

CHAPTER IV

FESTUBERT AND GIVENCHY, 1915

(See Map 2 and Sketches 15-22)

The Artois Offensive Begins

While the Second British Army was still fighting in defence of Ypres, and possession of Frezenberg Ridge remained in doubt, on the B.E.F.'s right wing the First Army, in cooperation with the French, had begun the long-planned offensive in Artois.

The main effort was to be made in the French Tenth Army's sector, south of the La Bassée Canal. Here, between Lens and Arras, where the eastern edge of the Artois plateau sloped down into the Douai plain, the German Sixth Army was holding a salient seven miles wide and four deep. The principal target was Vimy Ridge, which formed a barrier five miles long across the salient. A five-day bombardment preceded the French attack, which was made by eight assaulting divisions at mid-morning on 9 May, after bad weather had postponed it two days. In the centre a corps of three divisions under General Henri-Philippe Pétain, aided by subsidiary attacks on either flank, broke through the German defences to a depth of two and a half miles, and almost gained the crest of the Ridge. But reserve formations, held seven miles to the rear, came forward too late to exploit this success, and the arrival of German reinforcements turned the battle into an inconclusive struggle which brought the French only heavy losses.¹ The wearing-down process continued until 15 May, to be resumed a month later for another four days unproductive of results. By that time French casualties numbered more than 100,000, the Germans having lost about three quarters of that number.

The nature of the British contribution to the offensive had been settled between General Foch and Sir John French during April. The latter's orders to General Haig called for the First Army to breach the German defences at two points 6000 yards apart, north and south of Neuve Chapelle, to be followed by converging advances to the Aubers Ridge, 3000 yards distant. From there the attack would continue across the La Bassée-Lille road to the line of the Haute Deule canal, six miles from the start line.² Unlike the French, who had abandoned the short bombardment in favour of a prolonged artillery preparation of the enemy's positions, the British decided to preface their attack with an intense bombardment of only forty minutes. The choice was influenced partly by the shortage of heavy

THE FRONT FROM YPRES TO ARRAS

9 MAY 1915



artillery and ammunition (a deficiency intensified by the operations at Ypres), and also by the hope of gaining maximum surprise for the assaulting infantry. At the battle of Neuve Chapelle, British guns had failed to give rapid and accurate support to the infantry when they were held up by enemy strong-points; it was hoped to remedy this situation by providing "infantry artillery consisting of batteries of trench mortars and 3-pounder mountain guns card in lorries or armoured cars. Much preliminary work went into giving the infantry suitable assembly trenches and jumping-off places, and supplying them with assault equipment and adequate reserves of ammunition, rations and engineer stores; for after Neuve Chapelle G.H.Q. had expressed confidence that "by means of careful preparation as regards details and thorough previous registration a the enemy's trenches by our artillery, it appears that a sector of the enemy's front line defence can be captured with comparatively little loss".³

But the Germans too had been busy. On the opposing front formations of the Sixth Army's 7th Corps had strengthened their foremost breastwork considerably and more than doubled the width of their barbed wire entanglement. Carefully sited to cover these were each battalion's two machine-guns, placed to fire through steel-rail loopholes close to ground level. Two hundred yards to the rear, at the base of a second breastwork nearing completion, were dug-outs each holding twenty to thirty men ready to garrison the front line immediately the Allied bombardment stopped. Half a mile behind the front trench were concrete machine gun nests, 1000 yards apart, which would serve as rallying posts in case of a break-through.⁴

The Battle of Aubers Ridge, 9 May 1915

At 5:00 a.m. on the 9th six hundred guns burst into a furious bombardment across the First Army's front. Forty minutes later the assaulting infantry began crossing the 200 yards of no man's land, the men extended to an interval of three paces, and in six lines about fifty yards apart. On the right the Indian and the 1st Corps each attacked with one division: the northern assault was made opposite Fromelles by a division of the 4th Corps. Neither succeeded. The short British artillery preparation, its effectiveness impaired by worn out gun-barrels and faulty ammunition, had failed to destroy the German defences, so that many of the garrison had returned to their forward positions before the bombardment ended.⁵

In the southern attack the first three lines of assaulting troops were mown down by rifle and machine-gun fire from front and flank, and the fourth wave was cut to pieces by German field artillery. At the few points where the attackers did penetrate the front breastwork they were quickly killed or captured. A second attempt made after a new bombardment was equally disastrous. When it ended, the casualties of the nine assaulting battalions of the 1st and Indian Corps exceeded 3100 officers and men.⁶

