advance slope of the crest, and there has an alternative position. When artillery fire on the sunken road is severe, the machine-gunners can “lay doggo,” safe except against the rarest chances. At this time an improved machine-gun

## The Battles of the Ridges.

appeared on the German side, and in very large numbers. But in the losing battle that he was now fighting, small technical improvements in his weapons or his methods could not restore the spirits of the German infantry. They were getting into the retreating habit—fighting stiffly still, showing no serious break in the wonderful discipline which is the keystone of their military efficiency—but obviously slipping back in moral.

Air fighting of a lively character marked the closing days of April. It was our experience that mastery of the air could be quickly (though not easily) obtained and just as quickly lost. Constant vigilance was needed to keep the enemy out of the air, for new air fleets were being constantly brought into action. We began the Battle of Arras in April with complete air mastery. Twice during the month we had to fight hard to reassert this air mastery. On April 29th the fighting in the air was particularly keen. One poignant incident of it was the bringing down of a German aeroplane just in front of our line by one of our airmen after a lively duel. Apparently the petrol tank of the German machine was pierced and then his engine set it afire. He came

## Using up the Germans.

flaming down from the sky, at first rushing, then gently settling. The pilot, all afire, still held to his seat and his controls. The aeroplane reached the ground in No Man's Land within 50 yards of our front lines, and there the fire burned itself out, leaving the frame of the machine and the corpse of the man, upright in his seat with skeleton hands on the levers. Rescue was impossible, burial impossible. For some days this ghastly monument of war remained in No Man's Land until our advance drove the Germans farther back, and we buried the skeleton.

If it had been one of our airmen it is certain that a party would have gone out to bring him in, no matter at what cost of life. The Germans did not make any attempt to do so, though if they had it is probable that not a rifle would have fired from our trench. But at this stage of the war the German is emphatically a shelter-loving soldier. His High Command profess to desire a return to "open warfare." Judging by the hourly incidents of the Battle of Arras, open warfare would mark the absolute rout of an enemy now inured to a "dug-in" method of warfare. The British soldier, even the British soldier who has known no other type of war than that of the

## The Battles of the Ridges.

trenches, seems naturally proof against that "dug-in" timidity of shells.

"G.," a close and able observer, in his book, "The Last Lap," calls attention to this characteristic of "Tommy":—

He is careless and insouciant. He is careless of his own life, and will often risk it most unnecessarily, as, for example, when he searches for souvenirs under a heavy shell-fire.

Not long ago we took a batch of prisoners, and as there was a fairly hot German barrage behind us, they were put for safety in one of our trenches. A British officer, who was standing by them, overheard and understood what they were saying. One of them tried to encourage the others by saying that there would soon be a counter-attack, which would result in their rescue. "Never!" emphatically returned one of his prisoners. "We'll never beat these fellows. Look there!"—and he pointed to some of our men calmly searching for souvenirs under the German barrage—"did you ever see a German soldier above ground, if he could help it, when shelling was on? Those fellows don't mind anything, and they have no nerves. We can never beat them."

The April fighting in the air on the Western front, according to official computations, involved the loss of 717 aeroplanes on the part of all the combatants. We lost 147, the French and the Belgians lost 201, and the Germans lost 369.

## Using up the Germans.

Illustrating the month's work by some more figures, we took 19,343 prisoners, including 393 officers. We brought in 257 guns, 227 trench-mortars and 470 machine-guns, besides destroying great numbers of guns. We won back from the enemy four times the extent of territory that we had won on the Somme during the same period. We had exhausted no less than 32 German Divisions. All this had been done with losses on our part which showed a decrease of 40 per cent. as compared with the casualties on the Somme. It was clear as daylight that we had now perfected our methods and had mastered the enemy. Gone was all prospect of a great Hindenburg offensive.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE MAY FIGHTING AND THE M.E.B.U.s.



THE German had now material on which "furiously to think," to use his own idiom; and it is quite clear from his actions in what direction his thoughts went, *viz.*, that it was necessary to use every means to hold on in the West in the hope that something at sea or in Russia would intervene to save his skin. Various mechanical devices came to eke out the ebbing courage of his troops. The new machine-gun has been already noted, and the anti-Tank gun.

A naval gun now appeared with a range of 28,000 yards, probably commandeered from the useless battle fleet shut up in the Kiel Canal. With it the Germans could send stray shells into areas far behind the ordinary battle area. The effect of such shelling is intended to be

## The May Fighting and the M.E.B.U.s.

moral, for material damage is, and must be, practically *nil*. As to moral the German persists in judging other peoples by his own character. It is for us a valuable persistence, and we need do nothing to discourage it.

A more dangerous German move was the use of a new poison gas, which marked a shade lower depth of moral depravity than the original chlorine gas clouds. The old gas at least could be seen and smelt, and generally gave the threatened man the option of running away. The new gas was discharged by shells, was invisible, almost odourless, and, whilst not incapacitating at once, caused grave disease, and sometimes death afterwards when inhaled in large quantities. British chemists were prompt with a remedy, and the British gas-mask to-day protects against the new gas absolutely.

Another result of the May fighting was to concentrate the German strength still more closely on the Western front. The Landwehr and Landsturm regiments now disappeared from this front and were replaced by line regiments withdrawn from Russia.

