

CHAPTER III

THE BATTLES OF YPRES, 1915

(See Map 1 and Sketches 4-14)

The 1st Division Enters the Line

THE CANADIANS' entry into active operations was not long delayed; but before taking over a sector of the front line the Division was given a brief period of indoctrination into trench warfare.

Between 17 February and 2 March each infantry brigade, accompanied by a field artillery brigade and engineer, signal and service corps personnel, was attached for a week to one of two British divisions holding the line in front of Armentières. The 1st and 3rd Canadian Brigade groups, commanded respectively by Brig.-Gen. M. S. Mercer and Brig.-Gen. R. E. W. Turner, went successively to the 6th Division on the right, and the 2nd Brigade group (Brig.-Gen. A. W. Currie) to the 4th Division on the left. The indoctrination was practical and thorough. From company commanders down to private soldiers everyone was associated with a corresponding member of the host unit for 48 hours of individual training. Then followed 24 hours of platoon training, during which each Canadian platoon was made responsible for a definite length of trench as part of the company forming the regular garrison. Throughout the week battalion commanders and their staffs learned from their opposite numbers the many details of battalion administration in trench warfare. Artillery officers spent some time at the gun emplacements and then occupied by day and night the exact positions which would be theirs when their own units were in action.

On the 20th the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, Field-Marshal Sir John French, inspected units of the Division in their rear area. He reported from what he "saw of them that they were well trained, and quite able to take their places in the line of battle" - an opinion which he later found to be "thoroughly justified".¹

Before the tour ended, orders came for the 1st Division to take over a section of the First Army's front. The relief of the 7th British Division began on the last day of February, and at 11:00 a.m. on 3 March General Alderson assumed responsibility for 6400 yards of line in front of Fleurbaix. Here the Canadians formed the left wing of Lieut.-General Sir H. S. Rawlinson's 4th Corps; on their immediate left the inter-army boundary ran three and a half miles

south of Armentières. Each infantry brigade employed two battalions in the front line, and its affiliated field artillery brigade had three of its four batteries in action some 2500 yards to the rear, the fourth being in reserve. Operating with each infantry brigade were a field company of engineers and a field ambulance.

Because the water level came close to the surface of the ground, the trenches were shallow and built up with breastworks of sod and sandbags. They looked out upon an area of flat fields between which the rows of pollarded willows that lined the intervening ditches provided German snipers with concealed points of vantage. About three miles to the east the low Aubers Ridge, rising in a few places 70 feet above the plain, barely hid from view the city of Lille, seven miles from the front line. The Canadian role was in general defensive - the "cardinal principle" being "a determination to hold the front trenches at all costs". General Alderson, however, impressed on all ranks the necessity for maintaining the initiative over the enemy, convincing him by means of "bold patrolling, persistent and accurate sniping and prompt enterprises against any sapheads ... that the Canadian Division is his superior".² In the event of a German attack reserves would man the "G.H.Q. 2nd line" - a partly constructed position 2000 yards to the rear. For an uneventful week the Canadians accustomed themselves to the routine of trench warfare. Then, on 10 March, came a more exciting role as the British front on their right flared into action.

Neuve Chapelle, 10-12 March 1915

The plan of operations proposed by General Joffre for a 1915 campaign in France was with little change to remain the main Allied purpose in the West until the summer of 1918. It called for a three-fold offensive designed to cut the long German supply lines through the occupied territory of Northern France: in the north an advance eastward from Artois* against German communication centres in the Douai plain; in the south a northward thrust from Reims to sever the German lateral running north-westward through Mézières to Valenciennes; and with these having succeeded an advance northward from the Verdun Nancy front to cut the enemy's line of retreat across the Rhine. The main blow in the north would be delivered by the French Tenth Army, striking eastward between Arras and Lens to capture the heights of Vimy and dominate the whole Douai region. In a memorandum to Sir John French on 15 February Joffre suggested that the British should participate on the left by attacking in the direction of La Bassée and the Aubers Ridge. The successful completion of this joint offensive on a seventy-mile front would pave the way for an advance into the Douai plain.³

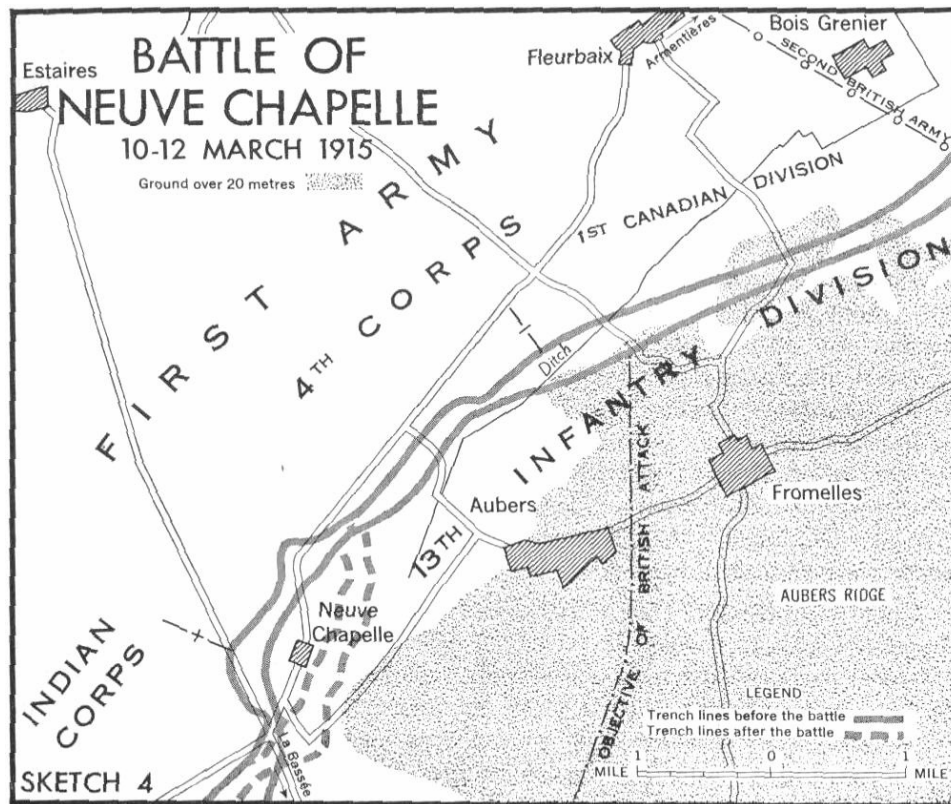
This combined Anglo-French effort, however, was not to materialize. At a meeting at Chantilly on 21 January, the two Commanders-in-Chief had

* The former province of Artois (capital, Arras) formed the greater part of the present *Département of the Pas-de-Calais*.

formally agreed that as soon as the arrival of additional British troops in France permitted, Sir John French would relieve the 9th and 20th Corps of the French Eighth Army, which held the Ypres sector. The 20th Corps would be used to extend the Tenth Army's front northward across the La Bassée Canal by taking over the sector of the 1st British Corps; the 9th Corps was required to strengthen the projected French attack. Field-Marshal French had counted on the arrival of the 29th British and 1st Canadian Divisions to enable him to carry out the agreed reliefs. But the 29th Division - it was the last of the Regular divisions, having been formed from units brought from overseas stations - was diverted to Gallipoli, and its Territorial replacement would require additional training before it could be put in the trenches. On 18 February he told Joffre that he could not both mount the La Bassée attack and relieve French forces in the Ypres Salient.⁴ He held firmly to his decision during further correspondence in which Joffre pointedly compared the lengths of front held by British and French forces. Finally on 7 March Joffre told the British C.-in-C. that while he had commenced offensive operations in - Champagne in mid-February, "the troops at my disposal do not allow me to undertake the attack with the Tenth Army at present".⁵ The British attack thus became an independent operation.

General Sir Douglas Haig's first objective was the straggling village of Neuve Chapelle, which lay opposite the centre of the First Army's front, less than half a mile from the forward trenches. Following a preliminary bombardment to smash the German breastworks and wire, four divisions of the Indian Corps and the 4th Corps, acting as a "battering-ram", were to "carry the Germans off their legs" and push forward to the Aubers Ridge, about three miles distant. The assaulting force would be in preponderant strength: forty-eight battalions would be opposed by only three German battalions manning the defences, and not more than four additional enemy battalions were expected to be available as reinforcements on the day of attack. On the British left the Canadian Division (which on 8 March had come directly under command of the First Army) was to make a demonstration with fire along its entire front in order to prevent German reinforcement of the battle area from that sector. If a British break-through developed, the Canadians would be ready to advance on orders from the First Army.⁶

When the bombardment began at 7:30 a.m. on 10 March, the Canadian divisional artillery shelled enemy positions opposite, and as the assault went in thirty-five minutes later, riflemen and machine-gunners opened bursts of rapid fire which continued at fifteen-minute intervals throughout the day. The main attack took the enemy completely by surprise, and within twenty minutes a breach 1600 yards wide had been opened in the German line. By nine o'clock British troops had cleared Neuve Chapelle, and with virtually no resistance in sight were halted on a pre-arranged line, awaiting orders from their corps head quarters to resume the offensive. Never were the disadvantages of a rigid control from a high level more disastrously demonstrated. With telephone and telegraph lines broken by enemy shelling, transmission of information to the rear and the



return of orders to the forward troops proved a slow and cumbersome process, taking an hour or more in each direction. Each corps commander, failing to realize the golden opportunity for rapid exploitation in the centre, waited for his flank (where progress had been slower) to get forward; and then the 4th Corps waited for the Indian Corps, so that both might move simultaneously. It was 2.50 p.m. before orders were issued for both corps to resume the advance at 3:30. Yet the time taken to relay these successively through division, brigade, and battalion headquarters meant that the companies in the front line did not begin moving until after half-past five, as dusk was falling. In the meantime the enemy had had at least five uninterrupted hours in which to bring up reinforcements and prepare new defences, so that the British attack was opposed by double the strength which it had faced that morning.⁷

This time there was no surprise, and artillery preparation was inadequate. Heavy fire from well-sited German machine-guns inflicted damaging casualties on the infantry as they crossed the flat fields. The advance came to a halt. During the night the Germans closed the breach with a well-wired rallying line linking up strongpoints armed with machine-guns, and brought forward new batteries. The Allied artillery, unable to determine the location of either the German guns

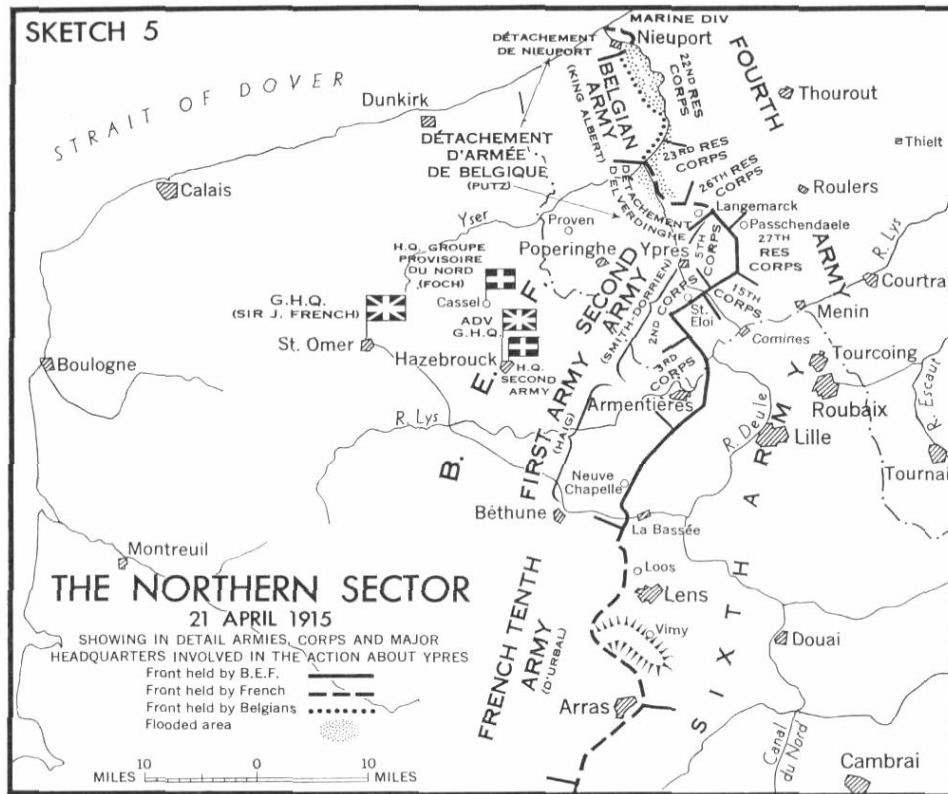
or the new entrenchments, could not usefully support the infantry's early-morning, renewal of the attack. It was quickly checked by the enemy's fire, and an afternoon attempt to advance was equally fruitless and costly. Throughout the day the Canadian Division repeated its role of the 10th, though to little effect, for a shortage of ammunition limited the artillery to a daily allotment of from ten to fifteen rounds a gun, unless enemy batteries should disclose themselves, when ammunition was to be "expended freely".⁸

Early on 12 March, after a pre-dawn bombardment of the Allied positions, the Germans counter-attacked with twenty battalions. British unit commanders were well prepared and the full force of their rifle and machine-gun fire threw back the enemy with very heavy losses. Previous orders by Sir Douglas Haig for a renewal of the British advance at 10:30 a.m. kept the forward troops from immediately exploiting the German setback, and there was a further postponement of two hours because of a thick haze which hindered artillery observation. The attack brought only further British losses, and at 10:40 p.m. orders from Haig to establish a new defensive line on the ground gained ended the battle.* For a while during the afternoon reports of sweeping British gains had caused the 3rd Canadian Brigade to be alerted for an advance; and towards evening the Army Commander asked Sir John French for a division from general reserve to relieve the 1st and 2nd Canadian Brigades for participation in the expected break - through. But the reports of success proved unfounded, and the Canadians remained in their trenches.

Neuve Chapelle cost the First Army 12,892 casualties (including one hundred in the 1st Canadian Division-which was no more than the normal wastage for that period in the line). German losses, estimated at twelve thousand, included 1687 officers and men taken prisoner. Though the tactical gains were disappointing, this first planned British offensive had certain useful results. The realization that neither the Germans nor their defences were invulnerable contributed much to the morale of the Allied soldiers. The B.E.F. was now held in greater respect, both by the enemy, who would not again dare to thin out to a minimum his defensive forces on a British front, and by the French High Command, who would no longer relegate the British role to taking over additional frontage so as to relieve French troops for offensive action.¹⁰ Although many of the lessons that the operation had to teach were to be disregarded far too long by Allied commanders, at least one received immediate attention. A General Staff "Memorandum on Operations" issued by Sir Douglas Haig's headquarters on 14 March stressed the importance of displaying "enterprise and initiative" in the attack. It criticized the "inexcusable" inaction of officers who would not advance because they had "not received specific orders to do so from their immediate superiors".