The attack on the left by the 4th Corps had fared little better. Three of the five assault battalions gained small lodgements beyond the first breastwork but were then cut off as heavy fire from German positions still intact halted all further movement. From army headquarters General Haig, intent on assisting the progress of the French fifteen miles to the south, ordered the assault renewed in both sectors. Once again German riflemen and machine-gunners, seeing no man's land filled with extended lines of men following closely behind one another, took a terrible toll. An Indian brigade lost a thousand men in a few minutes. Only part of the first wave gained a footing in the enemy trenches, and without support these troops were soon overpowered. Survivors withdrew to their own positions after dark. The battle of Aubers Ridge was not renewed. In twelve hours of fighting the First Army had gained no ground and had suffered more than 11,000 casualties.⁷ It was a costly demonstration of the futility of pitting unsupported massed manpower against skilfully applied firepower.

Yet Haig recognized the need for continuing the First Army's active operations, if only to meet the demands of General Joffre, who was accusing the British of not "pulling their weight" and thereby upsetting his plans. It seemed the right time to be maintaining pressure on the Western Front, for the enemy's attention was directed to the east, where on 2 May a powerful Austro-German offensive had been launched in the Gorlice-Tarnow sector in Galicia (below, p. 118). For this undertaking von Falkenhayn had withdrawn from opposite the French all the divisions he could spare. When the British struck, the Sixth Army had alerted its only two reserve divisions in the neighbourhood, but the fact that on the evening of 9 May these could be diverted southward from in front of the B.E.F.⁸ to reinforce the Arras-Vimy sector increased the urgency of Joffre's appeals for British action. The failure at Aubers Ridge convinced Haig that it was impracticable for the First Army to press two attacks simultaneously on a wide frontage against such strong defences. He therefore abandoned the effort on his left wing in order to concentrate his resources on a three-mile front between Neuve Chapelle and Festubert, a village one and a half miles north of the La Bassée Canal.

General Joffre was anxious that the First Army should either strike at once or extend its front south of the La Bassée Canal so as to relieve a French division for action in the Vimy offensive. In order that General Haig might carry out the attack in his own time, Sir John French agreed to the latter alternative. He was exceedingly short of troops, for the long awaited divisions of the New Armies were being retained in England, ostensibly because Lord Kitchener feared an invasion as soon as the German striking force returned from the Russian front, but in reality because they were deficient in guns, rifles, and above all, ammunition. Sir John named the Canadian Division, which had been reorganizing south of Bailleul, to relieve the French 58th Division on the British right.⁹ But the Canadian artillery was still in action at Ypres and at Ploegsteert (where a composite C.F.A. brigade had relieved a brigade of the 4th (British) Divisional Artillery on 10 May), and the French would not leave their own guns behind. Accordingly the relief was carried out by the 1st (British) Division, which on the night of 14-15 May took over 5500 yards of the French line. Holding the front from the canal to Festubert was the 47th Division, and north of this was the 1st British Corps, with which General Haig planned to make his attack.¹⁰

The disaster of 9 May had brought an important change in British tactics. On the 11th Sir Douglas recorded in his diary:

The defences in our front are so carefully and so strongly made, and mutual support with machine-guns is so complete, that in order to demolish them a long methodical bombardment will be necessary by heavy artillery (guns and howitzers) before Infantry are sent forward to attack.

He purposed using 60-pounder guns in addition to the 15-inch siege howitzers, and accurately observing the result of every shot to ensure that the enemy's strong points had been demolished before the infantry attacked.¹¹ In formally approving "a deliberate and persistent attack" in which the enemy would "be

gradually and relentlessly worn down by exhaustion and loss until his defence collapses”, Sir John French noted that surprise would be lacking because of the long bombardment and he therefore prescribed only a limited objective, entailing an advance of about 1000 yards—one third the distance contemplated in the battle of Aubers Ridge.¹² The distinction between semi-open warfare and semi-siege warfare had at least been recognized. For the first time in the war British forces were to engage in a battle of “attrition”.

The Battle of Festubert, 15-25 May

On the morning of 13 May, 433 howitzers and guns began a systematic bombardment of the German defences on a 5000-yard frontage extending northward from Festubert. The fire was slow and deliberate (50 rounds per howitzer in each 24 hours) in order that the effect upon the German defences might be carefully observed. Six-inch howitzer batteries concentrated on the enemy parapet; 4.5-inch pieces bombarded the support and communication trenches. The field guns went to work on the wire entanglements and harassed enemy troops by spraying the communication trenches with shrapnel. This “wearing-down” preparation continued for the prescribed 36 hours, and was prolonged another 24 hours at the request of one of the assaulting divisions. During the sixty hours the artillery of the 1st Corps expended just over 100,000 rounds of ammunition.