But of far greater moment was the conclusion forced upon the Germans by the Battle of Arras

## The Battles of the Ridges.

that the days of successful "trench war" for the defending army were over. We had proved that we could destroy any German trench and occupy its site. If the defensive were to be prolonged another method of defence must be sought.

A German Army Order of this time confesses to the conclusion that a line of trench, no matter how strongly fortified, cannot be relied upon. "The continuous lines constituting a front position are regularly and methodically destroyed by artillery before an attack begins. Subterranean shelters, especially in the first and second lines, have proved to be traps."

"Unfortunately," continues the German Army Order, "the violence of the enemy fire—that is, the fire of the French and British batteries—prevents us from repairing our trenches. Any attempt to do so merely exhausts the fighting force of our men prematurely. From the outset of the battle another method of construction must be applied. A defensive zone extended in depth must be substituted for the old system of positions which can be destroyed by the enemy. This system, with its organisations concealed as far as possible from the enemy's observation, and



## The May Fighting and the M.E.B.U.s.

with the troops holding it echeloned in depth so that their numbers, scanty in the front, increase progressively towards the rear, should enable us to pass from the defensive to the offensive with the troops from the rear. . . . During the battle all idea of having a continuous front-trench line must be abandoned. This must be replaced by shell-crater nests, held by groups of men and isolated machine-guns, disposed like the squares on a chess-board. The shelter provided by the shell-craters will be extended by tunnelling into the sides, or by linking them to adjacent craters by means of tunnels, supported by timber props. The earth dislodged should be thrown into unoccupied craters near by, or, if the nature of the position permits it, should be spread over the ground between them. If timbered galleries cannot be built owing to the wetness of the ground, one must be content with very simple organisations to afford protection against shrapnel."

The German Army Order goes on to give instructions that machine-gun centres and shelters for storm troops ready to make the first counter-attack are to be placed behind the first line of fortified shell-craters.

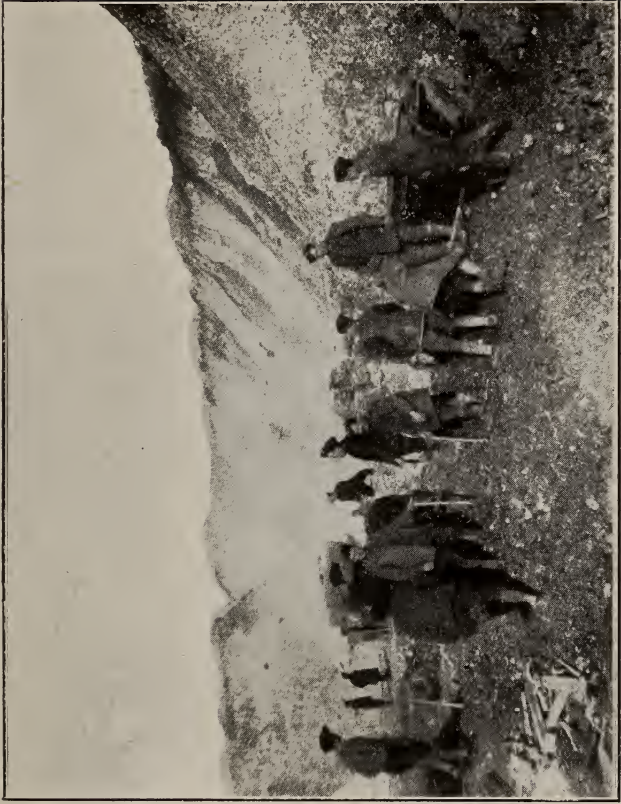
"For this purpose old shelters, dug before

## The Battles of the Ridges.

the new order of things, may be used, but if none are available the men must obtain shelter as best they can on the open ground. There should be a line of barbed wire in front of the first line of shell-craters, and the empty craters in front of it should be girdled with wire to prevent the assaulting infantry from occupying them."

In development of this new policy the Germans began the construction of the M.E.B.U.s, or "pill-boxes," as the British Army christened them. A pill-box (the German M.E.B.U. represents the initials of the German term for "Machine-gun-emplacement-glorious-victorious-all-supreme-Hindenburg-soldier-protecting," or some such phrase) is a reinforced concrete shaft with a steel lid designed to hold a machine-gun. The shaft is set in the ground with the lid just protruding from the surface. A narrow slit gives a fire aperture for the gun. In action the gunner crouches in the shaft, resting on a little iron stairway which runs down to a dug-out beneath, where the ammunition, the supplies and the spare men of the gun's crew rest. When not in action all remain below.

The pill-box is safe against shells, unless in the case of a direct hit on the lid, or



A MINE CRATER, MESSINES.



BRITISH SOLDIERS OFF FOR A REST.

## The May Fighting and the M.E.B.U.s.

the bursting in the ground very close of a shell of great calibre, and it is practically safe against observation from the air if the lid is not allowed to be too obtrusive.

From a mechanical point of view this M.E.B.U. scheme looks very well, and in an earlier stage of the war, when German infantry moral was at its highest, it might have proved very useful. But it has this fatal defect for an army which is in process of being beaten, that it calls for a very high degree of courage and initiative on the part of the men boxed up in the pill-boxes. If they were real die-hards and clear-thinking men to boot, with some knowledge of how to take a tactical advantage, the pill-boxes would be far more obstructive than they have proved to be in actual practice. As things are, the pill-box soon loses its medicinal qualities when confronted by resolute riflemen.