The Canadians' remaining stay in the Fleurbaix sector was uneventful. Their 24 day tour in the front line ended on 27 March when they were relieved by

* In a wire to Lord Kitchener early next day, the C.-in.C. blamed the cessation of the advance on "the above all ... the want of ammunition".⁹



the British 8th Division and went into army reserve at Estaires, five miles behind the line. Almost immediately demands for working parties broke in on the relative calm of life in billets. Units of all three brigades took their turn at trench-digging, and this, combined with a number of training schemes rehearsing the attack, pointed to an early return to action. On 1 April orders from Sir Douglas Haig returned the Canadian Division to the Second Army,* placing it under command of the 5th Corps, which had been formed in mid-February under Lieut.-General Sir H.C.O. Plumer. On the 5th and two succeeding days the Canadians marched across the rolling Flanders countryside to the Cassel area - about seventeen miles west of Ypres, to begin a week of preparation for new tasks.

The Canadian move formed part of the approaching relief - long advocated by General Joffre - of the French 9th and 20th Corps in the Ypres Salient. On 1 April Sir Douglas Haig, deciding that the first three Territorial divisions - 46th (North Midland), 47th (2nd London) and 48th (South Midland) - which reached France in February and March, had received sufficient training to replace regular divisions in the field, notified Joffre that he was extending his

* It was not the first time that the Army Commander, General Smith-Dorrien, had had Canadians under his command. During the South African War he had commanded the 19th Brigade, which included the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment.

front northward five miles to the Ypres-Poelcappelle road. Responsibility for the new sector was given to General Plumer, who between 2 and 17 April relieved three French divisions with, from south to north, the 27th, 28th and 1st Canadian Divisions.

These moves placed two-thirds of the Ypres Salient within the Second Army's boundaries. Only the northern flank, extending westward five miles from opposite Poelcappelle to the Yser Canal at Steenstraat, remained in French hands. It was manned by two divisions - the 45th (Algerian), adjoining the Canadians, and on its left the 87th (Territorial), next to the sector held by the Belgian Army. These two divisions and a detachment of cavalry made up the Groupement d'Elverdinghe (named from a town four miles north-west of Ypres), commanded by the G.O.C. 45th Division. This group together with the Groupement de Nieuport between the Belgians and the coast formed the Détachement d'Armée de Belgique, under General Putz; while all French forces from south of Arras to the sea (including in addition to the foregoing the Tenth Army in the Arras-Vimy-Lens sector) constituted the Groupe Provisoire du Nord, under the command of General Ferdinand Foch, with headquarters at Cassel. As General Joffre's representative he was responsible for coordinating the operations of these French formations with those of the British and Belgians.¹¹

The Ypres Salient

At the conclusion of the unsuccessful German attempts to break the dead-lock in Flanders in the late autumn of 1914 the Allied line in front of Ypres formed a deep curve seventeen miles long, extending from Steenstraat (on the Yser Canal, five miles north-west of the town) around to St. Eloi (nearly three miles south of Ypres). Throughout the winter this perimeter had remained unchanged.

At the focal point of the Salient was the ancient moated town of Ypres, which the Canadians first saw in April 1915. By that time German bombardment had damaged the stately 500-year old Cloth Hall and Cathedral, but many streets were still unharmed, and most of the inhabitants were still living at home. War had not yet devastated the fertile, densely populated area of the Salient. The network of roads which spread out across the Flanders plain linked Ypres with villages, hamlets and farms to north, east and south still tenanted though many were within two miles of the firing line. The largest of these communities proceeding clockwise around the perimeter, were Langemarck (in the north-east angle of the Salient), St. Julien (on the Poelcappelle road), Zonnebeke (about half-way down the eastern flank), and Zillebeke (two miles south-east of Ypres).

A number of physical features were to have an important bearing on the tactics employed by both sides. The low sandy ridge which ran in a north-easterly direction from Messines to Passchendaele, rising no more than 200 feet above sea level, or 150 feet above Ypres, marked the south-eastern flank of the Salient. From it the land fell away gradually to the north-west, a series of subsidiary spurs

at right angles to the main ridge forming the watershed of the muddy little streams feeding the Steenbeek, which flowed sluggishly through St. Julien to be joined south of Langemarck by the Lekkerboterbeek. Another series of four ridges running east and west, just high enough above the plain to overlook Ypres from the north, lay between the Steenbeek and the Yser Canal. The most northerly of these, named from the hamlet of Pilckem on its slopes, was to be the enemy's first objective in the Battles of Ypres, 1915. A feature which was to impose a limitation on the movement of Allied reserves and otherwise affect the battle was the barrier presented by the Yser Canal, which passed behind Ypres and ran in a generally northerly direction through Steenstraat to the sea. The canal's normal road bridges, augmented by a number of military bridges north of Ypres, constituted defiles constricting the movement of troops and became the targets of German artillery fire.

The 1st Canadian Division's relief of the French 11th Division took place between 14 and 17 April, General Alderson assuming command at 10:00 a.m. on the 17th. The Canadian sector, 4500 yards in length, lay obliquely astride the valley of the Stroombeek, northernmost of the Steenbeek's tributaries within the Salient. Between 1000 and 2000 yards to the rear was the Gravenstafel Ridge, which took its name from the hamlet lying just inside the Canadian boundary with the 28th Division. On the left the junction with the 45th (Algerian) Division lay 1000 yards south-west of Poelcappelle on the road leading to Ypres. The Canadian front was held by the 2nd Brigade on the right and the 3rd on the left, each with two battalions in the line, one in support, and one in divisional reserve on the northern outskirts of Ypres. The 1st Brigade was in corps reserve at Vlamertinghe, two and a half miles west of Ypres.¹² French artillery remained in position while the infantry was taking over, and was relieved section for section on the two succeeding nights by batteries of the 2nd and 3rd Brigades, Canadian Field Artillery. Reports on the divisional relief pay tribute to the courtesy and helpfulness of French officers and men in making the handing over as easy and methodical as possible.

The Canadians immediately found that French and British methods of conducting a war differed considerably. This was most noticeable with respect to the forward defences, where the British policy (as set forth in the Scheme of Defence issued by General Alderson) was "to hold the front trenches at all costs". The French, however, believed in manning the front line only lightly; if attacked the infantry would retire, allowing the artillery's effective 75-millimetre field guns to come into action to stop the enemy. It was an early example of the doctrine of "defence in depth" which, as we shall see, within the next two years the enemy was to adopt and practise with considerable success. In view of these different standards, it is hardly surprising that the state of the French front line came as a great shock to the men of the 1st Canadian Division. They found unconnected lengths of field works without the customary traverses for protection against enfilading fire. Because the closeness of water to the surface

prevented digging to a depth of more than two feet, there was a need for building up the parapets into breastworks of sod, mud or sandbag four feet or more high, but these were flimsily constructed, and seldom thick enough to stop bullets; in some places they did not exist. There was no parapet to give protection from the rear. Besides these serious shortcomings from the standpoint of security and safety, the trenches were sadly deficient in the matter of sanitation. A report to the C.R.E. 1st Canadian Division by one of his officers described the 2nd Brigade's sector of the line as being "in a deplorable state and in a very filthy condition, all the little broken down side trenches and shell holes apparently being used as latrines and burial places for bodies". The 3rd Brigade's sector was equally bad. The trenches and the ground behind them were littered with dead, buried and unburied, and the numerous shallow graves greatly hampered digging.¹³

A "subsidiary line" named in the 5th Corps instructions was shown on French tactical maps as being under construction or projected along the crest of the Gravenstafel Ridge. It was far from complete, and existed merely as a series of unlinked strongpoints or shelter trenches. One group of shelter trenches was at Locality "C", a position on the sky-line opposite the centre of the Canadian sector; another covered Gravenstafel, and one was midway between these at Boetleer's Farm. Considerably stronger was the G.H.Q. Line: which ran northward from Zillebeke Lake (a mile and a half behind the front) to a point on the Poelcappelle road half a mile east of Wieltje, turning thence north-west to link up with defences intended to cover the village of Boesinghe and its bridges over the Yser Canal. This well-sited position consisted of a number of redoubts, 30 yards across, about a quarter of a mile apart, protected by a continuous belt of wire six yards wide and three feet high. There was one major drawback - being passable at only certain road and track crossings, the G.H.Q. Line was, like the Yser Canal, seriously to restrict the forward movement of reserves. Each brigade holding the front trenches was assigned a section of the G.H.Q. Line to occupy in the event of a withdrawal, and all regimental officers were required to familiarize themselves with the position without delay.¹⁴ In addition to its responsibilities in manning posts in the "subsidiary line", the brigade on the divisional left was charged with the defence of St. Julien, a key point covering the bridge by which the Ypres-Poelcappelle road crossed the Steenbeek.

The Canadians immediately began converting the front line into a defensive position more in keeping with British standards. Every available man in the forward companies went to work rebuilding breastworks, deepening existing trenches where possible and adding traverses and communication trenches, linking all into a continuous work guarded by an unbroken belt of barbed wire. While this construction was in hand, reserve companies improved the positions in the subsidiary line. Some reliefs took place during the first week and there were minor boundary adjustments. By the morning of 22 April the 2nd Canadian Brigade was holding the division's right sector with the 5th Battalion

* This position corresponded to the G.H.Q. 2nd Line in the Fleurbaix sector and elsewhere (above, p. 50); but northward from Fleurbaix to Ypres there was no G.H.Q. 1st Line.

(next to the 28th Division) and the 8th Battalion. The 3rd Brigade had the 15th Battalion on the right and the 13th on the left. Each of these units had detachments of from two platoons to a company manning posts on or near the Gravenstafel Ridge. St. Julien was garrisoned by two and a half companies drawn from battalions of the 3rd Brigade. The 1st Brigade had been moved from Vlamertinghe to Proven, north-west of Poperinghe, and placed in Second Army Reserve for employment if needed in an operation by the 2nd Corps against Hill 60, just across the inter- corps boundary.

Hill 60 (designated by its altitude in metres) was an artificial mound of earth thrown up by the excavation of a cutting on the adjacent Ypres-Comines railway. Its position on the crest of the Messines-Passchendaele ridge made it the highest point overlooking the Salient, and one to be denied to German observers if possible. The 2nd Corps' assault was made by the 13th Brigade of the 5th Division on the evening of 17 April, after five mines containing in all five tons of explosives had been fired under the German positions. The enemy reacted vigorously with heavy shelling and repeated infantry counter-attacks. Bitter fighting continued for the next four days as British battalions strove to retain the battered mound. Early on the 21st the 1st Canadian Brigade, commanded by Brig.-Gen. M. S. Mercer, which had returned to Vlamertinghe the previous day, was placed under orders of the 5th Division and put on one hour's notice to move to Hill 60.¹⁵ The morning of the 22nd found the 2nd and 4th Battalions standing by, their commanders having reconnoitred routes forward to the battle area.

But the move to Hill 60 did not take place. Before the day ended the 1st Brigade was to find itself committed to action closer at hand.

German Dispositions and Plans

The Germans were holding the perimeter opposing the six Allied divisions within the Salient with seven divisions and two independent brigades, all grouped in four army corps of Duke Albrecht's Fourth Army. Next to the Ypres-Comines Canal the 30th and 39th Divisions* of the 15th Corps faced the British 5th and 27th Divisions. Farther north was the 27th Reserve Corps, with its 54th and 53rd Reserve Divisions confronting the 28th Division, and the 38th Landwehr Brigade on the Corps right flank, opposite the 2nd Canadian Brigade. Then came the 26th Reserve Corps, which had the 2nd Reserve Ersatz Brigade under command of the 51st Reserve Division opposing the 3rd Canadian Brigade, while the 101st Reserve Brigade of the 51st Reserve Division and the 52nd Reserve Division were facing respectively the 45th Algerian Division and the right of the French 87th Territorial Division. The 51st Reserve Division had its 102nd Reserve Brigade in reserve, and the 37th Landwehr Brigade was in corps reserve nearby. The north-west shoulder of the Salient, opposite the Franco-Belgian boundary, was held by the 23rd Reserve Corps with the 46th and

* German divisions and regiments not otherwise described are regular infantry formations.

45th Reserve Divisions, the latter facing the Yser. On the rest of the Fourth Army's front were the 22nd Reserve Corps along the Yser Canal and the Marine Division on the Belgian coast. In army reserve were the Guard Cavalry Division, the 43rd Reserve Division (from the 22nd Reserve Corps) and the 4th Ersatz Division.¹⁶

Ever since the Battles of Ypres, 1914, the existence of the Allied-held Salient had remained a challenge to the Fourth Army. But no major operation to reduce it could be contemplated, for by the end of March the German G.H.Q. had reached a decision to stand on the defensive in the west while making a determined effort in the east "to annihilate the offensive power of the Russians for all time".¹⁷ By mid-April Austro-German armies were concentrating for the great offensive in Galicia which was to carry them 250 miles eastward by winter. To draw attention from these troop movements German forces on the Western Front were directed to engage in lively activity "combined with attacks, in so far as the modest numbers remaining there permitted".¹⁸ An enterprise of this kind, which entailed the gaining of no major objective, was particularly suitable for testing new techniques or new weapons. "The battles of Ypres which began on the 22nd April", states the *Reichsarchiv*, "had their origin on the German side solely in the desire to try the new weapon, gas, thoroughly at the front."¹⁹

With the introduction of trench warfare conventional means of attack had proved largely ineffective. We are told by General von Falkenhayn that the Germans' adoption of chemical warfare (contrary to the provisions of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1906)* arose from their need for finding a weapon capable of preparing "for assault those positions which were constructed with all the modern methods of the art of fortification."²² Early in 1915 a 15-centimetre shell containing a gas charge was tried out against the Russians. It proved unsuccessful because of the great cold and a shortage of the guns required to obtain the necessary mass effect.

A decision was taken to use chlorine gas as a cloud, propelled towards the enemy by a suitable wind. The gas was readily available at low cost - it was used in the famous German dye industry - and could be easily transported in cylinders already made for industrial use. Germany produced 37 tons of chlorine a day (less than five days' production would be used on 22 April) against a trivial amount manufactured in Britain. A heavy gas, chlorine was not easily dissipated, and clung to the ground as the cloud rolled forward. It attacked the lungs, immediately incapacitating those exposed to it; sometimes it proved fatal. Since it left no noticeable residue, attacking troops could move forward behind the easily visible cloud.²³

By the end of January 6000 cylinders of chlorine gas were ready for use by the Fourth Army, the High Command having ordered Duke Albrecht to

* In attempting to justify this infringement of the rules of war, the German War Ministry and High Command in 1917 charged the French Army with having used a rifle grenade filled with bromic acid, and a hand grenade filled with ethyl bromo-acetate liquid.²⁰ The German Official History brands the French use of gas shells and gas hand grenades from the end of February 1915 as "the first breach of international agreement in the sphere of gas warfare".²¹ These charges were that the Hague agreements barred the use of such projectiles only when their *sole* object was the diffusion of asphyxiating gases.

employ the new weapon against the Ypres Salient. At first part of the 15th Corps' sector opposite the south-east face of the Salient was selected for the attempt, and by mid-February newly organized pioneer companies had finished digging in the cylinders. But the choice of location reflects little credit on the German meteorologists, for though by 10 March the line of cylinders had been extended to cover the whole of the 15th Corps' front, the wind consistently failed to blow from the south or south-east. On the 25th the Army Commander ordered cylinders not yet installed to be moved to the northern flank of the Salient, in the sector held by the 26th Reserve Corps and the 46th Reserve Division. By 11 April a line of 5730 cylinders extended from 1200 yards west of Poelcappelle to just east of Steenstraat. For ten days there was no wind from the right direction, and postponements of the attack did little to increase the enthusiasm of the troops for the new device. "Almost throughout the forces", records the German Official History, "both leaders and troops regarded with mistrust the still untried means of offence, if they were not entirely inclined against it."²⁴ Von Falkenhayn was urging the earliest possible execution of the attack, as he intended to transfer to the Eastern Front the 15th Corps and the 26th Reserve Corps (as well as the 4th Ersatz Division in army reserve).²⁵ On 21 April conditions were considered favourable enough for the undertaking to be ordered for 5:45 the next morning. But the 22nd dawned clear and calm; and at half-past five the attack was put off until evening.