The infantry attacked on the night of 15-16 May. General Haig’s plan called for the 2nd Division on the left to launch a midnight assault on a front of 1300 yards: the Meerut Division of the Indian Corps would cover the left flank. At daybreak the 7th Division (which did not know the ground well enough for a night attack) would join in on the right, attacking on a half-mile front, while the 2nd Division advanced to the second objective, the line of la Quinque Rue, which ran north-eastward from Festubert.¹³ Both attacks would fall on the German 14th Infantry Division, which was holding the front from south of the La Bassée Canal to the Ferme du Bois, two miles north-east of Festubert, with the 16th, 56th and 57th Infantry Regiments. Farther north the 13th Infantry Division faced the Indian Corps.¹⁴

The 2nd and Meerut Divisions’ use of darkness to gain surprise - it was the first British night attack of the war - was partly successful. The right brigade reached the German breastwork in silence and secured it and the support line as planned. But on the northern flank a preliminary demonstration by the Lahore Division with small-arms fire only alerted the Germans, who drove back the two assaulting brigades on the left with heavy fire. The 7th Division advanced at 3:15 a.m., substituting a field artillery barrage for the surprise which would have attended a silent assault in the dark. The German front breastwork was carried, and the right-hand brigade reached its final objective along la Quinque Rue. Elsewhere the advance was halted by determined fire from unmolested German positions in the gap between the 2nd and 7th Divisions’ sectors. Two attempts during the 16th to link the adjacent flanks of the two divisions failed. That night, however, the Germans abandoned any hope of regaining their lost trenches and

on orders from the G.O.C. 14th Infantry Division withdrew on a 3000-yard front. Their new line of resistance, which for several days the British were unable to identify accurately, opposite Festubert lay some 500 yards behind la Quinque Rue, but farther north it swung to the west of that road to include their strong position at Ferme du Bois.

Interpreting the German withdrawal as a sign that the enemy's resistance was breaking down,¹⁵ at mid-morning on the 17th the Army Commander ordered the 1st Corps to consolidate a strong front along la Quinque Rue, with brigadiers on the spot pressing on if opportunity offered. At the same time he placed the 3rd Canadian Brigade at the disposal of the G.O.C. 1st Corps, who detailed it as divisional reserve to the 7th Division. The general direction of advance was to swing to the south-east, Sir John French having changed the First Army's ultimate objective from Aubers Ridge to La Bassée, in order to gain access to the area south of the canal.¹⁶ But efforts to get forward failed, and that evening General Haig ordered a fresh infantry attack, preceded by a deliberate bombardment, to take place on the 18th. The Corps Commander named the 3rd Canadian Brigade to assault on the 7th Division's front; immediately on the left the 2nd Division would attack with the 4th Guards Brigade.¹⁷ Because of early morning fog the artillery preparation was postponed and zero hour for the infantry assault was set at 4:30 p.m.

The main attack would be launched at the centre of the 1st Corps front to secure a mile of la Quinque Rue. In a subsidiary effort farther north the Indian Corps was to capture Ferme du Bois. Because the 7th Division's front line was much closer to the road (which angled towards the north-east), the 3rd Brigade was given the additional task of occupying the North Breastwork (a section of the original German line running east and north-east from la Quinque Rue), and at the end of this Breastwork an orchard which was known to be defended.¹⁸ Brig.-Gen. Turner's plan for the Canadian assault called for two companies of the 14th Battalion on the left and one from the 16th Battalion on the right to attack eastward to the road and the orchard beyond. In the meantime another company of the 16th would make a long detour through Festubert village to take the North Breastwork from the south-west and link up with the frontal attack.¹⁹

General Haig's final orders were not issued until 1:55 p.m., and by the time these had reached the infantry brigades and the supporting artillery, zero hour was fast approaching. A two-hour bombardment scheduled to begin at 2:30 was an hour late in starting,²⁰ and the Canadian frontal assault did not begin until 5:25 p.m.²¹ By that time the Guards Brigade had been halted by machine-gun fire from the new German positions, which because their location was not yet known to the artillery had survived the bombardment without serious damage.