On May 3rd we began an attack on the Drocourt—Quéant line, from north of Arleux to a point beyond Bullecourt, on a front of about 12 miles. The attack everywhere prospered. On the south side of the battle front we penetrated the German line west of Quéant. Farther north we made progress near Cherizy and on the Arras—Cambrai

## The Battles of the Ridges.

Road. On the north wing of the battle we took trenches north of Oppy and occupied Fresnoy, and thus broke through the Oppy—Méricourt line. We penetrated into the little wood west of Oppy, but could not hold that point with advantage.

The Germans were in great strength, and we learned afterwards from prisoners that they were massing for a counter-attack by which they hoped to win back Arleux. Our attack upset their plans, but they were in more than ordinary strength to resist. At the end of the day we had captured territory of high tactical importance from Fresnoy in the north to Bullecourt in the south. The enemy's casualties had been heavy for the troops he had massed for his attempt on Arleux were freely thrown into the fighting. A little knoll north-east of Gavrelle, which was crowned with a windmill, changed hands eight times. The chemical works near Rœux were just as stubbornly fought for. But the fighting was not on even terms. Our artillery and air superiority loaded the dice against the German infantry, and the latter were sacrificed uselessly, though probably in the fighting on this day they had a great local superiority in numbers.

## The May Fighting and the M.E.B.U.s.

In preparation for this attack, we found that the German Commands had split up Guards' regiments into companies and distributed these companies to stiffen battalions of inferior troops. Artillery reinforcements too had been brought up on the German side, but the tide of battle could not be turned. The yield of prisoners was over 900.

Fighting on May 5th, 6th and 7th was somewhat slacker. We let the week-end pass without a new attack, and the German counter-attacks were futile. Saturday saw a thrilling battle in the air, when a German squadron of from 15 to 20 aeroplanes attempted to cross our line. Our airmen did not shirk a combat, and the German formation was distinctly worsted, three of their machines being brought down. All our machines came out of the action safely.

On May 7th we made some slight progress on the south of the line, and on May 8th, lest we should be tempted into thinking that the enemy was helpless, he broke a long record of losses and won back from us the village of Fresnoy, captured on May 3rd. This was the first time for many months that he had managed to win back a village which we had had time to consolidate. The

## The Battles of the Ridges.

enemy deserved his little success, for he had managed to bring up two new Divisions in front of Fresnoy.

Encouraged by this, the Germans on May 11th attempted a surprise attack on the positions south of the Souchez River, which we had won in the same advance. A great force of *flammenwerfer* had been mobilised by the enemy for this attack, and their use procured a momentary success. Then our reserves came up and restored the line. The enemy had used his oil and his men for nothing.

We attacked again on May 11th, making the chief thrust this time south, where at Bullecourt a gallant Australian battalion had been holding desperately to a little salient. Pushing on too far on May 3rd the Australians found themselves left "in the air," having driven a lane into the German line. On neither flank did they have any support, and their communications with the rear were most precarious. But they had won a position which was capable of local defence, and "the Hun-shooting was simply superb," as one officer enthusiastically remarked. So they held on. From front and right and left the exasperated enemy made frequent attacks. Ten different



## The May Fighting and the M.E.B.U.s.

“ full-dress ” assaults were made with the object of cutting the communication in the rear and thus isolating the Australians completely. All were in vain. From May 3rd to May 13th, when our attacks finally brought our line up right and left of the Bullecourt salient, the stubborn garrison held out.

The attack of May 11th did not quite complete the capture of Bullecourt, and as this battle continued without cessation through May 11th, 12th, 13th, its results can be best summarised by stating the position on May 14th. By then we had pushed our line forward to Bullecourt and Rœux, and had taken in the stubborn fighting 700 prisoners, including 11 officers. At Rœux, as well as at Bullecourt, the fighting had been very severe. Many “ pill-boxes ” were encountered, and the chateau behind Rœux had been organised strongly as a fortress.

Now that there was no longer a definite line of trench as the fighting objective, incidents multiplied of small bodies of our men getting far forward into the German position. A band of Kent men with machine-guns were led on by the excellence of the shooting until they found themselves in a position with Germans all

## The Battles of the Ridges.

around them to shoot at. This was considered to be too good to last, and a move homeward was made. *En route* the Kent men found two temporary trenches occupied by Germans, but fought their way successfully home with their guns, though they lost half their number in casualties.

There were no incidents of the like kind on the German side. German companies finding themselves within our lines surrendered very promptly, and, to all appearances, very gladly.

The next few days were filled with the beating off of German counter-attacks. The loss of Rœux and of Bullecourt was evidently felt keenly. Gavrelle also was heavily counter-attacked, and fell back into the enemy's hands for a few hours; then was recaptured. By May 21st we held all the Hindenburg line from a point one mile east of Bullecourt to a point due east of Arras, with the exception of one small sector; that is to say, for a stretch of nearly 10 miles. Until the end of the month of May we were engaged in consolidating these positions and preparing for a new attack further north. We had gained our objective, and the enemy was pushed off his commanding ground from St. Quentin to Vimy. Another bit

## **The May Fighting and the M.E.B.U.s.**

of high ground, that at Messines, was now to engage our attention.