The Allies had not been without warnings that the Germans were contemplating the use of gas. The 5th Corps' "Summary of Information" of 15 April, issued through divisions down to battalion level, reported the interrogation of a deserter from the 51st Reserve Division who had surrendered to the French 11th Division before its relief by the Canadians. The prisoner* revealed the planned attack and gave details of the preparations that had been made to release asphyxiating gas through pipes fitted to cylinders buried deeply in the German forward trenches.²⁷ An agent of the Belgian Army independently reported that the attack would be made in the Ypres area on the night of 15-16 April. These disclosures corroborated earlier statements about German preparations southeast of the Salient given by prisoners from the 15th Corps and reported in the Bulletin of the French Tenth Army on 30 March. On 16 April a Belgian Army information bulletin published an agent's report of a German rush order placed in Ghent for 20,000 mouth protectors, "to protect the men against the effects of asphyxiating gas". The report stated specifically that the gas attack would come on the front of the 26th Reserve Corps - where it actually did come.²⁸

Little attention seems to have been paid to these various reports. There was incredulity either that the German High Command would sanction the use of gas, or that if gas were used it could be effective over more than a very limited area. The commander of the 11th Division later declared that when he issued

* Publications of the deserter's name in a post-war article by the former commander of the French 11th Division²⁶ led to an investigation in Germany which culminated in 1932 in a sentence by the Reich Supreme Court to a 10 year prison term and loss of civil rights.

orders for special measures to be taken to meet a gas discharge he was told by the French General Headquarters, "All this gas business need not be taken seriously."²⁹ There was no great concern in the Canadian Division over these warnings (though the artillery had orders to search the German line and look out for explosions), perhaps because instructions from the Second Army published on 15 April called for reticence in dealing with "secret" or "confidential" matters, and because the night of 15-16 April (when the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade was already in the line) passed without a German attack. By 22 April, as we have noted, the fighting at Hill 60 was about to draw in Canadian forces. Attention was further diverted from the scene of the forthcoming battle by the bombardment of Ypres. On the afternoon of the 20th a 42-centimetre howitzer had begun dropping 2000-lb shells into the city with devastating results.

Von Falkenhayn had emphasized to the Fourth Army that it was more important to launch the gas attack at an early date than to obtain a deep penetration. He rejected Duke Albrecht's request for an extra division to be held in readiness to exploit possible success, not only because he had none to spare (particularly with the prospect of postponements because of the weather), but because he had doubts as to what the gas would accomplish. Accordingly the operation was planned with the limited objective of the Pilckem Ridge. On the 26th Reserve Corps' front the 51st Reserve Division would take Langemarck and the 52nd Pilckem. On the German right the 45th Reserve Division (of the 23rd Reserve Corps) was to seize Steenstraat, while the 46th Reserve Division secured the line of the Yser Canal, with bridgeheads at Het Sas and Boesinghe. The Fourth Army believed that the attainment of these objectives would force the Allies to abandon the Ypres Salient. Subsequent objectives specified the capture of the Yser Canal south to and including Ypres.³⁰

The Battle of Gravenstafel Ridge- The First Gas Attack, 22 April

The morning and early afternoon of Thursday, 22 April, a bright sunny day, brought no variation from the daily routine of the troops of the 1st Canadian Division. The 2nd and 3rd Brigades were in the line, and at Vlamertinghe the 1st Brigade, alerted for possible action at Hill 60, continued training. Shortly before 3:00 p.m. the 3rd Brigade received notification of one hundred mouth organs waiting to be picked up at Divisional Headquarters.³¹ The Salient had been under fairly heavy shelling since the 19th, the German fire being directed mainly on roads and bridges north and east of Ypres. There was a lull during the afternoons but, soon after four o'clock the French front line on the north of the Salient came under a violent bombardment, which gradually shifted to the Canadian sector. At five o'clock the Germans opened the valves of the gas cylinders* for from six to

eight minutes, releasing more than one hundred and sixty tons of chlorine into a light north-east wind.³²

The first warning to the Canadians was the sound of small-arms fire and the rapid discharge of French 75s coming from the northern flank. Almost simultaneously the 3rd Brigade reported “a cloud of green vapour several hundred yards in length” between the French trenches and the enemy’s front line.³³ The chlorine drifted southward at five or six miles an hour, producing an initial concentration about half a mile in depth. It caught in its deadly embrace the Tirailleurs and African Light Infantry holding the Langemarck sector and the Territorials of the 87th Division farther west. Half suffocated, and with eyes streaming and nose and throat burning, their morale broken by this unexpected terror, many abandoned their positions and fled, leaving behind large numbers of dead.

The Canadian sector had escaped the gas concentration, and at all levels of command steps were taken to deal with the serious situation that was developing on the northern flank. General Alderson and his C.R.A. were at the crossroads 1000 yards north-east of St. Julien when the attack started. They made their way on foot back to their horses at Wieltje and then rode back to Divisional Headquarters, in the Château des Trois Tours, west of Brielen. From here the first order was issued just before six. Shortly before 9:30 p.m. the C.R.E. reported the canal bridges prepared for demolition.³⁴ Meanwhile in the front line the left company of the 13th Battalion sent two platoons to line the ditch of the Poelcappelle road in support of a small party of Tirailleurs, who from their original trench were exchanging fire with Germans occupying a parallel hedge. Some 600 yards nearer Ypres, covering the culvert over the Lekkerboterbeek, two more platoons of the 13th Battalion manned the ditch, their numbers increased by Algerian riflemen driven back by the gas. The battalion commander, Lt.-Col. F.O.W. Loomis, who was also Commandant, St. Julien, ordered his small garrison there into battle positions, placing one company on each side of the road north of the village, and holding the remaining two platoons in reserve. These dispositions left unguarded a stretch of more than a mile of the road north of St. Julien, except for the 10th Battery C.F.A. south of Keerselaere.

West of St. Julien there was a still wider gap, which, lying nearer the centre of the German attack, presented a greater danger. A British 4.7-inch battery in Kitcheners Wood,[†] half a mile from the village, was the only manned position between the former French line and the 3rd Brigade Headquarters at Mouse Trap Farm, 1000 yards north of Wieltje. At six o’clock Brig.-Gen. Turner ordered the 14th Battalion, in reserve at St. Jean (with one company in St. Julien), to occupy a portion of the G.H.Q. Line from the Ypres-St. Julien road to

* Of the 5730 cylinders used (above, p.60) 1600 were of the large, commercial type, containing 41.5 kilograms of gas; and 4130 of a specially prepared smaller type, containing 20 kg. of gas. The total weight in cylinders was 149,000 kg.

† Named not from Lord Kitchener, but from the French *Bois des Cuisiniers*. The French, who had occupied this sector before the Canadians, may have found the wood a good hideout for unit cooks.

beyond Mouse Trap Farm. On its left a group of 500 Zouaves extended south-westward to Hampshire Farm (about 600 yards west of Brigade Headquarters), while on its right the 3rd Field Company C.E. covered the Wieltje-St. Julien road. By that time German rifle fire was coming from Mauser Ridge, which ran westward from Kitcheners Wood. Not until 8:00 p.m. did Turner receive a delayed message releasing to him from divisional reserve his fourth battalion, the 16th Battalion, which had meanwhile lined the west bank of the Yser Canal. Elements of the 1st and 2nd Field Companies C.E. were left to guard the vulnerable canal bridges. Brig.-Gen. Currie did not wait for a parallel message releasing the 10th Battalion from reserve. He took control of the battalion and had it moving forward shortly after six o'clock.³⁵

With telephone lines broken by enemy shelling, information reaching brigade and divisional headquarters was slow and frequently inaccurate. A series of messages dispatched by hand from 3rd Brigade Headquarters between 6:45 and 7:10 p.m. erroneously reported that the left of the Canadian front line had been "forced back towards St. Julien", and then "forced back on G.H.Q. line". The 1st Canadian Division at once relayed this faulty intelligence to the 5th Corps, and ordered the 2nd Brigade "to hang on and take care of your left".³⁶ Currie, whose headquarters were at Pond Farm, south-east of St. Julien, immediately ordered the 10th Battalion's C.O. to report to the commander of the 3rd Brigade. To secure his own sector he concentrated the whole of the 7th Battalion about Locality "C" on the Gravenstafel Ridge.

Reports of the German attack began reaching Second Army Headquarters at Hazebrouck at 6:45 p.m., and during the next two hours a disturbing picture enveloped of both French divisions having been driven from their first and second lines of defence with the loss of all their guns, and of virtually no formed bodies of French troops remaining east of the Yser Canal. This meant that except for the hasty dispositions made from within the resources of the 1st Canadian Division the Second Army's left flank lay open for 8000 yards. A successful German attack through this gap would not only threaten Ypres but would take in the rear the three divisions still holding the Salient.

One of General Smith-Dorrien's first moves towards establishing a new line was to release the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade from army reserve at Vlaminghe. This enabled the 5th Corps at 8:15 p.m. to hand over the 2nd and 3rd Battalions to General Alderson; they were immediately sent forward under the 3rd Brigades marching across 3000 yards of open front under an escort of the Divisional Cavalry.³⁷ At the same time General Plumer put at Alderson's disposal the 2nd East Yorks, who were in the 28th Division's reserve a mile north-west of Ypres. This was the first of thirty-three British battalions to come under General Alderson's command during the battle.

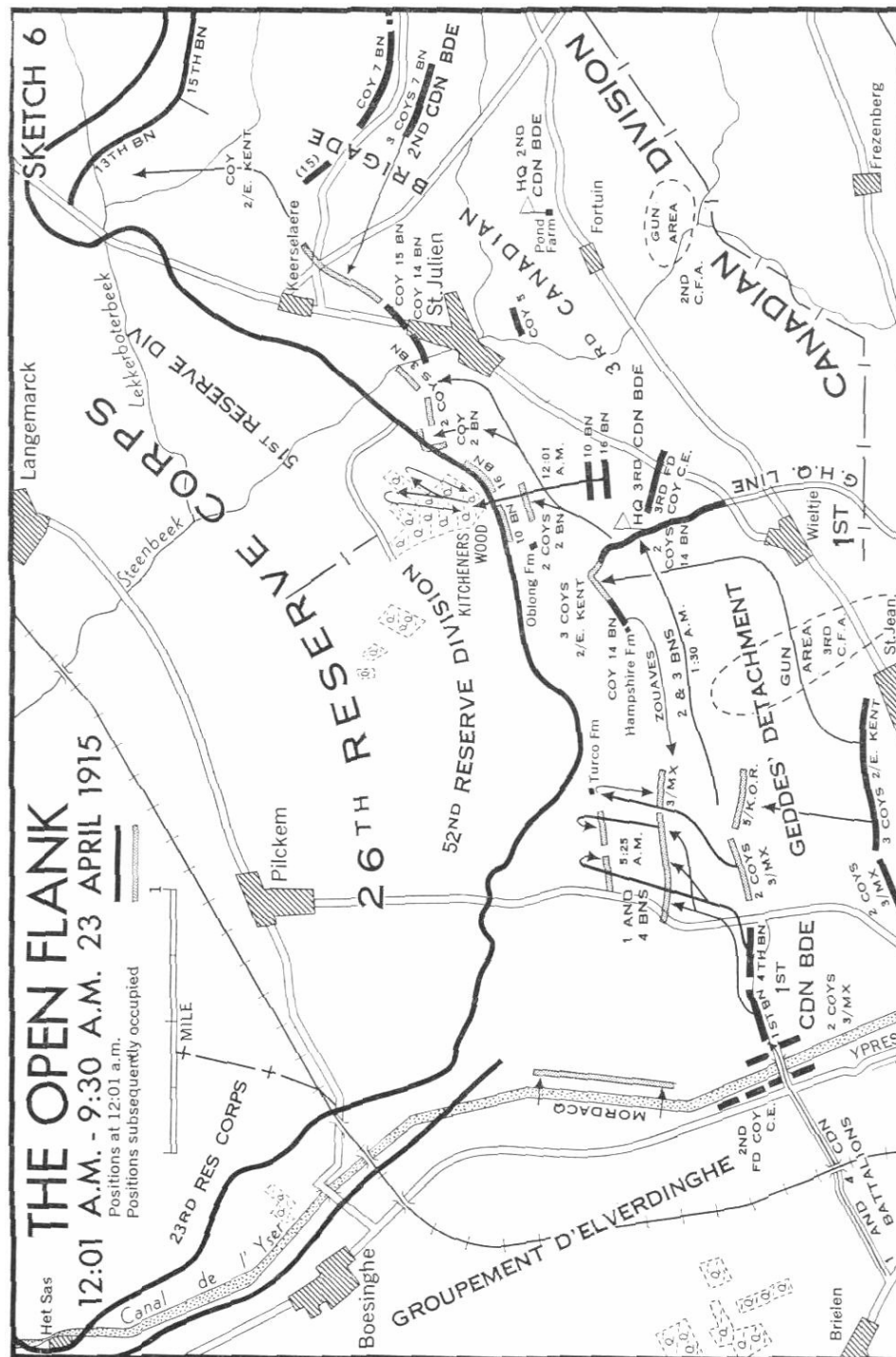
Other reserves of the 27th and 28th Divisions were already on the move. The 27th Division had called forward the 4th Battalion, The Rifle Brigade to the St. Jean area. Earlier two battalions of the 28th Division - the 2nd Buffs (East Kent Regiment) and the 3rd Battalion, The Middlesex Regiment - had moved out

from St. Jean to the ridge north of the village, where they deployed westward as far as the Yser Canal. In front of them only a solitary, French machine-gun post guarded the 3000-yard gap between Hampshire Farm and the canal.

Fortunately, however, the advance by the German centre and right had halted. Except on the canal flank both enemy corps had speedily gained their initial objectives. For some reason a number of the gas cylinders at the western end of the line had not been discharged, and Steenstraat was able to hold out against the 45th Reserve Division until late evening. The 46th Reserve Division crossed the canal north of Het Sas, but strong French resistance kept the division's left wing from reaching the eastern bank. The most rapid and deepest penetration was made by the 26th Reserve Corps, whose 52nd Reserve Division reached its initial objective, the Pilckem Ridge, by 5:40 p.m. Farther east the 51st Reserve Division was temporarily checked at the long, straggling village of Langemarck, where the garrison had escaped the full effects of the gas cloud. By six o'clock, however, the village ruins were in German possession, and the division was ordered to cross the Steenbeek, and if possible take St. Julien. Before nightfall forward troops had passed the Franco-British boundary and overrun Kitcheners Wood, capturing the four British guns there. Units of the 52nd Reserve Division had meanwhile occupied Mauser Ridge and were near the east bank of the canal overlooking the Boesinghe railway bridge. Orders came for the infantry to dig in at their present positions, and the 37th Landwehr Brigade was brought up from reserve to form a support line along the Pilckem Ridge.³⁸

In recording the difficulties encountered by the 51st Reserve Division at Langemarck and farther east, the German Official History blames the fact that the gas "had not had a decisive effect, or else the troops had not followed it up immediately. So it was that the extreme right wing of the French and the Canadians adjoining on the east could offer an obstinate resistance."³⁹ The two isolated platoons of the 13th Battalion's No. 3 Company at the Lekkerboterbeek crossing fought with mounting casualties until overwhelmed by superior numbers. Farther north, at the left of the Canadian front line, the Algerian detachment was forced back to the Poelcappelle road, where the 13th Battalion's detachment, reinforced by two more platoons drawn from other companies, maintained a stalwart defence against the attackers' heavy rifle fire. South of Keerselaere guns of the 10th Field Battery, in action since early evening, halted a body of Germans marching on St. Julien. To cover the battery in its exposed position, within 500 yards of the enemy, the Commandant of the St. Julien garrison sent forward a party of 60 infantrymen of the 14th and 15th Battalions and a machine-gun detachment of the 13th Battalion.