The 14th Battalion's frontal attack across water-logged fields devoid of cover met the same fire from unlocated machine-guns, and was deflected to the south. Then the German artillery opened up, bringing organized forward movement to a halt about 400 yards from the jumping-off trenches. The

adjoining company of the 16th Battalion by following a communication trench reached la Quinque Rue and deployed along it. Here they were joined by their flanking company, which had made an encircling two-mile approach through Festubert. It came under heavy shelling at the western end of the North Breastwork - one German salvo caused 47 casualties-and without supporting fire was unable to advance any farther.²² Although neither the 1st nor the Indian Corps had gained its objectives, the 3rd Brigade's advance had reduced the gap between the 2nd and 7th Divisions. In a downpour of rain relieving companies of the 16th Battalion dug throughout the night to consolidate the gains into a continuous line. The Germans gave full credit to their artillery for stopping the Canadians. "They encountered such an effective barrage", writes the historian of the 57th Infantry Regiment about the 3rd Brigade, "... that the attack collapsed after a few minutes and was not again renewed against the regiment's position".²³

During the night (18-19 May) the 2nd Canadian Brigade took over positions on the 3rd Brigade's right. This was part of a series of reliefs in which the 2nd and 7th Divisions (less their artillery) were replaced in the line by the 51st (Highland) and the 1st Canadian Divisions. The Army Commander grouped the two relieving divisions and the 2nd and 7th Divisional Artilleries under General Alderson's command "for an active offensive movement", designating the temporary corps "Alderson's Force".²⁴ Alderson retained operational control of his own division, while the Indian Corps took over the administration of the Canadian and Highland Divisions. But the experimental grouping did not prove successful. With no corps staff Alderson had to use his own chief staff officer, with resulting disorganization of his divisional headquarters.²⁵ "Alderson's Force" was to last only four days.

In the meantime the enemy had been busy bringing in all available reserves to restore a situation which local commanders regarded as precarious. From the evening of 16 May reinforcing units of company or battalion strength came in piecemeal from the north, some marching, more distant ones by rail. The 2nd Guard Reserve Division, a veteran formation of the 1914 fighting, which had been brought from Alsace on 14 May as reserve for the defenders of Vimy Ridge, marched to La Bassée on the 18th. It gradually relieved the 14th and the leftwing of the 13th Divisions, its 55th Reserve and 15th Reserve Regiments taking over the line opposite the Canadians and the 2nd British Division.²⁶

General Alderson's first assignment on taking over his new command on the morning of 20 May called for an advance of from 600 to 1000 yards against objectives 3000 yards apart. Later First Army modified these requirements, as the 51st Division's relief of the 2nd Division was delayed. At 3:00 p.m. Alderson ordered the two Canadian brigades in the line to assault at 7:45 that evening. On the right the 2nd Brigade was directed to seize a point (K.5 on the map)* near the junction of the new and old German front lines. At the same time the 3rd Brigade

* On the trench maps in current use topographical features and other tactical objectives were indicated by a letter and number, e.g., J.1, J.2, etc. The letters distinguished narrow sectors of the front in alphabetical order from right to left: numbers read consecutively from the British front line out into enemy territory.

was to secure half a mile of the enemy's new front line and capture Canadian Orchard (as it came to be called) and an adjoining building (M.10).²⁷ Farther north the Indian Corps would again try to take Ferme du Bois. The operation would be preceded by a comprehensive artillery programme involving all the guns and howitzers of the First Army.

It was still broad daylight when the attack started, after a bombardment which had begun at 4:00 p.m. In the 3rd Brigade's sector it was the same story of men advancing magnificently against a hail of machine-gun bullets. On the left the two assaulting companies of the 16th Battalion reached the orchard, and quickly clearing it of its surprised defenders dug in within a hundred yards of the main German line. The nearby house at M.10 was found to be well protected by barbed wire and strongly garrisoned, and attempts to cross the intervening open ground had to be abandoned. The 15th Battalion's advance on the right had been made across open fields that gave no cover from the eyes of the German machine-gunners and artillery observers. Casualties mounted rapidly as the two companies of Highlanders pressed forward in short 20-yard dashes. They gained and crossed the North Breastwork, but were halted 100 yards beyond. As night closed in supporting companies came forward to consolidate what had been won.²⁸

The 2nd Brigade's attack, which was assigned to two companies of the 10th Battalion, was doomed to failure before it started. In an afternoon reconnaissance Brig .-Gen. Currie had been unable to identify his objective, which was shown as a small circle on the map. (A major disadvantage of this method of designating positions was the use of the same symbol regardless of the nature of the feature to be identified. To confuse matters further, the Festubert trench map was full of inaccuracies, with errors in position amounting to as much as 450 yards. Furthermore, it was printed upsidedown, with the north at the bottom of the sheet and the east on the left.)²⁹ The assembly trenches were badly breached and under fire, as was a shallow communicating ditch which provided the only semblance of a covered approach to his target. Currie therefore asked for the attack to be postponed until next day, but was refused. Even his expected fire support was reduced. The original artillery plan had included a blasting of K.5 by two 9.2-inch howitzers, but this was cancelled lest the necessary withdrawal of Canadians from the danger zone near such a bombardment should alert the Germans, who from Aubers Ridge could look right into the First Army's positions. The 10th Battalion's attacking party cleared the communication trench of enemy for 100 yards, but as the brigade bombers emerged in single file into the open they came under a storm of fire from machine-guns on built-up positions which had been unharmed by our artillery. Seeing the leaders all shot down, the company commander halted the suicidal advance and ordered the gains made good.³⁰