May's fighting in the Battle of Arras brought in 3,412 prisoners (including 68 officers). The air-fighting had been very severe, and it is calculated that on all sides 713 aeroplanes were lost, of which 442 were lost by the Germans and 86 by the British air forces.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MESSINES RIDGE : THE PREPARATION.



THE Battle of Messines marked another step in the progressive deterioration of the German position on the Western front. The enemy had been hustled off the Somme ridges and had found himself compelled in consequence to evacuate the Somme district. He had been hustled off the Artois ridges and was able to keep the Lens coal basin and the Douai Plain below only by continuous sacrifice of men and material. He was now to be pushed off the ridges around Ypres, the last of his old bulwarks facing the British line. Of these ridges the Messines Ridge was the most formidable.

Messines Ridge may be described as the German point of concentration against Calais. It was wrested from us, after fierce fighting, during the first Battle of Ypres in 1914, and was supposed to

## Messines Ridge : The Preparation.

give the enemy Ypres and the road to Calais. The French came to the rescue, re-took Messines Ridge, and lost it again in December 1914, since which date the Germans had held it without serious challenge. It did not give the Germans Ypres nor the road to Calais, because the stubborn British Army refused to recognise the "military impossibility" of holding Ypres with the enemy dominating the ruined town from Messines; but it did give the enemy the means to inflict constant and serious losses on our troops; and while they held it, the Germans could still pretend to hope for some future successful assault, which would win for them the French Channel ports and the means to compel Great Britain to peace. Now that hope was to be dissipated very plainly, so plainly as to make its message comprehensible to the dullest German. The Battle of Messines Ridge proclaimed that there was little hope of another German offensive on the Western front in this war, that the rôle of the German Army now is the dispiriting one of holding on to positions until it suits the attack to turn them out.

Advantage was taken of the delay to perfect preparations. The famous Mine of Messines, which was very literally to blast the German out of

## The Battles of the Ridges.

his front positions on June 7th, 1917, was in 1916 already in being, though it was afterwards extended. The German still rages and grumbles about that Messines Mine. It infuriated him just as the Tank infuriated him. The one supremacy that he felt sure was left to him in this war was in regard to science and material. He might not be able to put such good men into the line, might be beaten in the matter of quick adaptable courage in the field, but his Herr Professors, he reckoned, had an invulnerable supremacy. His machines would always be better.

Now, in this matter of the Mine of Messines, the Herr Geology Professors on the German side knew quite well that you could not mine to any extent around Messines. The water-logged strata would not allow of it, so Fritz could sleep easily in his trench, so far as mines were concerned; and Fritz, confident in his Herr Professors, altogether neglected any attempt to counter-mine. But on our side there was a Geology Professor who knew better, and the Messines Mine, the greatest ever used in warfare, was the result.

It was the only element of surprise in the battle. In the preparation of the Arras push the British

## Messines Ridge : The Preparation.

forces had been able to introduce a good deal of the element of surprise. The Artois country made concealment of the preliminary operations (road-making, &c.) possible, and the last great deployment was protected from observation by a successful air offensive. In the preparation of the Messines Battle, effective concealment was out of the question. All the low marshy country on our side of the Messines Ridge was under constant enemy observation. We could not make a road nor push a light railway forward without the fact being known. And to give an offensive any chance at all in these marsh lands it was necessary to build many roads and many light railways to bring up supplies for guns and troops. In the Flanders plain country, barely above sea-level, always water-logged, traversed by innumerable ditches, wheeled traffic can never pass except by a built road, and only rarely can foot traffic leave the granite-paved roads with safety. To effect a big concentration of troops, roads and railways had to be multiplied, and this work done under German observation.

The Battle of Messines had, therefore, to be a "pitched battle," with ample notice to the defence that an attack was preparing. Indeed, the date

## The Battles of the Ridges.

of the attack could be forecasted fairly accurately by the enemy (who was only one day out in his reckoning, as the event proved), and he was able to make the best preparation of which he was capable. He might be excused for viewing the position with some confidence. The ridge on which he sat was of great natural strength and formidably fortified. The marshy country through which we had to advance to any attack gave little cover; the routes which the advance must follow were accurately known and "registered" for artillery barrages.

But German confidence had not taken into account the enormous improvement in the equipment for attack of the British Army. In material, quantity and quality had both improved. As to the improvement in quantity the free use of shell told its own tale. On the Somme a German officer prisoner had given reluctant praise to the British artillery work, but had commented that the expenditure of shell "was too lavish; no country could keep that pace up." But in the Battle of Arras the artillery shell used showed an increase of 40 per cent. on the Somme consumption. In the Battle of Messines, the Arras consumption was again increased. In regard to quality-



## Messines Ridge : The Preparation.

improvement, evidence was given by the superior effectiveness of destruction.

Not less important, though not so tangible and easily recognised, was the vast improvement in skill and moral of the British Army since the first days of the Somme. From the generals down to the soldiers of the line, everyone knew more and had more confidence. The generals knew the quality of the men they commanded. That they were of high courage had never been in doubt; but there are other soldierly qualities needed besides courage, especially in these days of ultra-scientific warfare; and these qualities had been now well tested and proved. The men had a full confidence in their leaders from day-by-day experience of hard struggles, which always had a satisfactory ending, and in the course of which the soldier never found his officer hanging back, and never found "the system" failing him with rations or ammunition.