This manoeuvre, which contributed to the safe withdrawal of the 10th Battery's guns, owed much of its success to the skill and daring of Lance-Corporal Frederick Fisher in working his Colt machine-gun forward under heavy fire and bringing it into effective action against the Germans. Fisher, who was awarded the Victoria Cross, was killed next day.⁴⁰



The Counter-Attacks of 22-23 April

About 8:00 p.m. on the 22nd a French liaison officer asked General Alderson for Canadian cooperation in a counter-attack that the 45th Division was preparing to launch towards Pilckem. The G.O.C. promptly ordered the 3rd Brigade to counter-attack with two battalions toward Kitcheners Wood. The attack was made about midnight from an assembly area east of Mouse Trap Farm, by the 10th Battalion (of the 2nd Brigade) and the 16th, which after its release from divisional reserve reached Brig.-Gen. Turner's Headquarters shortly before ten. The two battalions, with the 10th in the lead, advanced in "column of half battalion-six waves of men marching shoulder to shoulder on a two-company front, the ranks of the forward battalion spaced at 30 paces, the rear at 20. One hundred bombers from the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Brigades accompanied the attack. Artillery support was provided by a British battery and the 9th and 12th Batteries of the 3rd Brigade C.F.A., firing on the northern part of the wood and beyond. The prescribed task was to "Clear wood C.1 0.d", but beyond this the hasty arrangements detailed no objectives nor did they provide any plan for consolidation.⁴¹

There was enough moon to silhouette the dark shape of Kitcheners Wood, and moving briskly the closely massed infantry, 1500 strong, covered half the 1000 yards to the objective before the alarm was given. Then heavy machine-gun and rifle fire burst from the trench which the Germans were holding south of the wood, and many of the Canadians fell. The final stretch of ground was covered on the run, and quickly taking the trench with bayonet and rifle butt, the two battalions pressed on. At 2:45 a.m. the 3rd Brigade reported to the 1st Division that the wood had been carried and the four captured British guns recovered. But success was short-lived. During the advance in the darkness over unknown ground companies and platoons had lost cohesion, many officers having become casualties, and the lack of a preconceived plan made consolidation difficult. The expected French attack on the left had not materialized. Rifle fire from that flank indicated that the Germans were still holding the north-west corner of the wood. Others were strongly entrenched with machine-guns at the south western extremity. They were also in force on the opposite flank, east of Kitcheners Wood. In the circumstances it was decided to fall back to the trench originally held by the enemy south of the wood. As teams to remove the British guns had not yet arrived, these were abandoned, but not before their ammunition had been destroyed. The retirement was completed by four o'clock, as fewer than 500 survivors of the 10th and 16th Battalions having reversed the parapet began digging in on a line extended to 750 yards.⁴²

While the assault on Kitcheners Wood was still in progress, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions had reported to Brig.-Gen. Turner. Ordering the 3rd Battalion to a position facing north behind the G.H.Q. Line, Turner sent the 2nd Battalion to aid the counter-attack. One company unsuccessfully assaulted the German strongpoint south-west of the wood; a second occupied Oblong Farm to the left of the 10th Battalion; while a third dug in on the 16th Battalion's right flank. To

fill the 500-yard gap west of St. Julien, Turner then moved up two companies of the 3rd Battalion. Meanwhile northeast of the village, in response to the 3rd Brigade's urgent appeal for help, Brig.-Gen. Currie shortly after 2:00 a.m. had ordered the 7th Battalion (less one company) to move westward from Locality "C" to extend the right flank of the St. Julien garrison to the end of the Gravenstafel Ridge. Thus by 5:30 on the morning of the 23rd a continuous though tenuous line had been established reaching south-westward from the crossroads east of Keerselaere to Oblong Farm. But from Keerselaere northward to the original front line the Allied flank still lay open for nearly a mile. In its stubborn defence of the Salient's new apex the 13th Battalion had received welcome reinforcement in the arrival, shortly before dawn, of its two platoons from the St. Julien garrison, and a company of the 2nd Buffs which the battalion commander, Colonel A. D. Geddes, had placed at the disposal of Lt.-Col. Loomis.

The second counter-attack of the night was hurriedly improvised to be carried out by the meagre forces available, and like many impromptu schemes it suffered from hasty planning and faulty coordination. Shortly after one o'clock the G.O.C. 5th Corps made available to General Alderson a composite brigade of four battalions of the 28th Division under the command of Colonel Geddes. This infantry group, which as "Geddes' Detachment" was to operate under the Canadian Division for the next five days, was ordered to fill the dangerous gap between the 3rd Canadian Brigade's left and the French right, "driving back any enemy that may have penetrated".⁴³ It appears to have been almost 3:00 a.m. when these orders reached Geddes, who, hampered by lack of staff, had difficulty in putting them into effect. Leaving two battalions uncommitted, he placed at the right edge of the gap his own battalion (less the company sent to reinforce the 13th Battalion), and at the left edge two companies of the 3rd Battalion, The Middlesex Regiment (the other two companies being left to guard the Brielen bridge over the Yser Canal).

In the meantime as a precautionary measure the 1st and 4th Battalions of the 1st Canadian Brigade were ordered to move east of the canal. They crossed opposite Brielen shortly after three o'clock, and at 3:47 Alderson ordered them to attack northward in cooperation with a projected French attack timed to begin at five. The French effort was to be made by two battalions of the 45th Division striking north-eastward from the Yser Canal against Pilckem; the Canadians were to attack on the east side of the Ypres-Pilckem road.⁴⁴ This was in the same area assigned to Geddes, whose weak force was preparing to advance on two widely separated axes. While the Canadians had been advised of his intended movements, it came as a surprise to Geddes when his left unexpectedly made contact with the 1st Battalion.

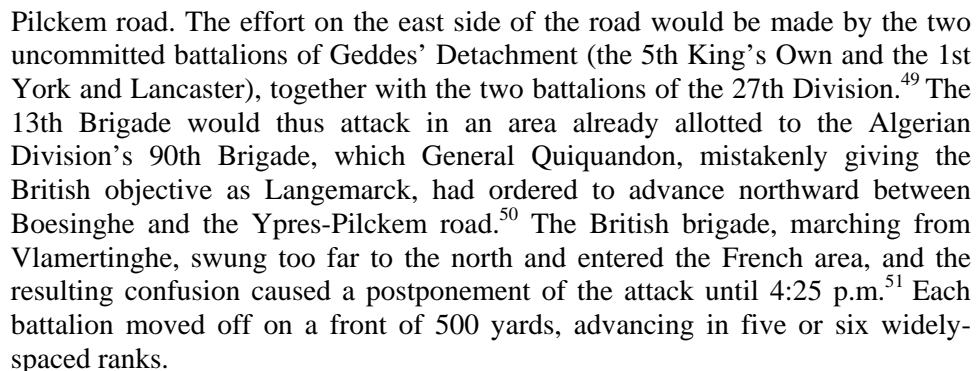
The two Canadian battalions had deployed on a 200-yard frontage just below the crest of Hill Top Ridge. Daylight disclosed the enemy busily digging in on Mauser Ridge, 1500 yards to the north. When no sign came of any French attack, the Commander of the 4th Battalion, Lt.-Col. A.P. Birchall, whose four

companies were in front, assuming that the French movement was hidden by intervening hedges, at 5:25 gave the order to advance. As the leading waves moved down into the shallow valley, they were met by heavy rifle and machine-gun fire, which was soon supplemented by the enemy's artillery. On the right the two Middlesex companies steadily kept pace, and reinforced by a reserve company of the 1st Battalion occupied Turco Farm within 300 yards of the German position, only to be shelled out again by our own artillery.

This was the farthest point of advance. Casualties were heavy, for the supporting artillery-eight 18-pounders of the 10th and the composite 2nd-3rd Field Batteries and eight 4.5-inch howitzers of two British batteries-could not silence the fire from a mile of enemy trench. Beside the Pilckem road the 1st and 4th Battalions were pinned down in the valley bottom with an uncertain left flank, for though an assuring message had come from the French of three and a half battalions east of the canal and two more about to cross, nothing had been seen of any attack.⁴⁵ At 8.30 a.m. Brig.-Gen. Mercer ordered both Canadian battalions to dig in, and a request went to the French attack headquarters to fill the gap on the 1st Brigade's left.⁴⁶ During an uncomfortable morning, in which the Canadians and the Middlesex were severely harassed with tear gas shells,⁴⁷ a battalion of Zouaves moved up to the Pilckem road, and established contact with Mercer's left shortly after midday. Meanwhile reinforcements had reached Mouse Trap Farm with the arrival of two battalions of the 27th Division from General Smith-Dorrien's already depleted corps reserve - the 2nd Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and the 9th Royal Scots. It was now apparent that the French counter-attack would not take place until new batteries arrived to replace the guns lost in the gas attack. It had already been postponed until nine o'clock, and an operation order issued at 1.20 by General Quiquandon set the new time for 3:00 p.m.

The situation in the Ypres Salient had been under careful scrutiny at General Headquarters, where air reconnaissance reports confirmed that the Germans were rapidly consolidating their gains. During the morning Sir John French visited General Foch and was assured that reinforcements were arriving and that the territory lost by the 45th and 87th Divisions would be regained. In agreeing to cooperate in any counter-attack, Sir John reserved the right to withdraw his troops from the threatened Salient if the French position were not soon reestablished.⁴⁸ On returning to his advanced headquarters at Hazebrouck the Commander-in-Chief ordered General Smith-Dorrien to assist the French attack, and made available to the Second Army the infantry of the 50th Division, and later the whole Cavalry Corps. Shortly after midday the 1st Cavalry Division reached the Ypres area, and with it the 13th Infantry Brigade, the latter much reduced in numbers by its ordeal at Hill 60 (above, p. 58).

At 2:40 p.m. the Army Commander issued orders to the 5th Corps for a general attack between Kitcheners Wood and the Yser Canal. General Alderson's detailed instructions called for the 13th Brigade to cross the Brielen bridge and attack towards Pilckem on a two-battalion front with its right on the Ypres-



Unfortunately British and Canadian supporting batteries which had not been informed of the postponement opened fire at 2:45, giving the Germans ample warning of the attack. When the actual assault did go in, a shortage of ammunition prevented another preliminary bombardment. This mishap, coming on top of the general lack of preparation, the absence of any reconnaissance by battalions and the uncertainty as to the enemy's exact location, doomed the attack to failure before it started. As the advancing battalions came into German view

they were met by heavy fire from Mauser Ridge. There were many casualties, especially among the officers, with the result that little information came back and direction of the battle broke down. A sudden eastward advance from the canal by a battalion of Zouaves cut across the 13th Brigade's front, temporarily halting the 1st Royal West Kent and the 2nd King's Own Scottish Borderers and forcing them to veer to the right. In the centre, as the leading troops of Geddes' Detachment reached the positions which the 1st and 4th Canadian Battalions and the 3rd Middlesex had been holding under fire since the failure of the 1st Brigade's early morning attack, the survivors of all three units joined in, to carry the advance to within 200 yards of the German trenches. On the right the 9th Royal Scots dug in short of Hampshire Farm, the Duke of Cornwall's doing better by recapturing Turco Farm, though they were to hold it only briefly.⁵²

This was the high tide of the counter-attack. The approach of darkness brought the task of sorting out units and establishing a new line about 600 yards south of the German trenches. This furnished a continuous manned position from the 3rd Brigade's holdings in front of Mouse Trap Farm to South Zwaanhof Farm beside the canal, where a battalion of the 13th Brigade reinforced the junction with the French right flank. Except for the uncoordinated effort on its right by the Zouaves, the 45th Algerian Division had achieved little; and farther north attempts by the 87th Division to retake the canal crossings at Het Sas, and by reinforcements from the Groupement Nieuport to recapture Steenstraat had failed.⁵³

Casualties had been heavy, running in each British battalion from 200 to 425. In their two efforts that day the 1st Canadian Battalion had lost 404 all ranks; the 4th Battalion's losses of 454 included the C.O., who was killed. Of the survivors it was reported that some were so confused "that daylight found them digging in facing the wrong way."⁵⁴ Once more the enemy's advance had been stopped, and at a cost perhaps justifiable. For while it seems probable that a simple night advance might have secured the same ground with few casualties, there is little doubt that the determined Allied counter-offensive caused a change in the German plans. In the first flush of success following the gas attack on the 22nd, the Commander of the Fourth German Army had broadened his objectives and had ordered the attack to be pressed westward across the Yser Canal in the direction of Poperinghe, in order to drive a wedge between the Belgians and the French. On the morning of the 23rd he ordered the 26th Reserve Corps to regard "the undertaking against Poperinghe as the main operation" and its own advance as only secondary. But later that day, when Allied counter-attacks had brought the Corps' forward movement to a standstill, the German High Command intervened, telling the Fourth Army "that Poperinghe did not primarily enter the question at all as an objective for the operation, and that it was strictly a matter of cutting off the Ypres Salient"⁵⁵

For the time being General Alderson's fear of a German advance down the canal to Ypres had been removed by the gallant action of the 13th Brigade in sealing the gap on the left flank. To the Brigade Commander he wrote, "Words

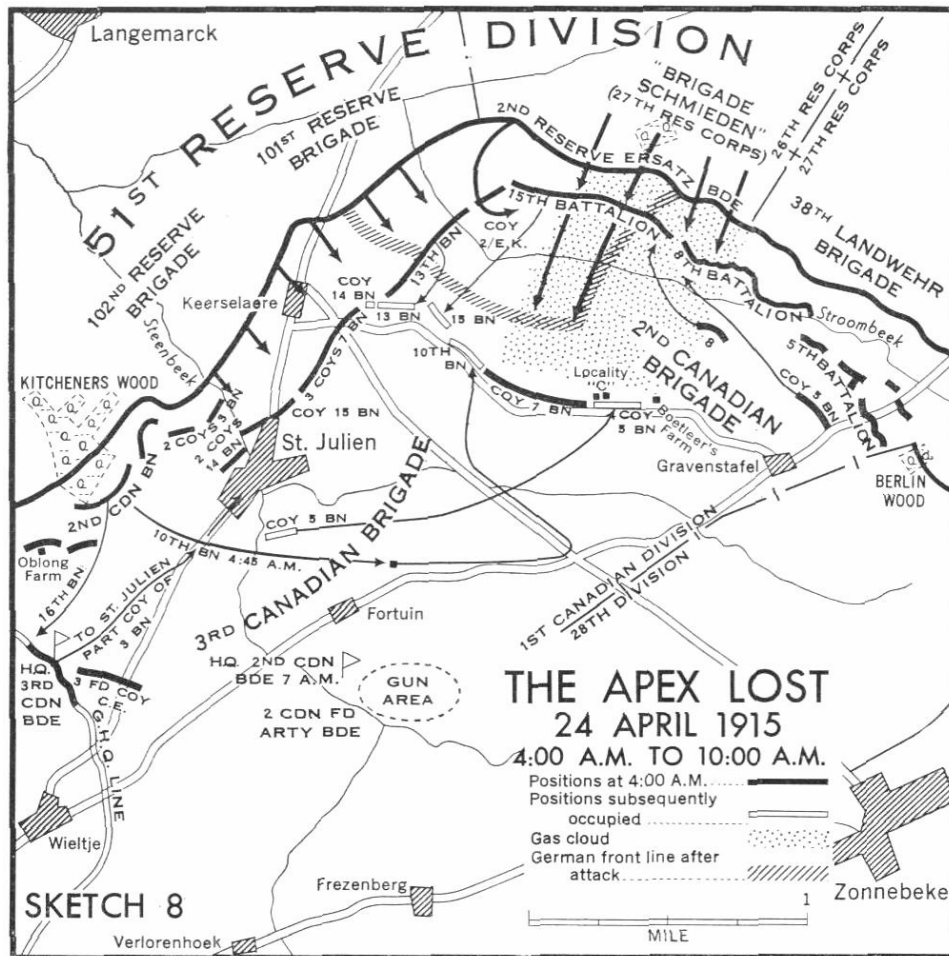
cannot express what the Canadians owe the 13th for their splendid attack and the way they restored confidence.”