A proposed early morning renewal of the attack on the 21st was postponed till nightfall in order to allow for a more deliberate bombardment. The First Army's order for the operation required "Alderson's Force" to secure K.5

and M.10 and the intervening 1500 yards of front trench which barred access to the Rue d'Ouvert, leading south-eastward to La Bassée. From K.5 the new German line ran north-eastward along the South Breastwork, forming a sharp salient with the old front line. Enemy records show that the "Stutzpunkt" (strongpoint), as the Germans called their redoubt at the tip of this salient, was ordered to be maintained by reinforcement and counter-attack until the new line was completed.³¹ K.5 became the principal Canadian target; and since it was opposite the divisional boundary, the 47th (London) Division placed its left forward battalion under General Currie's command for the operation. On Alderson's left, because of the known strength of the fortified house at M.10 and the lack of unexposed assembly area, there were no orders for any advance from the Orchard.

A bombardment of three and a half hours preceded the attack, which was launched at half-past eight, while it was still light. But once again the artillery preparation proved woefully ineffective. Field guns, dispersed thinly across the whole front and forced by ammunition shortages to fire mainly shrapnel, could not compensate for the lack of heavy siege guns. The German strongpoints suffered little damage. With counter-battery work in its infancy, the enemy's guns, superior in calibre and supplies of ammunition, were virtually unmolested. The 2nd Brigade's assault was made by the same two companies of the 10th Battalion, together with the 1st Brigade's grenade company, carrying 500 bombs. From breaches cut in the sides of the approach trench half the force broke out to the left, half to the right. The former, advancing across 200 yards of open ground towards K.5, was quickly cut to pieces by machine-gun fire. The right-hand party, however, attacking the western face of the salient, met less resistance and drove the enemy out of 400 yards of his front line. During the night the Germans attempted several counter-attacks, which the Canadian garrison, reinforced by a company of the 5th Battalion, drove off. Then, with the coming of daylight on the 22nd, enemy guns began a heavy bombardment of their lost position. Large portions of the breastworks were blown away and the occupants wiped out. Before midday Currie withdrew his men from all but 100 yards of the newly occupied line. The 10th Battalion had by then suffered casualties of 18 officers and 250 other ranks.³²

That same morning General Haig visited General Alderson's headquarters to express dissatisfaction at the failure of the Canadian attacks and to insist that the Germans be driven from the positions.³³ Relinquishing the idea of an "active offensive movement" in favour of a "methodical advance combined with the consolidation of the positions won", he dissolved "Alderson's Force", placing the 51st (Highland) Division under the Indian Corps (whose attempts to take Ferme du Bois had finally been abandoned), and the 1st Canadian Division directly under the command of First Army. At an Army conference next morning he ordered a thorough reconnaissance of the enemy's positions before planning the next attack, which would be a combined effort by the Canadian Division and the 47th Division (of the 1st Corps) on its right to reduce the German salient opposite. From its apex at K.5 this extended 1500 yards north-east to the Orchard

and an equal distance south-east to a point opposite Givenchy-lez-Ia Bassée - a hamlet about half a mile from the La Bassée Canal.³⁴ The Canadians were to take K.5 and get patrols to the northern part of the Rue d'Ouvert; the British division was to attack towards Chapelle St. Roch, farther south on the same road.³⁵

As a preliminary to the main operation the inner brigades of the two divisions made a night assault astride the South Breastwork. Again the 2nd Brigade was entrusted with the Canadian part of the operation. This time there had been opportunity for careful reconnaissance and detailed preparations. The artillery had maintained a slow continuous fire through the night, and at 2:30 a.m. (on the 24th) two companies of the 5th Battalion, led by a party of 30 bombers, assaulted* from the communication trench and the adjoining front line opposite the German redoubt at K.5. Twelve footbridges carried the infantry across a waterfilled ditch ten feet wide, and within half an hour the Canadians had seized K.5 and 130 yards of trench to the north-west. Three companies of the 7th Battalion came forward to reinforce the 5th, which had suffered 250 casualties-including thirteen of its eighteen combatant officers. The 47th Division's attack on the right, half an hour later in starting, reached the near end of the Breastwork but failed to capture any enemy trenches.