The British New Army, in short, had "found itself" completely, and had the confidence of a winning team. The Divisions which were given the task of taking the Messines Ridge knew before they started that the thing would be done. They expected indeed a tougher resistance (and would

## The Battles of the Ridges.

have overcome a tougher resistance), since the enemy had had such ample time and opportunity to organise his garrison. The Germans, in spite of all losses, had still a fund of over 5,000,000 soldiers to draw upon. At this time they had to meet heavy attacks on the British front only, and so could devote the cream of their effectives to its holding. That they were soundly, decisively beaten at Messines was a testimonial of the highest value to the British Army.

Victory was the reward of forethought as well as of courage. Very elaborate had been the preparation for the assault. In the first place the road and railway system to the front of attack had been thoroughly organised. Then places of safe assembly for troops had been prepared, wherever there was a chance of cover. Ploegsteert—Plug Street, as the Army knew it—Wood was of great value for this purpose, and it was traversed by a great net-work of wooden paths, raised well above ground level, for the area of the wood becomes a marsh after heavy rain.

The next step was a careful rehearsal by all the units to be engaged in the actual operations. Models of the German ground to be taken were prepared, and the infantry learned exactly the

## Messines Ridge : The Preparation.

points they had to take, the tracks they had to follow, the obstacles they had to meet, the intricacies of the barrages which were to prepare the way for them. Part of the plan of the day was a great Field Artillery advance. Simultaneously with the advance of the infantry a mass of batteries were to limber up and push forward to advanced positions so that they could carry their help forward. This needed the most careful preparation, for the ground along which the guns were to advance was criss-crossed with trenches and would certainly be torn up with shell. Batteries were ready for the morning with some quaint equipment to meet the exigencies of the day. A Horse Artillery officer, who still cherished memories of the galloping-into-action days of the Marne, described his outfit : " I am carrying forward my guns and ammunition, the material for making my road as I go along, and the material for fortifying my new position. I hope on arrival to find a bit of ground to settle on. Short of this I have everything. I am half expecting orders to bring along an acre of ground with me too."

With rehearsals still going on, the artillery began a searching and sweeping of the enemy area and the area of supply behind it, which, at varying

## The Battles of the Ridges.

pitches of intensity, lasted during ten days. At the same time the Air Service began to sweep the sky clean. These were certain signs of an offensive coming soon, and the German made his preparations, confident, as I have said, in the strength of the position he had to hold.

Messines Ridge bulges out on the Flanders plain between Zillebeke and Ploegsteert in a shallow arc. The chord of this arc, about 9 miles long, was the site of the German front-line system. Behind it, at the base of the arc, about 6 miles long, was the second-line system. To write of a first trench, a second trench, a third trench, and so on, would be absurd, for to cross from the front to the back of the German Messines position at any point it would be necessary to cross at least a score of trenches. A map showing the trench system looks as if it were covered with fine-mesh wire-netting. The main element of strength in the German position was that the whole of the ridge had to be taken at a blow, the chord of the arc and the base of the arc; and there were 4,000 yards of fortified country between. It was probably calculated that whilst an artillery preparation could batter the chord of the arc, it could not properly reduce the base of the

## Messines Ridge : The Preparation.

arc. Supposing the first system carried, the defenders could take refuge in the second system, and organise there a prompt counter-attack. This calculation was upset because it had been foreseen and provided for. As already mentioned, a part of the preparation was to move a mass of Field Artillery forward as soon as the infantry got going. Whilst the infantry were still clearing up the chord, the artillery, from forward positions, were battering at the base of the German arc.

## CHAPTER IX.

### MESSINES RIDGE: THE VICTORY.



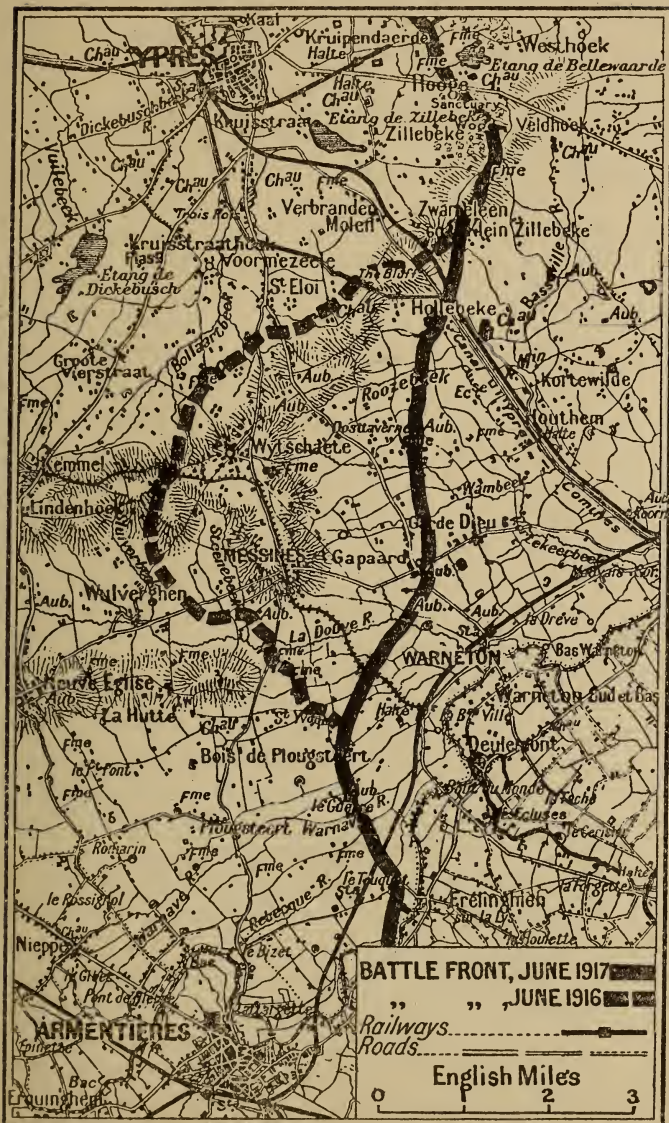
ALL the elaborate and ingenious preparations for the Battle of Messines worked out perfectly. There was not a hitch anywhere, and in one day a clear-cut victory gave the whole objective sought at a stroke. General Sir Douglas Haig's despatches of June 7th and June 8th told with quiet satisfaction the good news thus:—