The Battle of St. Julien-The Second Gas Attack, 24April

To implement the German High Command's intention of “cutting off the Ypres Salient” Duke Albrecht ordered a discharge of gas to be made on the 26th Reserve Corps' front early on the morning of 24 April, to be followed by a converging attack on the Canadian-held apex. The German formations concerned formed the Corps' left wing, consisting of the 51st Reserve Division with the 2nd Reserve Ersatz Brigade under command. Behind that Brigade was Brigade Schmieden, a strong *ad hoc* formation organized from battalions of the 27th Reserve Corps for the purpose of exploiting any progress on the left wing of the 26th Corps. Adjoining the Ersatz Brigade was the 38th Landwehr Brigade, the extreme right wing of the 27th Reserve Corps. The attack was intended to crush the Canadian old and new lines, capture St. Julien and strike into the heart of the Salient as far as the Zonnebeke Ridge (a mile south of the Gravenstafel Ridge). At the same time the 23rd Reserve Corps (which had captured Lizerne at 1:30 a.m. on the 24th) would continue its operations west of the Yser Canal, circling southward to cut off the line of retreat at Vlamertinghe while the Salient was being driven in. On the east side of the Salient the 27th Reserve Corps would stand ready to join in the advance as the 26th Reserve Corps swept southward.⁵⁶

Along the Canadian front preparations were made to meet the inevitable attack. The line north-east of St. Julien had been shortened. After dark on the 23rd the 13th Battalion and the company of the 2nd Buffs, which together had held the narrow apex all day long under continual fire from front and rear, retired and dug in on a line running south-westward from the 15th Battalion's left to the 7th Battalion's positions east of Keerselaere. The entire line from the Canadian boundary with the 28th Division near Gravenstafel round to Kitcheners Wood was now manned by the equivalent of eight battalions. These were to be attacked by at least three times their number of German battalions.⁵⁷ The 5th and 8th Battalions (of the 2nd Brigade) and the 15th Battalion held the original front on the east side of the Salient; from the new apex to St. Julien were in order “B” Company of the 2nd Buffs, the 13th, 7th and 14th Battalions; west of the Steenbeek the 3rd and 2nd Battalions were dug in near the southern face of the wood. The work of entrenching went on all night, and telephone linemen toiled at repairing and extending communications. Each man in the 8th Battalion's trenches was issued with a makeshift respirator—a cotton bandolier to be wetted and tied over his nose and mouth if a gas cloud approached.*

* Manufactured respirators came later. The smoke helmet, an impregnated bag to fit over the head, was introduced in June. The small box respirator was issued in August 1916 and remained in use to the end of the war.

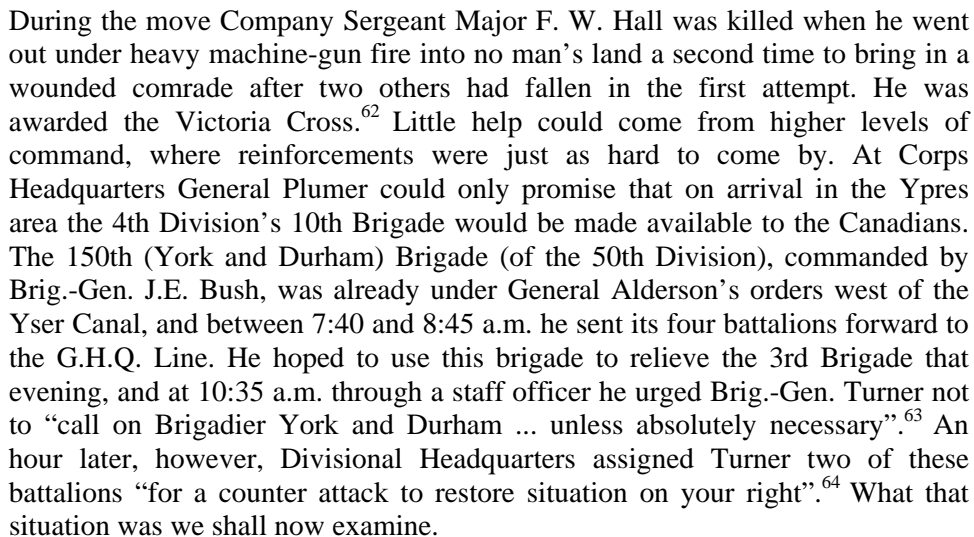


At four o'clock in the morning of 24 April the Germans opened up a heavy ten-minute bombardment, at the same time releasing chlorine gas on a 1200-yard front opposite the junction of the 8th and 15th Battalions. As the greenish yellow cloud rolled in across no man's land hurried calls for artillery support brought prompt aid to the 8th Battalion.⁵⁸ But on the left there was no help for the 15th Battalion, for the 3rd Field Artillery Brigade (assigned to support the 3rd Infantry Brigade) had to admit that its guns had been moved back behind the G.H.Q. Line, and were out of range.⁵⁹ The deadly gas enveloped the whole of the 15th Battalion's right company and most of the 8th Battalion's left one, as well as part of each unit's centre company. The damp cloths over their mouths and nostrils, untreated with any chemical, helped but little against the chlorine, and with eyes blinded and throats burning men collapsed on the floor of the trench in suffocating agony.

Behind the gas cloud came the German infantry wearing their mouth protectors. On the 8th Battalion's front they were met not only by the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade's shrapnel barrage but with steady enfilading small-arms fire from the right rifle company, which had escaped the gas. The men of the centre and left companies who were still able to fight manned the parapet and emptied their Ross rifles into the advancing enemy, desperately jarring loose with boot heel or entrenching-tool handle stubborn rifle bolts that repeatedly jammed with the rapid fire (below, p. 156). In the face of this unexpected resistance the attackers halted. The 2nd Brigade's line had held. But the 15th Battalion's right-hand company, which met the full force of the chlorine, was not only without artillery support but had no enfilading fire; for the platoons to the west, outside the gassed area, could not see the front of the attack. The few members of the company who had escaped death from shelling and gas fell back to the Stroombeek, where they joined survivors of the adjacent platoon from the centre company. Having broken through the 15th Battalion's line to a depth of some 700 yards the Germans mounted further attacks to reduce the apex. By 6:30 a.m. they had overrun the little band at the Stroombeek and were within 300 yards of Locality "C".⁶⁰

The initial attack against the north-western face of the apex, unaccompanied by any effective discharge of gas, had been repelled by determined rifle and machine-gun fire from across the entire front. Then the German guns came into action again and, aided by excellent observation from the Poelcappelle houses and without drawing any countering fire from Allied batteries, systematically shelled up and down the length of the trenches north-eastward from St. Julien. Casualties mounted rapidly amid the wreckage of the shallow trenches. At 8:30, when a lull in the bombardment presaged a renewed German assault, the 13th Battalion, whose position next to the apex was now vulnerable from both front and rear, was ordered back to the Gravenstafel Ridge. The three companies on the left fell back in good order; but of the exposed company on the right, only a dozen men reached the ridge. The Buffs' company at the tip of the apex, cut off and lacking a written order to retire, fought on alongside the remnants of the 15th Battalion's left company. Finally, surrounded on three sides by enemy, the surviving Buffs surrendered shortly after nine o'clock.⁶¹

As soon as the initial German attack was reported, the commanders of both brigades concerned had taken steps to reinforce the threatened front. Brig.-Gen. Turner, having received an erroneous report that the 2nd Brigade's left had been driven in, promptly released what remained of the 10th Battalion from its trenches south of Kitcheners Wood, with orders to move to Locality "C". At the same time Brig.-Gen. Currie placed under the command of the 8th Battalion a reserve company from each of the 5th and 7th Battalions. The platoons of the 8th Battalion's own reserve company were moved by the battalion commander to his left, first to help the 15th Battalion, and then in an attempt to seal his open flank.



The Loss of St. Julien, 24 April

Throughout the early hours of the 24th the left of the 3rd Brigade's line, from Keerselaere to Kitcheners Wood, had been under continual pounding by German artillery. An attempt by enemy infantry shortly after five o'clock to advance up the Steenbeek to St. Julien had been repulsed by rapid fire, as had a more general attack across the whole front about 8:30 a.m. About mid-morning the enemy returned to the attack, heralding his advance with a crushing bombardment of the entire Canadian position. The renewed assault fell on the battle-worn units of the 3rd Brigade, which was virtually without reserves. Near Keerselaere the enemy's progress was checked by the heroism of the 7th Battalion's Machine Gun Officer, Lieutenant Edward Bellew, who, though wounded and cut off from his battalion, kept his last gun firing with telling effect until out of ammunition. Then, having destroyed it, he met his opponents with fixed bayonet, and fought on until overpowered. Bellew remained a prisoner of war until 1919, and only then learned of his award of the Victoria Cross - the first won by an officer of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

Shortly after 11:00 a.m. the commanders of the 7th and 15th Battalions, and the second-in-command of the 14th, out of touch with 3rd Brigade Headquarters, conferred on the St. Julien-Gravenstafel road and decided to evacuate their exposed position and withdraw 300 yards to a new line south of the Gravenstafel Ridge. The right half of the line, consisting of the survivors of the 15th and 13th Battalions, fell back without great loss, but so closely were the Germans pressing the left that two companies of the 7th Battalion were overrun 500 yards north-east of St. Julien, the majority being taken prisoner. Yet the new position was equally untenable, for from the captured Canadian trench the enemy could sweep with fire the south side of the Ridge. At 12:30, after another consultation, the three commanders agreed on a further withdrawal, this time of 1000 yards to a line north of the Wieltje-Gravenstafel road. It was a fighting retirement, carried out by small parties falling back in a succession of short bounds while their comrades kept up a punishing fire that caused the troops of the 51st Reserve Division temporarily to abandon the attack until reinforced.⁶⁶

These reinforcements had been swarming westward from the 27th Reserve Corps' front, and shortly after midday, when the Canadian withdrawal had exposed the right of the St. Julien garrison, regiments of the 51st Reserve Division infiltrated into the village on three sides. Under frequent admonition to hold St. Julien to the last, the majority of the small garrison fought on until overwhelmed, the Germans entering the outlying houses about 3:00 p.m. At one o'clock Divisional Headquarters, having learned that the enemy was massing troops east of St Julien, had ordered General Turner not to counter-attack with the two battalions assigned to him from the York and Durham Brigade, but instead to utilize them "to strengthen your line and hold on".⁶⁷ Turner, understanding this to mean the G.H.Q. Line (an interpretation that a telephone conversation with Alderson's General Staff Officer seemed to confirm), at 1:40

issued an order to the two British units and the six Canadian battalions under his command to hold the G.H.Q. Line from the St. Jean-Poelcappelle road southward.⁶⁸

Over towards Kitcheners Wood the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Battalions had taken a heavy toll of the lines of German infantry advancing up the Steenbeek, while themselves under continual attack. Only the 2nd Battalion, on the left, was able to comply with the order to retire. Part of its right company and the two companies of the 3rd Battalion were under such intense fire from front and flank that they could only hold on to their positions, hoping for a counter-attack, and in the meantime continuing to kill Germans with machine-gun and rifle.

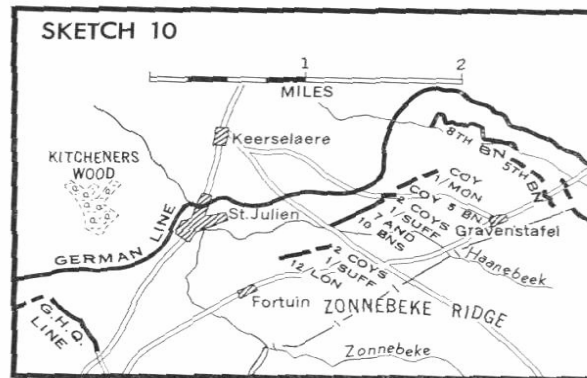
Brig.-Gen. Turner's misinterpretation of General Alderson's instructions was but one instance of the wide-spread misunderstanding and confusion which developed, as broken communications and delayed and often faulty reports spread a dense "fog of war" across the battle area, keeping the 2nd and 3rd Brigades at cross purposes for several hours. At nine that morning General Plumer had given the G.O.C. 27th Division, Major-General T.D.O. Snow, command of all troops in corps reserve, though notification of this appointment does not seem to have reached subordinate commands. At noon General Snow moved the 1st Royal Irish Regiment to a position north of Fortuin. Fortuin, a scattered group of farms and cottages centred half a mile south-east of St. Julien, was being held by 200 survivors of the 7th and 10th Battalions. Having no other reinforcements available, Snow next commandeered two battalions from the 28th Division's reserve and sent them to join the Irish, at the same time directing General Turner to take command of the three units and drive the enemy north-eastward, adding the admonition, "Act with vigour."⁶⁹ But the Canadian brigadier, unaware that General Snow's powers of command had been extended, and satisfied that his own actions accorded with General Alderson's designs, paid no attention to the message, other than to walk across (at 5:30 p.m.) and order the Irish Regiment to withdraw from the Fortuin area to the G.H.Q. Line at dusk. He saw no sign of the two battalions from the 28th Division.⁷⁰

Other British reinforcements were on the way. Two of the 150th Brigade's battalions - the 4th East Yorkshire and the 4th Green Howards (Yorkshire Regiment) -having "received a good many different orders", finally found themselves marching towards Fortuin, and they occupied positions on the left of the Royal Irish, facing St. Julien. Thus while the exhausted units of the 3rd Canadian Brigade were pulling back into the G.H.Q. Line, five British battalions had fortuitously and most fortunately intervened in the gap through which a resolute German advance could have cut off the 2nd Canadian Brigade and the neighbouring 28th Division. But lack of coordination was to dissipate their effectiveness.