On the night of the 24th the Canadian effort shifted to the left flank, where thirty minutes before midnight a company of the 3rd Battalion assaulted from the Orchard in an attempt to capture 300 yards of trench running north from the fortified house at M.10. But a preliminary six-hour bombardment had failed to silence the enemy's machine-guns, four of which caught the attacking troops at ranges of from 50 to 100 yards. Only a few men reached the German trench, and none of these remained alive or uncaptured.³⁶ The positions along the Orchard's eastern hedge gained by the 16th Battalion four days before remained the farthest points to be reached by the First Army in the Battle of Festubert, and indeed were not to fall into the enemy's hands until his major advance in the spring of 1918.

Before the inconclusive battle ended there was one more Canadian attempt to push the Germans back. The task of cooperating with the 47th Division's attack on the evening of 25 May was given to "Seely's Detachment", which had relieved the 2nd Brigade on the 24th. This dismounted detachment consisted of the headquarters and units of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade. To meet the 1st Division's shortage of infantry after Ypres its personnel had volunteered for service in France and had crossed the Channel on 4 May, approximately 1500 strong, leaving their horses with Yeomanry units in England. Except for 24 hours' instruction given to one squadron of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, Brig.-Gen. Seely's nine squadrons of cavalrymen entered the front line with no experience in trench warfare.³⁷ They were opposed by the newly arrived 91st Reserve Regiment of the 2nd Guard Reserve Division.

* The battle cry during the attack was "Lusitania". The British liner had been sunk without warning by a German submarine on 7 May, with the loss of almost 1200 lives.

Promptly at 6:30 p.m. the British attacked immediately north of the Givenchy-Chapelle St. Roch road. Within an hour two battalions of the 142nd Brigade had advanced an average distance of 400 yards to capture (at a cost of 980 casualties) the German forward and support trenches on a frontage of 1000 yards.³⁸ The Canadian contribution began at nine o'clock with a bombing group from Lord Strathcona's Horse working northward from K.5. They carried 200 gas bombs - the first authorized use of gas by the B.E.F.³⁹ - and they were assisted by bayonet parties from their own regiment. Reports of success coming back soon after midnight indicated that the South Breastwork had been cleared from K.5 to L.8, a point 300 yards to the north-east. Working parties from the 2nd Brigade moved forward to consolidate the new line. But later it was found that L.8 was still in German hands, the attacking party, misled by the unreliable maps and the fact that the ground was "trenched and retrenched in all directions", having occupied positions farther to the west.⁴⁰ It was left to the 3rd Brigade, which relieved Seely's Detachment on 27 May, to secure L.8 and link up a continuous line with the 47th Division south of K.5.

On the last day of May 1915 the 1st Canadian Division began shifting to the right to take over the Givenchy sector, immediately north of the canal. The move was part of a reorganization of the First Army's front following a decision by Sir John French on 25 May to halt the Festubert battle and initiate new undertakings to assist the French offensive. "Having attained for the moment the immediate object I had in view", the C.-in-C. reported to the War Office, " ... I gave orders to Sir Douglas Haig to curtail his artillery attack and to strengthen and consolidate the ground he had won."⁴¹ But French demands could not be ignored. General Foch was pressing for a British offensive south of the La Bassée Canal towards Loos, in cooperation with a renewal of the French effort between Lens and Arras. Yet the serious shortage of ammunition precluded any immediate major offensive, and Sir Douglas Haig argued that the open country west of Loos afforded no cover for artillery positions or for the assembly of troops. He recommended instead a limited operation north of the canal from Givenchy towards La Bassée, possibly to be followed by another small attack south of the waterway towards Haisnes.⁴² In concurring, Sir John French ordered the First Army to take over another divisional sector on the French Tenth Army's left so as to enable Foch to reinforce his renewed offensive against Vimy Ridge.

For the 1st Canadian Division, as for the other formations of the First Army taking part in the battle, Festubert had been a frustrating experience. Substantial gains had been looked for but not achieved, and in the lower echelons, where the Army's role of easing pressure on the French was little appreciated, few could readily share the Commander-in-Chiefs view of an objective attained. In the course of the battle Canadians had assaulted on five separate days, to advance their line an average distance of 600 yards across a one-mile front. Except for the capture of a bit of German defences at K.5 their attacks had not reached the enemy line. In doing this they had suffered 2468 casualties. The Canadian Division had returned to action a little more than two weeks after losing half its fighting strength at Ypres - far too short a time for

units to assimilate their infantry reinforcements (we have noted the inexperience of the dismounted cavalry). Yet no fault can be found with the offensive spirit and the self-sacrifice of the troops, who were called upon to persist in the impossible.