*June 7th.*—The Messines—Wytschaete Ridge, which for over two and a half years has dominated our positions in the Ypres salient, was stormed by our troops this morning.

In this attack we captured the villages of Messines and Wytschaete and the enemy's defence system, including many strongly-organised woods and defended localities on a front of over 9 miles from south of La Douve Brook to north of Mont Sorrel.

Later in the day our troops again moved forward, in accordance with the plan of operations, and carried the village of Oosttaverne and the enemy's rearward

# THE BATTLE OF MESSINES



BATTLE FRONT, JUNE 1917

“ “ JUNE 1916

Railways  
Roads

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## The Battles of the Ridges.

defence system east of the village on a front of over 5 miles.

In the course of this advance an attempted counter-attack against the southern portion of our new positions was completely broken up by our artillery fire.

The enemy's casualties in to-day's fighting have been heavy. In addition to his other losses, up to 4.30 p.m. this afternoon over 5,000 German prisoners had passed through our collecting-stations. Others have still to be brought in. We have also captured a number of guns and many trench-mortars and machine-guns, which have not yet been counted.

*June 8th.*—The position captured by our troops yesterday was one of the enemy's most important strongholds on the Western front. Dominating as it did the Ypres salient, and giving the enemy complete observation over it, he had neglected no precautions to render the position impregnable.

These conditions enabled the enemy to overlook all our preparations for the attack, and he had moved up reinforcements to meet us. The battle, therefore, became a gauge of the ability of German troops to stop our advance under conditions as favourable to them as an army can ever hope for, with every advantage of ground and preparation, and with the knowledge that an attack was impending.

The German forward defences consisted of an elaborate and intricate system of well-wired trenches and strong points, forming a defensive belt over a mile in depth. The numerous farms and woods were thoroughly prepared for defence, and included large numbers of machine-guns in their garrison.



## Messines Ridge : The Victory.

Guns of all calibres, recently increased in numbers, were placed to bear not only on the front, but on the flanks of an attack. The numerous communication-trenches and switch-lines radiating in all directions were amply provided with strongly-constructed concrete dug-outs and machine-gun emplacements, designed to protect the enemy garrison and machine-gunners from the effect of our bombardment. In short, no precaution was omitted that could be provided by the incessant labour of years, guided by the experience gained by the enemy in previous defeats on the Somme, at Arras and on the Vimy Ridge.

Despite the difficulties and disadvantages which our troops had to overcome, further details of yesterday's fighting show that our first assault and subsequent attacks were carried out in almost exact accordance with the time-table previously arranged. At 3.10 a.m. nineteen deep mines were exploded simultaneously beneath the enemy's defences, by which large portions both of his first and support trenches, including extensive dug-out and mining systems, were completely wrecked.

Immediately upon the explosion of the mines our guns opened, and our infantry assault was launched. Within a few minutes the enemy's first-line system was carried on the whole front attack.

Our troops then pressed on with scarcely a pause up the western slopes of the Messines—Wytschaete Ridge, and three hours after the commencement of the attack had stormed the entire crest-line from south to north.

## The Battles of the Ridges.

Shortly afterwards the whole of Messines was captured, and before mid-day the capture of Wytschaete village had also been completed after hard fighting.

In the second stage of the attack our troops pushed down the eastern slopes of the ridge, and advanced against a powerful line of German rear defences, which lay like the chord of an arc across the base of the salient formed by the ridge itself.

Heavy fighting took place in a further series of fortified woods and strong points, but at 3.45 p.m. the village of Oosttaverne, lying just west of the centre of the line, was captured. By nightfall practically the whole of this trench system was also in our hands, and we had gained the whole of the day's objectives.

The great numbers of German dead lying in the captured positions prove the severity of the enemy's losses, a large proportion of which was again borne by Bavarian troops. Our own losses were light. The enemy made no attempt during the night to recover his lost positions.

Following on the great care and thoroughness in the preparations made under the orders of General Sir Herbert Plumer, the complete success gained may be ascribed chiefly to the destruction caused by our mines, to the violence and accuracy of our bombardment, to the very fine work of the Royal Flying Corps, and to the incomparable dash and courage of the infantry.