As daylight on the 24th faded, General Currie's 5th and 8th Battalions were still holding firm in the original front line. But he had been much disturbed about his open left flank, where a company of the 5th Battalion at Boetleer's Farm and the survivors of the 7th Battalion's company at Locality "C" held the

THE SECOND BRIGADE HOLDS FIRM

2.00 A.M. 25 APRIL
1915



only remaining positions of the “subsidiary line” along Gravenstafel Ridge. All morning he had anxiously awaited the planned counter-attack by the two battalions of the York and Durham Brigade, and at about 1:00 p.m., when efforts by his rear headquarters staff at Wieltje had failed to urge these forward from the G.H.Q. Line, Currie took the extreme course of leaving his command post (which had been moved to 400 yards south of the Fortuin road junction) and going back himself, “it being thought”, he writes, “that they might move for me when unlikely to move for officers of lesser rank”.⁷¹ Before he went he left provisional instructions for his two front line battalions to fall back to the Gravenstafel Ridge, if necessary - an order which was not put into effect.⁷² Having failed to persuade Brig.-Gen. Bush (who had now received General Alderson’s order cancelling the counter-attack), Currie personally saw General Snow (about 3:30 p.m.) and gave him an appreciation of the situation, but could obtain no assistance from him.⁷³ The best he could do was to induce some stragglers from the 7th Battalion, who had lost their officers, to go forward and join the 8th Battalion.

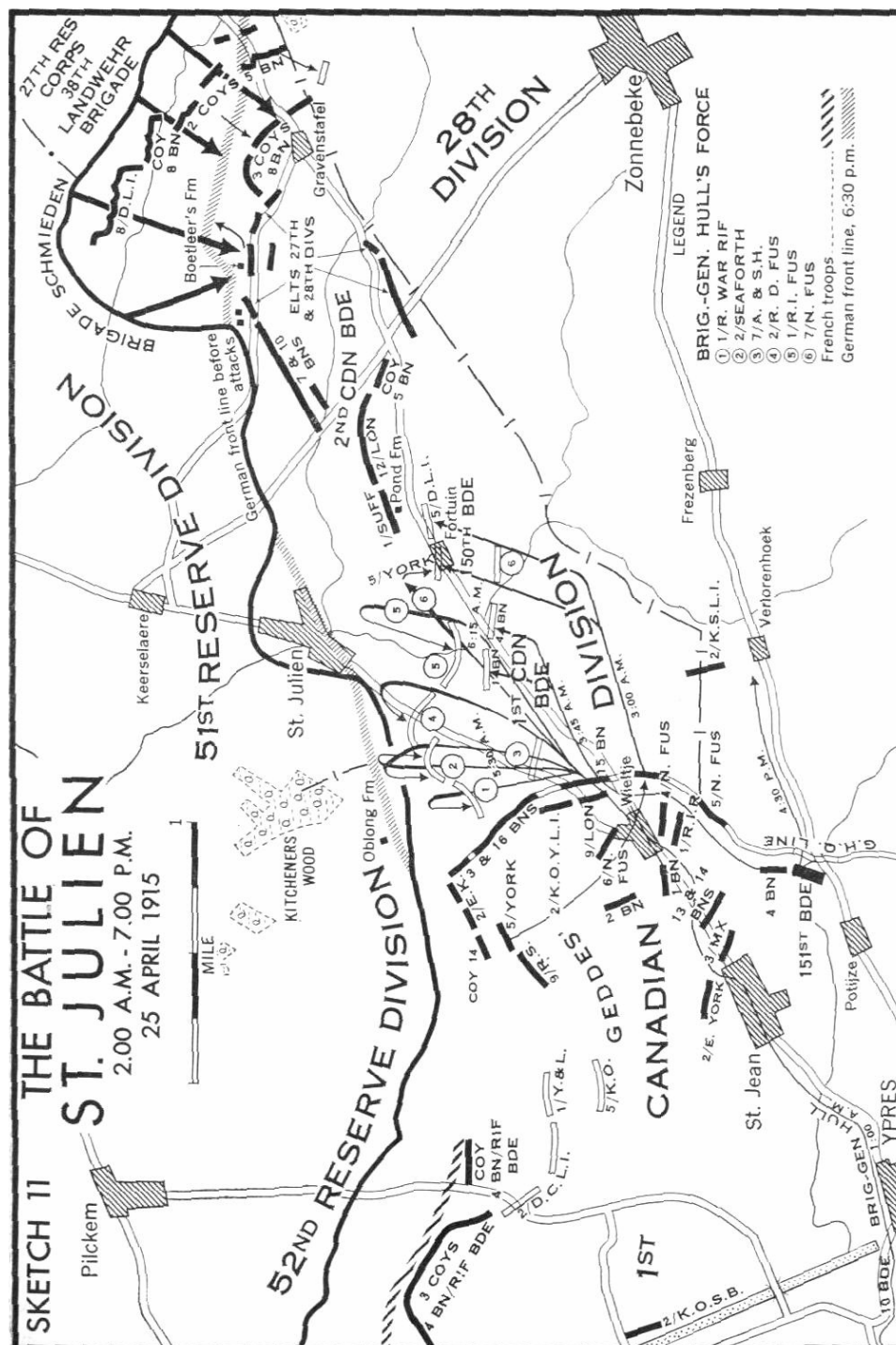
Meanwhile, the 2nd Brigade’s situation had improved with the arrival of the two units of the 28th Division - the 1st Suffolks and the 12th London (Rangers). South of Fortuin the two battalions had been diverted from their original mission by Currie’s brigade major. Continuing their march north-eastward they ran into increasingly heavy fire and finally entrenched just south of the Haanebeek, facing Locality “C”, which the Germans had at last captured. During the evening two Suffolk companies occupied the crest immediately west of Boetleer’s Farm. After midnight these were joined on the left by the weary remnants of the 7th and 10th Battalions, each about 150 strong, led forward personally by General Currie from the G.H.Q. Line, where they had been taken back in the late evening for a long overdue meal. With these reinforcements and other detachments provided by units of the 28th Division in response to the urgent appeals of the 8th Battalion’s CO. (Lt.-Col. Lipsett), a tenuous defence line was established along the 2nd Brigade’s left flank. Shortly before dawn the 8th Durham Light Infantry (of the 151st Brigade), sent forward by General Snow to reinforce the 85th Brigade, relieved the two gassed companies of the 8th Battalion in the front line, but daylight came before Lipsett’s right company could be replaced.

The bitterest fighting of the afternoon of the 24th took place south of St. Julien, where the two Yorkshire battalions had arrived in time to meet the fifth German attack of the day. As these Territorial units counter-attacked, they were aided by small-arms fire from the 3rd Brigade troops at the northern end of the G.H.Q. Line, and by the 18-pdrs. of the 5th and 6th Canadian Batteries, shooting over open sights. The enemy was driven back on the village, which, according to the German Official History, he was forced to evacuate. But the counter-attack had come too late to save the stubborn detachments left by the 2nd and 3rd Battalions between St. Julien and Kitcheners Wood; their magnificent resistance had ended an hour before when, with few survivors unwounded and their last machine-gun silenced, their isolated trench had been overrun by the 102nd Reserve Infantry Brigade. Yet this desperate stand and the appearance of the fresh British battalions were sufficient to prevent the execution of an order from the 26th Reserve Corps to retake St. Julien that night. This was most fortunate, for the gap had been partly reopened at seven o'clock when the two Yorkshire units, acting on instructions from General Turner relayed to them by the 1st Royal Irish Regiment, retired with that battalion to the G.H.Q. Line.

It was not until four o'clock that word of the complete withdrawal of the 3rd Brigade and its attached battalions reached General Alderson at the Château des Trois Tours. He had planned on using the 10th Brigade and the uncommitted part of the York and Durham (150th) Brigade to relieve Brig.-Gen. Turner and Geddes' Detachment that evening. In the changed circumstances he promptly ordered Turner to employ six and a half battalions that were "in and around Wieltje" to prevent a German break-through.⁷⁴ The message admitted "no exact knowledge of your situation at the present moment" - indeed two of the units referred to were the Yorkshire battalions which were then hotly engaged southwest of St. Julien. Meanwhile Sir John French had told General Smith-Dorrien to make every effort "to restore and hold line about St. Julien or situation of 28th Division will be jeopardised".⁷⁵ Sir John hoped that with the Germans being "a bit tired by now, and ... numerically inferior to us as far as we can judge", it would not be necessary for the 28th Division to evacuate its positions.⁷⁶ For the time being the understanding reached with General Foch (above, p. 68) remained in force. General Headquarters was continuing to receive from that commander assurances of an imminent and vigorous French offensive across the Yser Canal; a fresh division, the 153rd, was arriving, and a second would be near Poperinghe early next morning.⁷⁷

Complying with G.H.Q.'s orders, at half-past six General Plumer instructed General Alderson to launch the strongest possible counter-attack to retake St. Julien and "re-establish our trench line as far to the northward as possible", employing the 10th and 150th Brigades and six other battalions,* or

* The 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and the 9th London (Queen Victoria's Rifles) of the 13th Battalion; the 4th Canadian Battalion; the 1st Royal Irish Regiment (27th Division); and the 12th London (Rangers) and 1st Suffolk (28th Division).



such of them as could be assembled, under a selected commander. He might also call on the Northumbrian Division's other two brigades (the 149th and 151st), which were due to arrive that night about Potijze in corps reserve.⁷⁸ Alderson nominated Brig.-Gen. C.P.A. Hull (10th Brigade), and cancelled the relief of the 3rd Brigade and Geddes' Detachment. Allowing as much time as he dared for the complex task of marshalling the force (which was indeed more widely scattered than either he or Hull realized), and arranging for an artillery programme involving the guns of the Canadian and the 27th and 28th Divisions, in formal orders issued at 8:00 p.m. Alderson set the hour of assault at 3:30 a.m. on 25 April. The fifteen battalion commanders (the 10th Brigade had a Territorial battalion attached) were instructed to report to General Hull at his headquarters north-west of Ypres at nine o'clock.⁷⁹ But the delay in transmitting these orders - some units, as we have seen, had been taken from their own formations and attached to others, and at least two did not receive their orders till next day - and an ambiguity about the site of the rendezvous, resulted in only one battalion commander showing up. Hull therefore postponed the attack to 4:30 a.m. and went over to Wieltje to try and round up the rest of his force. At three o'clock he moved his headquarters to Mouse Trap Farm, and because of traffic congestion and the fact that his troops would have to defile through two gaps in the wire of the G.H.Q. Line, he put off the attack another hour, when it would be light.

Meanwhile the confusion brought about by contradictory, and often misinformed reports was growing worse. When 5th Corps Headquarters received General Snow's appreciation of the situation, it dispatched a wire to General Alderson shortly before midnight sharply criticizing the order sending the troops of the 3rd Brigade and its attached units back to the G.H.Q. Line, "thus giving up all the ground for which such a struggle has been made today and leaving the second bde. in the air". It ordered an immediate re-establishment of the line as far forward as possible, and if necessary the appointment of an officer to take command.⁸⁰ The directive made no reference to the forthcoming attack by Brig.-Gen. Hull (whose resources it was likely to affect). Alderson at once sent forward a senior staff officer with plenary powers. Brig.-Gen. Turner, however, at a loss to understand the attitude of General Snow and the apparent inconsistency between his instructions and those received from General Alderson, was on his way back to the Château des Trois Tours on a motor-cycle pillion, to ascertain exactly from whom he was supposed to take his orders. Unfortunately the resulting interview still left Alderson and Turner each convinced that the other did not understand what was happening.

The Counter-Attack by the 10th Brigade, 25 April

At 3:15 a.m., a little more than two hours before the time now scheduled for the attack, Brig.-Gen. Hull found himself with only the five battalions of his own 10th Brigade. Of the other ten units originally allotted to him, three were on

their way back, two were near Mouse Trap Farm in an exhausted state, two had been committed since early afternoon and the remaining three had been removed from Hull's command. Hull placed his four Regular battalions in front, and his Territorial unit (the 7th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders) in support to the left. Shortly before half-past five, shielded by an early morning mist, the assaulting troops marched out in fours from the G.H.Q. position, forming up to advance against Kitcheners Wood and St. Julien. Supporting artillery fire was inadequate, for not only had the batteries of the 2nd and 3rd Brigades C.F.A. and of the 27th and 28th Divisions, ignorant of the postponements of the time of attack, fired their preliminary bombardment two hours earlier, but a warning had been issued not to shell St. Julien because of a mistaken report by the 3rd Brigade that 200 Canadian infantry were still in the village.⁸¹ When early morning patrols of the 51st Reserve Division found the place abandoned, the Germans promptly set up machine-guns in the outlying houses.

As the British troops moved forward they encountered first sniping and then a rapidly increasing volume of rifle and machine-gun fire which halted and then cut down the leading waves, leaving the dead and wounded lying in long rows. On the right the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers and the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers were held 200 yards short of St. Julien; next to them the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders, though reinforced by the Argylls, were stopped 500 yards from Kitcheners Wood; and on the left the 1st Royal Warwickshire failed to reach Oblong Farm. Two battalions of the 149th (Northumberland) Brigade, ordered forward to add impetus on the right, lost direction and gained only casualties. By seven o'clock the attack had stalled and survivors were withdrawing in search of cover. At 9:15 a.m. on the 25th a message to the Canadian Division reported failure.⁸² A new line was consolidated extending from the G.H.Q. Line by Mouse Trap Farm to south of Fortuin, whence the two York and Durham battalions linked up with the entrenchments of the Suffolks and the London Rangers facing Locality "C". The operation had cost Hull's brigade 73 officers and 2346 other ranks. But though it had not gained its objectives it had at last blocked the gap at St. Julien. The Germans made no attempt to exploit their gains; indeed for the next ten days their progress on this part of the front was stayed.

The 10th Brigade's heroic effort on this Sunday morning, 25 April, had seriously disrupted the plans of Duke Albrecht, who having abandoned as unprofitable the offensive across the Yser Canal was concentrating on a southward thrust through St. Julien by the 26th Reserve Corps, with subsidiary attacks by the 27th Reserve Corps' right wing. But the striking power for the main blow was expended in stopping Hull's attack, and the only German gains that day were in the north-eastern part of the Salient.⁸³ There the enemy had planned converging attacks - one from the east against the face of the Salient at Broodseinde, the other southward against the Gravenstafel Ridge. At 9:00 a.m. a heavy bombardment on the trenches held by the 84th and 85th Brigades (28th Division) heralded the former assault, which was delivered about one o'clock on

a quarter-mile front north of Broodseinde by a regiment of the 53rd Reserve Division. Of the ground initially lost an immediate counter-attack recovered all but sixty yards of the front line, a portion which remained in German hands despite subsequent efforts to regain it.