Once again the superiority of the German artillery had decided the issue. The enemy's organized shelling of the front line and support trenches prevented the assembly of troops within reasonable assaulting distance of their objective and kept reinforcements from coming forward to exploit initial gains. Our own guns, outclassed in weight and short of high explosive shell, could neither destroy the enemy's field defences nor silence his batteries. In addition the German defenders held the advantage in machine-guns, trench mortars and their very effective "stick grenades". New tactics were needed to offset the lead thus taken by a nation which had well prepared itself for war; yet so far Allied commanders appeared satisfied that success was merely a matter of persistence - and more guns and ammunition.⁴³

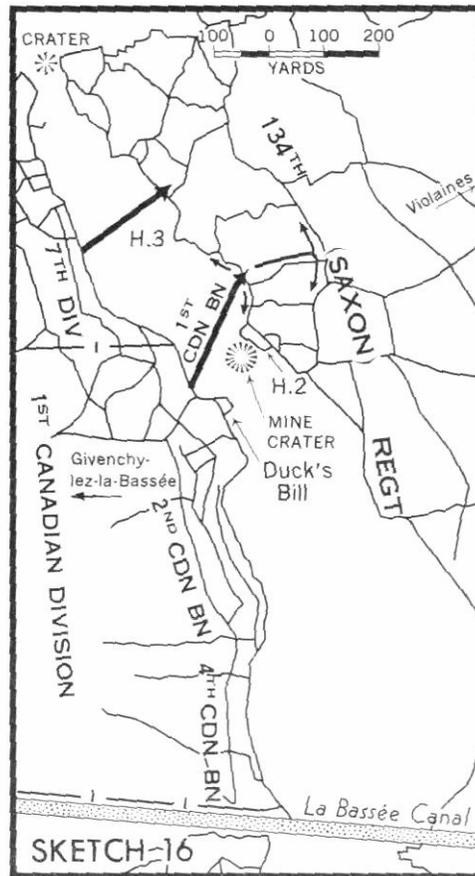
The Action at Givenchy, 15 June

On the completion of General Haig's reorganization the 1st Canadian Division found itself forming the right wing of the 4th Corps (Lieut.-General Sir H.S. Rawlinson), which was holding the centre of the First Army's front from the La Bassée Canal northward to Canadian Orchard. Next to the Canadians was the 7th Division, with the 51st (Highland) Division beyond. On the Corps left the Indian Corps had a defensive role on an eight-mile front, while to the south the 1st Corps held six miles of line between the canal and the French Tenth Army with the 1st, 47th and 2nd Divisions.

For a brief period the Canadians enjoyed a respite from fighting. The narrow divisional sector - the 4th Corps' frontage was a little over two and a half miles - required only one brigade in the front line, and units in reserve found relaxation in the pleasant Béthune countryside beside the banks of the canal. The Canadian front extended a thousand yards northward from the canal, crossing the south-westerly tip of the Aubers Ridge to take in the eastern outskirts of the shattered village of Givenchy-lez-la-Bassée - scene of a successful defence by British troops in December 1914. After Festubert it was a welcome change to occupy dry trenches. More important, the higher ground was to permit construction of communication and support trenches that would allow the concealed assembly of troops preparing for an assault. No man's land in the Canadian sector varied from 500 yards wide on the right down to 75 yards east of Givenchy, where a semi-circular sandbagged parapet, known as the Duck's Bill, protruded towards the enemy's line. On the German side, responsibility for the defence of the La Bassée area still rested with the 14th Division. Next to the canal, opposing the Canadians, was the 134th (Saxon) Infantry Regiment, brought in as reinforcement from the 40th (Saxon) Division north of Armentières.⁴⁴

GIVENCHY

15 JUNE 1915



There was not enough heavy ammunition to proceed with the original plan for attacks on both sides of the canal. The project was therefore reduced to an assault by the 4th Corps on a very narrow front towards Violaines, a village 1500 yards north-west of La Bassée; and after several postponements in order to coordinate with the renewal of the French offensive, the date was set at 15 June. General Rawlinson's orders called for an attack by the 7th and 51st Divisions against the line Chapelle St. Roch-rue d'Ouvert, with the Canadian Division "rendering such assistance as may be possible without actually assaulting the enemy's trench line".⁴⁵ But the Canadians could not establish the required protective right flank without breaking through the German front line, and General Alderson's orders of 8 and 12 June provided for an assault by the 1st Brigade on two strongpoints - H.2 opposite the Duck's Bill, and H.3 150 yards to the north.⁴⁶

On this occasion the Canadians had time for careful preparation, and the preliminary arrangements which they made were to stand as a model for successful major engagements fought later by the Canadian Corps. The artillery available for the 4th Corps' operation had been divided into five groups.