The whole force acted with perfect combination. Excellent work was done by the Tanks, and every

## Messines Ridge : The Victory.

means of offence at our disposal was made use of, so that every arm and service had a share in the victory.

During the day our new line south of Ypres has been organised and secured.

German counter-attacks south-east and north-east of Oosttaverne and east of Messines have been repulsed with loss by our infantry or broken up by our artillery.

Over 6,400 prisoners, including 132 officers, have passed through the collecting stations to date as a result of yesterday's operations.

More than twenty guns are reported so far as being collected.

Messines was distinguishable in the current account as an "Irish Day." The Wytschaete end of the ridge was taken by Irish battalions, in which were Ulster men and South of Ireland men, men who take different sides in the religious and political controversies which separate Ireland (not at all so sharply, in my humble opinion, as many think), but who took a common view as to the necessity of ending the German threat to human civilisation. A very gallant gentleman, Major Willie Redmond, M.P., one of the leading figures in "Nationalist" Ireland, gave up his life in this battle, and around the place where he fell the Irishmen of the North and of the South were fighting in brotherly comradeship, showing an Irish unity which could not be questioned. An

## The Battles of the Ridges.

“ Irish Day ” certainly, Messines, and no one will grudge them the honour ; least of all the Australians and New Zealanders who had, too, a big share in the victory, and who find themselves embarrassed sometimes by the amount of attention which is given to their exploits.

As for the English troops, who, of course, had the largest share in this and other battles on the Western front, they have never to expect a degree of popular notice commensurate with their work ; and, to do them justice, I do not think they “ grouse ” to any extent at the working of the inexorable publicity law which deprives them of “ paragraph value.” Newspapers must give attention to the abnormal, the unusual, to the outstanding group rather than the mass. There is a story of a great New York journalist who was trying to explain to a “ cub reporter ” the theory of news values.

“ If,” he said, “ in the Broadway to-day a dog bites a man, that is not news ; but if a man bites a dog, that is news.”

That story illustrates well the canons of publicity. According to those canons, in dealing with a great achievement by a great army made up of different elements, the small groups in the mass

## Messines Ridge : The Victory.

stand out. At various epochs in the operations of the British Army on the Western front, Indian troops, Canadian troops, Australian troops, Irish troops, Scottish troops, have figured most prominently in popular accounts. Yet in every great battle the English troops naturally have been most numerous, have done their full share of the work in hand, and have not been backward, in gallant emulation with their brothers, in deeds of shining courage. When a considered history of the war comes to be written this fact will be plain. But it is not, and never will be, made plain in current popular accounts.

And the High Command, for other reasons than those governing war correspondents, has sometimes to assist in buttressing an incorrect and disproportionate view. If in a despatch special mention is made of the gallantry of Canadian or Australian troops in some action, nothing in the way of information is given to the enemy. But special mention of "English" troops would be so vague as to be useless; the mention would need to be of Kents, or Worcestershires, or Londoners, or Yorkshires; and that might communicate to the enemy really valuable information as to the disposition of our troops.

## The Battles of the Ridges.

A great amount of Staff work at the Front is devoted to identifying the enemy's Divisions in different sections of the line, watching for the appearance of new Divisions, for the splitting up of veteran units to stiffen weaker units, and so on. This work is easy to us, for we are constantly taking prisoners. It is harder for the German because he rarely gets prisoners from us now. We have to be on guard against giving him facts which might prove the keys to the solution of puzzles which are worrying him. (A current incident to illustrate this is the large reward which we know the Germans have offered to their regiments in the line for the capture of the first American soldier.)

Again, on the principle that it is the unusual that is "news," accounts of the Battle of Messines concentrate most attention on the great mine explosion which heralded the struggle. It was, of course, helpful—singularly so. But it was not the whole battle, nor even an essential to its success. Two pen-pictures of the great explosion :—

From the "Morning Post" :—The ground opened below the brim of Wytschaete as though the furnace door of Hades itself had been thrown back, and an enormous fountain of fire spurted into the sky. It was infinitely terrifying. Another fountain gushed

## Messines Ridge : The Victory.

on the right, and still another on the left. The black shadows of the slope turned to flame as the mines went up, and with them stout trenches. The scarred face of Hill 60, a score of redoubts, and long banks of wire vanished in the night, and when the dawn came there remained only dreadful gaps and fissures in the naked earth, where our men afterwards found embedded the bodies of many of their enemies. The earth rocked as though a giant hand had roughly shaken it. Then the guns began anew.

From Reuter's correspondent:—At the pre-arranged moment the biggest thing ever attempted in mining operations rent the sky with a terrible glare and an ear-splitting crash as a long series of mines, some of which were dug over a year ago, were blown along the enemy positions. The aggregate total of the charges touched off in these earth-shattering eruptions was well over a million pounds of high explosives. The villages of Messines and Wytschaete have totally vanished. From the north of Hill 60 to the south of Ploegsteert the enemy's terrain looks like the face of the Long Valley at Aldershot after an August field-day. The spectacle is incredible. The whole geography of the district has been churned and blown and furrowed out of recognition, and how many stark Huns lie amid the hecatomb the Recording Angel alone can tell, for the enemy has been expecting this attack, and had brought up masses of troops to try to withstand the onslaught. The existence of these German soldiers for the past week baffles all efforts of imagination. Prisoners taken during raids state that no food worth speaking of has

## The Battles of the Ridges.

reached their front since the terrific bombardment began. They were reduced by hunger to the lowest ebb of moral.