Throughout the morning the same artillery bombardment had pounded the 2nd Brigade's front line and the ridge behind, while from Locality "C" German machine-gunners swept the Stroombeek valley with enfilading fire. By mid-afternoon large bodies of infantry were seen advancing from the direction of Poelcappelle, and soon the three companies holding the left end of the line were heavily engaged from front and flank. The attackers gained a footing at Boetleer's Farm and penetrated behind the two Durham companies before being stopped by rifle fire from the 8th Battalion's reserve companies and the various British detachments on the crest of the ridge. "Strong reinforcements" promised Brig.-Gen. Currie by Divisional Headquarters⁸⁴ did not materialize, and efforts to reinforce with detachments gathered locally were driven back by the withering fire that swept the open valley. The German shelling increased in fury and shortly after five o'clock the commanders of the three companies, cut off from communication with their battalions, agreed on withdrawal - about the same time that Currie was issuing orders for the evacuation of the front line at dusk. He had learned that the 151st Brigade would come under his tactical command and would occupy a switch-line from Gravenstafel to Fortuin and that one battalion for this task was already on the way.⁸⁵ He judged from this that the ridge was to be abandoned, and that therefore the retention of his exposed positions was hopeless. At about 6:00 p.m. the survivors of the two Territorial companies at the apex fell back through the left of the 8th Battalion's company. Only two of the Canadian platoons had retired when the Germans closed in and overran the rest of the company and a few Durhams who had remained behind to help cover their comrades' withdrawal.⁸⁶ The 5th Battalion's two front line companies began to fall back over the Gravenstafel Ridge, whence their reserve companies and those of the 8th Battalion had already retired. Later, however, the two battalion commanders, learning that the 85th Brigade on their right had received no orders to give ground, took some of their men forward again to cover Gravenstafel until replacements should arrive. To the west of Boetleer's Farm the two detached Suffolk companies withdrew soon after midnight, followed by the remnants of the 7th and 10th Battalions, which Currie reported as "simply blown out of their trenches by artillery fire".

The relief of the 2nd Canadian Brigade was not completed until early next morning, 26 April, when the last troops reached Wieltje. At 2:30 p.m. on the 25th General Plumer had ordered a redistribution of the forces holding the front line, which air reconnaissance, mistaking German-held trenches for British positions, had described as continuous and intact. The order, effective at 7:00 p.m., reduced the Canadian sector - which had been more than five miles long - to the two miles between Turco Farm and the Fortuin-St. Julien road, allotting

responsibility east of the road to Major-General E. S. Bulfin, G.O.C. 28th Division. To hold his left flank Bulfin was given the fresh 11th Brigade (4th British Division), which had reached his Vlamertinghe headquarters at noon, and pending its arrival in the line the 2nd Canadian Brigade would be under his command. Alderson's subsequent orders sent the 1st and 3rd Canadian Brigades out of the line for much-needed rest.⁸⁷ The 11th Brigade was delayed in moving forward; dawn was only an hour away when its right battalion dug in west of Berlin Wood, allowing the Canadian companies to complete their withdrawal. The main body of the 11th Brigade deployed along the Zonnebeke Ridge behind the 1st Suffolk and the 12th London (Rangers).

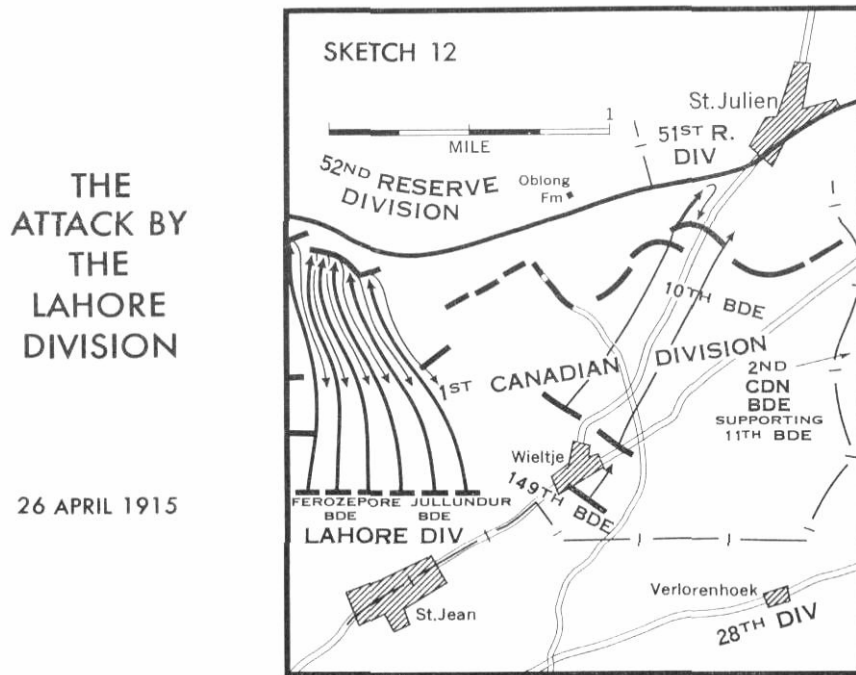
Daybreak of the 26th found the Germans in possession of the ridge westward from Gravenstafel; for the next seven days Berlin Wood was to mark the new apex of the Salient. There was a sorting out of units west of Fortuin as the readjustments ordered by General Plumer took effect and brigades resumed their normal composition. The 1st and 3rd Canadian Brigades had gone into reserve, each having sustained 1500 casualties.* The 10th Brigade took over the Corps flank from Fortuin to Mouse Trap Farm, and the 13th Brigade from there to the boundary with the French. The 2nd Canadian Brigade was still under the orders of General Bulfin, who moved it forward from Wieltje during the morning of the 26th to support the 28th Division's left. In this role it remained south of Fortuin suffering casualties until after dark on the 27th, when it crossed the canal into bivouac, having served thirteen days in the Salient.

The Lahore Division's Attack, 26 April

The events of the past four days had shown that hasty, isolated counter-attacks by infantry with insufficient artillery support could not stop the enemy's steady encroachment on the Salient, much less dislodge him from the ground he had gained. By the evening of 25 April, however, the arrival of three fresh Allied divisions made it possible to plan a counter-offensive of sufficient power to hold some promise of success.

An inter-Allied conference that afternoon agreed upon a joint scheme of attack, for which later in the day General Smith-Dorrien received the approval of the Commander-in-Chief, whose policy was still to hold the Salient if possible, provided the French regained all or a good part of the ground they had lost. General Putz planned to strike with six divisions, using one of his previously uncommitted formations on each flank. The 152nd Division with part of the battle-worn 5th Division would attack from the east side of the canal towards Pilckem at the same time as a British advance; on the left the newly arrived 18th Division, assisted by an assortment of French and Belgian units, would recapture Lizerne, Steenstraat and Het Sas and drive the Germans back over the canal; while in the

* The 3rd Brigade's Headquarters at Mouse Trap Farm was shelled and set on fire on the afternoon of the 25th. For his devotion in succouring the wounded on this occasion the 14th Battalion's Medical Officer, Captain F.A.C. Scrimger, was awarded the Victoria Cross.⁸⁸



centre the remainder of the Algerian Division and the 87th Territorial Division would stand west of the canal ready to cross at Boesinghe and join in a successful advance by the right.

The British attack would be made immediately east of the Ypres-Langemarck road by the Lahore Division, which had marched over from the Neuve Chapelle sector and at noon on the 25th was within five miles of Ypres. Its objective was the German line between the Langemarck road and Kitcheners Wood. The Indian division would remain directly under the Second Army, and General Smith-Dorrien's operation orders called on the 5th Corps to coordinate artillery support, and to launch an attack on the immediate right.⁸⁹ General Alderson accordingly directed the Northumberland Brigade to assault towards St. Julien astride the Wieltje road, and ordered the 10th Brigade to detail a battalion to advance between these two diverging efforts. Geddes' Detachment, in reserve at St. Jean, was to move to the G.H.Q. line to support the attack.⁹⁰ Except for the 3rd Brigade, placed in divisional reserve south of Wieltje, active participation by Canadian troops would be limited to the field artillery. The 1st Brigade C.F.A., west of the Yser Canal, was detailed to support the French; the Lahore Division's attack was supported by its own artillery, also west of the canal; and the remaining Canadian batteries covered the 5th Corps' front from St. Julien to west of Kitcheners Wood.

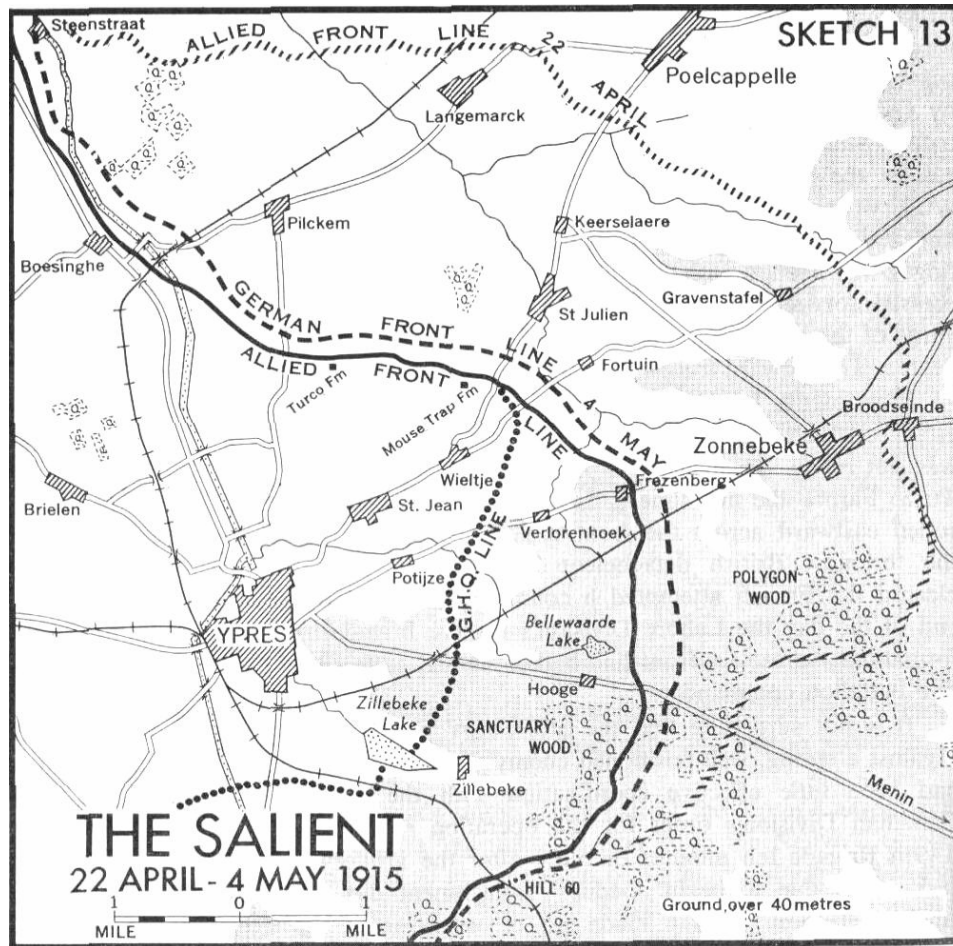
Unfortunately the time of the French attack, originally set for 5:00 p.m. on the 26th, was advanced three hours, thereby curtailing the already limited period available for the Lahore Division's preparations. Nevertheless by one o'clock the two assaulting Indian brigades (each consisting of one British

Regular, one British Territorial and three Indian battalions) were formed up side by side west of Wieltje in the valley behind Hill Top Ridge. They had already suffered casualties from enemy shelling, for their movements had been closely followed by German airmen. The objective was that of Geddes' Detachment three days before - the enemy trenches on Mauser Ridge - and as on that disastrous occasion the leading lines became targets for the German machine-gun and artillery fire as soon as they crossed Hill Top Ridge. Whole platoons were knocked out by single 5.9-inch howitzer shells and soon the valley between the ridges was heaped with the fallen. The British Regulars on either flank gallantly pressed forward through the 13th Brigade's forward positions to within 120 yards of the enemy line, the four battalions between them keeping up to a varying degree. The forward troops went to ground short of the German trenches.

West of the Langemarck road the French had made some progress; but the attack on their northern flank had been postponed an hour because the artillery was not ready. Then at 2:20 p.m. the Germans released chlorine north-west of Turco Farm - the first time it had been used defensively. As the poisonous cloud trolled eastward across the front it swept over the Lahore Division. All except the foremost British detachment fell back in confusion. After the gas had cleared the French attempted a counter-attack, which achieved nothing. By the end of the day the Lahore Division's reserve brigade had relieved the assaulting formations, whose six front line battalions had suffered 1829 casualties, including five battalion commanders.⁹¹

It is not surprising that the 5th Corps' attack on the right had also failed. Against a strong, well-positioned enemy with overwhelming artillery support there had been little effective coordination with the Lahore Division's effort. The Canadian Division's order for the operation reached both the C.R.A. and the 149th Brigade ten minutes or more after the artillery's and infantry's respective tasks were due to begin. Geddes' Detachment did not receive its final orders until 4:30 p.m. Having made no reconnaissance, the assaulting units (three battalions of Northumberland Fusiliers) lost time in getting through the narrow gap in the G.H.Q. Line and thereby missed what little artillery support there was. As the Fusiliers advanced astride the Wieltje-St. Julien road, German machine-guns to the front and left mowed them down. Among the killed was the brigade commander. Calls for reinforcements went unanswered, for the units of Geddes' Detachment, having received no briefing, were not at hand. Nor did the proposed battalion attack on the Lahore Division's immediate right take place, the 10th Brigade having received its orders too late to take action. At 7:30 p.m. on the 26th the Northumberland Brigade was ordered back to Wieltje, its three attacking battalions having suffered 1200 casualties.

A French report to General Joffre blamed their lack of success on the difficulties of command arising from a committal of newly-arrived brigades and units under commanders who, besides not knowing their troops, were also unfamiliar with the ground. Like the British reinforcements, their movements had seriously restricted by the canal, where crossings were easily shelled by the



Germans. Their only gain had been on their northern flank, where most of Lizerne had been captured.⁹² General Putz's orders for a renewal of the offensive on 27 April designated almost the same objectives, the same commanders and the same plan. It met with virtually the same negligible results. On his right the Lahore Division was called on to attack again, employing two brigades east of the Langemarck road. The assault was made at 1:15 p.m., but as on the previous day German shelling and small - arms fire halted the attackers well short of Mauser Ridge, taking a heavy toll.⁹³ General Smith-Dorrien, directed by Sir John French "to act vigorously with the full means available" in assisting the French, ordered the attack to be renewed at 6:30 p.m., reinforcing the Indian Division with a composite "brigade" formed from four casualty-ridden British battalions in the 5th Corps reserve.⁹⁴ Canadian artillery repeated its bombardment of the German trenches, but the devastating enemy fire broke up the composite "brigade's" attack with no gain. An earlier French attempt on the east side of the canal had also failed. Once again the only gleam of encouragement came from

General Putz's northern flank, where the French left wing completed the capture of Lizerne and regained Het Sas and the line of the canal northward to Steenstraat.

The operations on 27 April marked the last attempts by British infantry to regain the ground captured by the Germans on the 22nd and the following days. In an appreciation to G.H.Q. after the Lahore Division's unsuccessful attack of the 26th the Army Commander wrote, "I am doubtful if it is worth losing any more men to regain this French [sic] ground unless the French do something really big."⁹⁵ He pointed out that the German artillery's domination of the whole area as far back as Poperinghe (where he had his advanced headquarters) meant that the only position that the British could hold permanently would be the G.H.Q. Line from Wieltje to Potijze and thence a switch-line curving south-eastward through Hooge and behind Sanctuary Wood. He suggested a preliminary withdrawal of about 2500 yards from the eastern face of the Salient.