Following the mine explosion, the artillery barrage began from the groups of artillery which kept to their positions, whilst other groups of artillery at once moved forward following on the heels of the infantry. A swarm of aeroplanes also rose and advanced on the enemy. It is not much to the discredit of the German soldier that in the first few minutes of the battle he did not "stick it." The gun-flogging he had had for a fortnight had got on his nerves. He had been kept short of food. He saw now thousands of his comrades blown up in the air by an explosion which made a record for this or any other war. We took the first system of the enemy's defences with little trouble, collecting the remnants of the German front-line garrison as prisoners. The harvest of prisoners was unexpectedly rich. The enemy had reinforced his line considerably, and was further reinforcing it when we attacked. Some regiments had all their battalions in line (instead of one in line, one in support, and one in reserve). In one sector a Bavarian Division was relieving a Saxon Division at the hour of the



## Messines Ridge : The Victory.

attack, and we levied on both for the prisoners cages.

Later in the day the German resistance stiffened. As captured documents showed, the German Command had given instructions that the positions on Messines Ridge were to be held at all hazards ; and to keep up the courage of the front-line troops it was announced to them that great reserves were collected to come to their aid whenever an attack was developed. The opinion has been ventured in a previous chapter that probably the German plan was reconciled to the loss for a while of the front system of defences and hoped that our attack would land us just that far, in an utterly ruined position from which we could be ejected with great loss by counter-attacks from the second system of defence. That opinion seemed to be borne out by the progress of the day's fighting. But even at the second line the resistance was not as stubborn as had been expected. In Wytschaete Wood, a wood in which every tree had been reduced to a splintered stump by our shell fire, a tough fight was put up by a Prussian battalion. The wood was studded with pill-boxes, and a wild tangle of wire and *débris* made the going under-foot exceedingly difficult. The pill-boxes were

## The Battles of the Ridges.

connected by galleries, and other galleries connected the far edge of the wood with the Hospice and with the cellars of Wytschaete. The artillery preparation had demolished some of the pill-boxes, but not all. At one moment it seemed as if the infantry would be held up here, but our men, rushing forward with bayonets, shouting the while, terrified the enemy, and the wood was cleared.

At Battle Wood, on the left wing of the attack, there was also some stubborn fighting. But on the whole Messines was a cheap victory. Careful organisation had foreseen and provided for every contingency of the day, and we won a great result at a relatively small cost in casualties.

It was impossible for the Germans to allow the loss of this key-position to their Flanders coast-line to go unchallenged. But their effort to re-take Messines was a dismal failure, and gave proof of a degree of demoralisation that had never before been shown by the Germans in a big field of action. The counter-attack was made 36 hours after our initial success. That was too late to take advantage of the confusion which must follow in some degree a successful advance. It was too early to permit of a thorough preparation on the German part. Falling between the two

## Messines Ridge : The Victory.

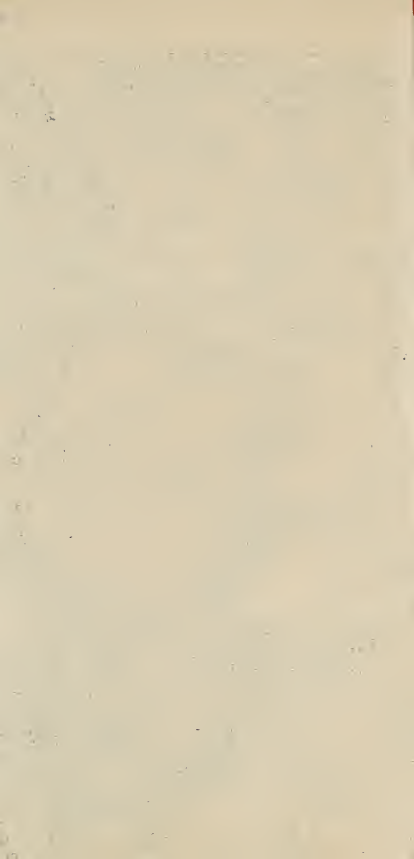
stools of "early" and "thorough," it was a sheer waste of men, and must have added greatly to losses which were already huge. The full extent of those losses will probably never be known, so many bodies and guns rest under the *débris* of the giant mine.

## CONCLUSION

THE capture of Messines Ridge on June 7th was, after a pause, followed by the successful attacks east of Ypres, on the ridges guarding the Ypres—Menin and the Ypres—Roulers roads, attacks which it is not proposed to deal with here further than to say that they continued and emphasised the victory of Messines. Some critics have found the ousting of the Germans from their trench fortresses to have been unduly slow. But it is work which has to be carried out with a due sense of proportion. Perhaps now and again a little time would have been saved by a much greater expenditure of men. The High Command decided that the game was not worth the candle, and they know best. What is important is not so much the date of the final German surrender, as the fact that that surrender is, humanly speaking, inevitable. Victory has been organised, is being won. The date of its consummation may be awaited with patience.

# THE BATTLE OF ARRAS





# THE BRITISH WESTERN F