Sir John French's reply, as we have noted, was an order to intensify the British effort, and at 4:35 p.m. on the 27th he directed Smith-Dorrien to hand over the command of all troops engaged in the operation in the Ypres area to General Plumer, who would be responsible directly to G. H. Q.⁹⁶ The British C.-in-C. fully realized the precarious position of the troops in the Salient. His instructions from Lord Kitchener had emphasized that he must exercise "the greatest care ... towards a minimum of losses and wastage".⁹⁷ Yet he had been told also that "every effort must be made to coincide most sympathetically with the plans and wishes of our Ally", and he was under considerable pressure from General Foch (who was imbued with the French pre-war doctrine of the offensive on all occasions) to continue to attack. Both commanders, however, were alive to the danger of prolonged large-scale operations at Ypres weakening the proposed Artois offensive, which was then planned to start at the end of April. On the morning of 28 April orders reached the new "Plumer's Force" to take preliminary measures for a possible withdrawal from the Salient. General Foch protested vigorously, and in an interview at Cassel persuaded the British Field Marshal to postpone any move until the night of the 29th. (To General Joffre he reported, "I painted the picture of the consequences of withdrawal blacker than they appeared to me.")⁹⁸

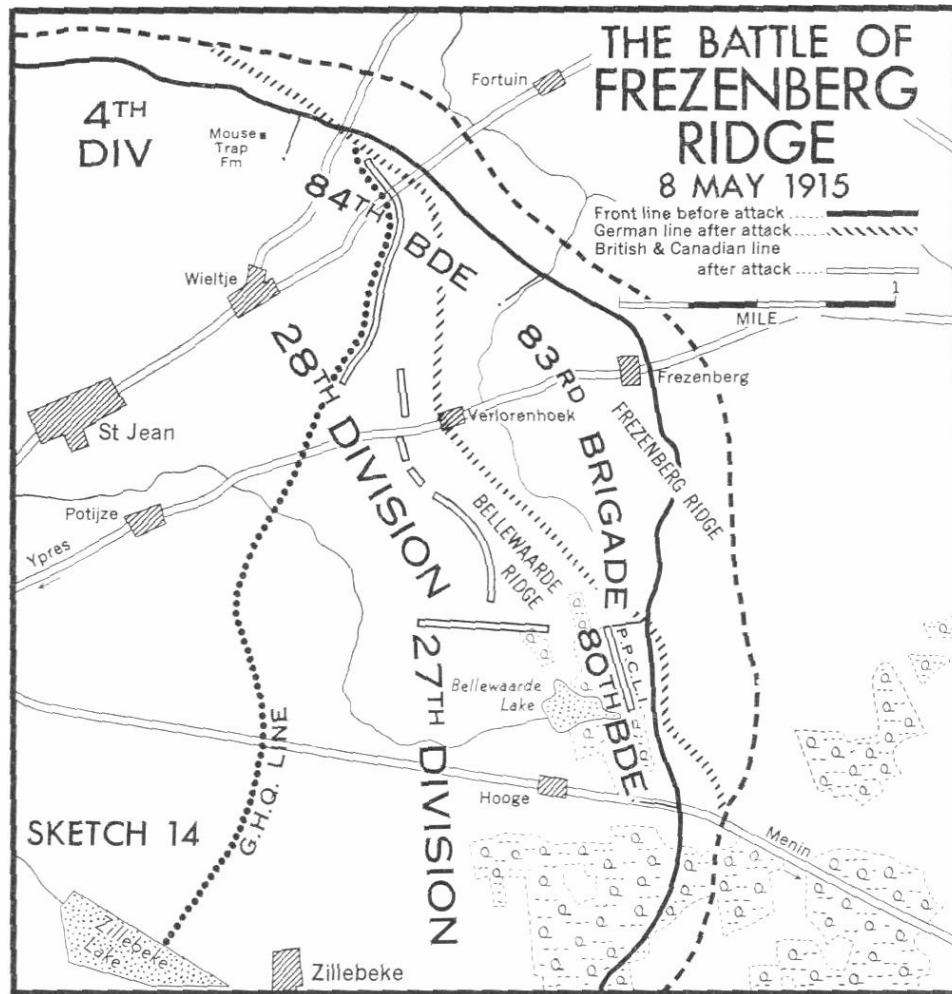
A French attack on the 28th achieved little, however, and an operation planned for next day was postponed to allow time for newly arrived artillery to register. Sir John agreed to delay the British retirement one more day, and when the 30th brought no French success, yet another 24 hours. This was the last postponement, for on 1 May Joffre overruled Foch, ordering that all resources be reserved for the coming attack on the Arras front and that he should "act on the defensive about Ypres". That evening General Plumer was ordered to begin the first stages of withdrawal preparatory to occupying a new line on the night of 3-4 May.

On the afternoon of the 2nd a shift of wind enabled the Germans to launch a strong attack with gas between St. Julien and Berlin Wood, on a three-mile front held by the three brigades of the 4th Division, all under General Alderson's command. But the trenches were far apart here and the fitful breeze dispersed the gas cloud so that only the trenches west of Mouse Trap Farm were affected; and Allied guns, which included all the Canadian field batteries, drove back the German infantry. The three Canadian infantry brigades, west of the canal, were alerted but were not required. In spite of another German attack on Berlin Wood the following afternoon, the 27th and 28th Divisions and the right of the Canadian Division carried out their planned withdrawal that night without the loss of a man. General Plumer's new line, a modification of that proposed earlier by General Smith-Dorrien, followed the recently manned front line from Turco Farm to Mouse Trap Farm,* continued south-eastward to Frezenberg and thence south to pass in front of Hooze and along the east edge of Sanctuary Wood, rejoining the old line 1000 yards north-east of Hill 60. At ten next morning the relief of the Canadian Division was completed as General Alderson handed over to the G.O.C. 4th Division. Only the Canadian Divisional Artillery remained in position attached to the British Division and covering the front between Mouse Trap and Turco Farms. Though the 4th Division's C.R.A. took over on 9 May, ten more days elapsed before the last Canadian batteries were withdrawn.

The P.P.C.L.I. in the Salient

The Battles of Ypres, 1915 were to continue for three more weeks, but in these later phases the only Canadian battalion engaged was Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. The unit had crossed to France as part of the 80th Brigade of the 27th Division, and from 7 January to 23 March 1915 had served in the St. Eloi sector. In this period its most significant operation had been a small local attack carried out by upwards of 100 Patricias on 28 February. At a cost of sixteen casualties (five of them fatal) they inflicted an unknown number of casualties on the Germans and destroyed thirty yards of enemy trench.¹⁰⁰ On 9 April, as the division relieved the French 17th Division in the Ypres Salient, the Patricias occupied positions in front of Polygon Wood, three miles south of the 2nd Canadian Brigade's right at Berlin Wood. During the bitter fighting on the northern flank the battalion was under repeated bombardments, and suffered 80 casualties. On the withdrawal of Plumer's Force on the night of 3-4 May the Patricias fell back to Bellewaarde Ridge, half a mile north-east of Hooze on the Menin Road. Here on 4 May, before there was time to develop their unfinished, shallow trenches, they suffered 122 casualties in the shelling and machine-gun fire that accompanied the enemy's follow-up.

* On the moonlit night of 28-29 April three battalions of the 1st Canadian Brigade, with the 2nd Battalion acting as a covering party had dug a traversed trench 1200 yards long between Hampshire and Turco Farms. By this achieve important ground was gained without a casualty.⁹⁹



On 8 May a violent bombardment of the whole 5th Corps front heralded a major German assault. Duke Albrecht had ordered three converging attacks to reduce the Salient - the 26th Reserve Corps to advance from the north against the sector Mouse Trap Farm to Frezenberg; the 27th Reserve Corps to make the central and main attack westward between Frezenberg and Bellewaarde Lake; and the 15th Corps to break through north-westward between Bellewaarde and Zillebeke Lakes. The 27th and 28th British Divisions were thus under attack by at least six German divisions.¹⁰¹ As a preliminary, in three gas attacks on 5 May the 15th Corps had captured Hill 60.

The brunt of the main onslaught on the 8th fell on the 28th Division's 83rd and 84th Brigades holding Frezenberg Ridge. Two assaults were beaten back, but the third overwhelmed the front line, and by mid-morning Frezenberg had fallen. Before noon the Germans had penetrated nearly a mile and were in

Verlorenhoek. They advanced no farther, but by mid-afternoon they had widened their breach of the Salient to a gap of two miles and had begun rolling up the British line on either flank.

In their positions on Bellewaarde Ridge at the 27th Division's extreme left the Patricias with the 80th Brigade's other front-line battalion, the 4th King's Royal Rifle Corps, on their right, held the southern shoulder of the gap. The devastating fire that the enemy concentrated on the British trenches from the Menin Road to Frezenberg obliterated whole sections of the P.P.C.L.I. front line on the forward slope of the ridge. Two of the units four machine-guns were put out of action and casualties were so heavy that Major Hamilton Gault, who had taken over command of the regiment on 5 May, ordered signallers, pioneers, orderlies and batmen forward into the support trenches. When the Germans launched their main assault at 9:00 a.m., the Patricias' steady rifle fire drove them back on the left; but on the right the enemy gained a footing, compelling a retirement to the main defence line on the crest. Here the battalion, reinforced by a company from the 4th Rifle Brigade, stood unflinchingly for the rest of the day, enduring repeated bombardments and beating back every German attempt to advance from the captured trenches.¹⁰² During the afternoon the left flank, drawn back to face the danger from the north,^{*} was extended by reserve battalions of the 80th and 81st Brigades. These units linked up with counter attacking battalions of the 85th Brigade in the centre to seal off the German encroachment. East of Mouse Trap Farm a heroic stand by the 2nd Northumberland Fusiliers, when the remainder of the 84th Brigade's front-line battalions were annihilated, held firm the northern shoulder of the gap. On the 4th Division's front west of Mouse Trap Farm British artillery (including eight Canadian field batteries) broke up the infantry attack which followed the early morning bombardment.

When the Patricias were relieved shortly before midnight, their total trench strength was four officers and 150 men. The day's casualties totalled 392. For the last few days of the Battle of Frezenberg Ridge (which ended on 13 May) they formed a composite unit with the 4th King's Royal Rifles, which had shared their valiant stand on Bellewaarde Ridge. On 24 May, when the Fourth Army again attacked the 5th Corps, releasing a heavy concentration of chlorine along a front of 4-1/2 miles (the largest scale yet attempted), the 27th Division was in corps reserve. The Germans captured Mouse Trap Farm and Bellewaarde Ridge, breaking through on both sides of Bellewaarde Lake. Late on the 24th the 80th Brigade made an unsuccessful counter-attack, the Patricias being held in brigade reserve. This operation, named the Battle of Bellewaarde Ridge, ended the Battles of Ypres, 1915. A successful counter-thrust by the French on 15 May had driven the Germans back over the canal about Steenstraat. But the Allies regained no more ground. For the next two years the opposing lines around the Salient were to remain virtually unchanged.

^{*} Remnants of the 83rd Brigade's two right-hand battalions, cut off when the enemy broke through the centre, continued to fight from isolated positions on the Patricias' left.¹⁰³

The successful defence of the Ypres Salient in the spring of 1915 stands as triumph for the common soldier and his commanders at the regimental and brigade level. At this stage of the war commanders of formations larger than brigades could very rarely exercise effective control of large-scale defensive operations. The absence of adequate air observation and aerial photography made it impossible to determine accurately the enemy's dispositions (or indeed those of our own troops, who had as yet no means of communicating with aeroplanes). The problem presented by this dearth of information was intensified by the deficiencies in signal communications-to the extent that divisional and corps commanders could do little more than pass on the Army Commander's instructions for counter-attacks to be made and try to keep what reinforcements were available moving to the battle area, leaving the tactical employment of these forces almost entirely to the subordinate commanders on the spot. The failure to commit these reinforcements as complete brigades under their own headquarters imposed on the staffs of the formations to which individual units were attached an almost impossible task in the exercise of control and the passage of information and orders. In some cases staffs found their brigades increased by these attachments to twice their normal strength or more.

With no corresponding increase in the administrative services the problems of supply and evacuation reached almost insuperable proportions. An examination of the tactical situation after the first gas attack reveals the dilemma that faced General Plumer. The main pressure had come down on the flank of the Canadian Division, constricting the divisional area to half its normal width. Alderson had to fight along the whole six miles of this front-to-a-flank, moving his reinforcements and supply up through the long narrow sector which ran across the front of the enemy. In this situation Plumer can be criticized for making no change of divisional boundaries throughout the whole of the Battle of St. Julien, during which the 27th and 28th Divisions enjoyed relative quiet. An extension of the 28th Division's front to include the Gravenstafel-St. Julien sector would have greatly facilitated command and supply by sharing the load. As it was, confusion increased when, unknown to the brigade commanders fighting in the line, the corps reserve was placed in the hands of the G.O.C. 27th Division, who was unfamiliar with the sector of the attack and the troop dispositions there. That break-through succeeded break-through at the apex is not surprising. What does surprise is that Currie and his 2nd Brigade hung on so long. In spite of an apparent lack of sound thinking at Corps level, the day was saved by the improvisation of the leaders on the spot - Alderson, Turner and Currie, Snow, Geddes and Hull - that, and the extraordinary slowness of Duke Albrecht's men to capitalize on their early successes.

The movement of substantial reserves into the threatened area was opposed by both the French and British commands, for General Foch did not wish to weaken the projected Artois offensive, and Sir John French would not sanction a further expenditure of British troops unless the French first regained the lost shoulder of the Salient. But these decisions were not immediately known to the hard-pressed defenders of the Salient. Their task was clear - "hold the line

at all costs". And hold it they did, in the face of an enemy who by employing Superior numbers of infantry supported by a preponderance of heavy artillery and machine-guns was attempting to exploit the advantage gained by his introduction of poison gas into modern warfare. Fortunately the Germans had wasted the potentialities of their new weapon, and the "paralyzing surprise" of its first appearance could never be repeated.

The significance of the Canadian effort lies in the determined stand made during the first three days of the battle. By 25 April enough British and French reinforcements had arrived to end the danger of a German break-through and to make possible an orderly withdrawal to a shorter line of defence. "The Canadians had many casualties", announced a War Office communique, "but their gallantry and determination undoubtedly saved the situation."¹⁰⁵

Once again Ypres had been held. To our Belgian allies the retention of the city and the Salient meant above all that there was still Belgian territory untrodden by the Prussian heel; to the strategic planners Ypres in Allied hands blocked a German advance to the Channel ports and maintained the threat of an Allied drive towards Lille and Brussels. The cost had been high. The B.E.F.'s total losses at Hill 60 and in the battles of Ypres, from 22 April to 31 May, numbered 59,275 all ranks.¹⁰⁶ During the 1st Canadian Division's period in the line (15 April-3 May), Canadian casualties (not including those of the P.P.C.L.I.) numbered 208 officers and 5828 other ranks, infantry losses being almost equally distributed between the three brigades. The P.P.C.L.I., in their longer period in action with the 27th Division (10 April-21 May), suffered 678 casualties.¹⁰⁷ Against these losses must be set the immense gain in stature which their achievements had brought the Canadians. Henceforth their morale would be high, for they had proved themselves more than a match for the enemy and not less than the equal of their Allied comrades in arms. In their first major operation of the war Canadian soldiers had acquired an indomitable confidence which was to carry them irresistibly forward in the battles which lay ahead.