Covering the Canadian front was a group under Brig.-Gen. H.E. Burstall (Commander of the Canadian Divisional Artillery), which included eight 4.5-inch and eight 6-inch howitzers, a group of French 75-mm. guns, and the 2nd and 3rd Brigades C.F.A. (the 1st Brigade C.F.A. was employed in a group supporting the 7th Division's right). The Canadian 18-pounders had the task of destroying the enemy's wire. Determined that there should be no criticism over uncut wire after the battle, General Burstall insisted that the infantry express themselves as satisfied before the assault.⁴⁷ The successive postponements prolonged the task, for the enemy was able to repair some of the breaches by night; as a result the artillery was forced to exceed the expenditure of ammunition prescribed by the First Army (six rounds of shrapnel per yard).⁴⁸ Afterwards the commander of the 1st Brigade reported that the wire on his front "was found to have been most satisfactorily dealt with".⁴⁹

The experience of Festubert had emphasized the need for neutralizing the enemy's forward machine-guns if the assaulting troops were to be saved from annihilation as they crossed no man's land. To this end three 18-pounders fitted with heavy armour plate shields and with their wheels silenced by rubber tires were secretly dragged forward on the night preceding the attack and placed in position - two (from the 4th Battery C.F.A.) near the Duck's Bill, only seventy-five yards from the German trenches, and one (6th Battery) in a ruined farmhouse within 300 yards' range of H.3.

As mentioned above, the relatively high ground had made it possible for engineers and working parties to construct behind the Canadian front line an assembly trench protected by a parapet. By mid-afternoon on 15 June the 1st Battalion, which was to make the Canadian assault, was in position here, its four companies suitably disposed to attack in four successive waves. All were equipped with the short Lee-Enfield rifle, which two days earlier had replaced the Ross rifle throughout the Division (see below, p. 155). A slow artillery bombardment of 48 hours had quickened at six that morning into twelve hours of heavy fire. At 5:45 p.m., fifteen minutes before zero hour, the three forward guns were unmasked, and those near the Duck's Bill began blasting the German parapet over open sights. The third gun, however, did not open fire for fear of hitting our men in the front trenches, and as a result the machine-guns in the twin redoubt at H.3 went unharmed. Unfortunately the wire-cutting programme had shown the enemy exactly where to expect an attack, and his immediate reaction was a heavy artillery concentration upon the Givenchy area. The infantry crowded in the assembly trenches suffered severely and both 18 pounders were put out of action, though not before they had fired some 120 rounds, knocking out three machine-guns and effectively breaching the German parapet.⁵⁰

At two minutes before six British engineers (of the 176th Tunnelling Company, R.E.) exploded a giant mine close to the German line. The plan had been to blow up H.2, but water encountered under no man's land had stopped tunnelling short of this target. In compensation the charge was increased to 3000 pounds of ammonal; yet though the resulting crater was more than forty yards

across, the strongpoint was not destroyed. By ill luck the explosion inflicted a number of casualties on bombing parties of the 1st Battalion, and detonated or buried bomb reserves in the Canadian front line. The debris from the eruption had scarcely ceased falling when the 1st Battalion's leading company was on its way, quickly followed by the supporting company with two machine guns, which were set up in the enemy's front trench. As a covering artillery barrage lifted eastward, both companies went straight through to the German second line and began bombing to right and left and establishing blocks. At 6:10 p.m. the third company crossed no man's land and occupied the German front line, to be joined at seven o'clock by the remaining company.⁵¹

Early reports from the sector of the main attack, where the 7th and 51st Divisions were each assaulting with two battalions, indicated the capture of the German front line across the whole of the 4th Corps front. But later it was established that the enemy still held H.3. Farther north he was also holding the crater of a mine which the 7th Division had exploded twelve days earlier, and from these two positions his machine-gun fire swept no man's land as far south as the Duck's Bill. Thus he was able to play havoc with the Canadian third and fourth waves, and at the same time cover the reoccupation of his lost trenches. Meanwhile the 1st Battalion's attempts to bomb northward towards H.3 had been halted by German counter-bombing and by the attackers' shortage of grenades. The situation for the Canadians in the enemy's second line became critical, for the 7th Division's failure to advance beyond the opposing front line had left an open flank. To meet a German counter-attack the 1st Battalion's machine-gun officer, Lieutenant F. W. Campbell, took one of his guns forward from the enemy's front line. The tripod had been broken, but a the only other surviving member of the detachment, Private H. Vincent, supported the weapon on his back while Campbell kept on firing until he fell, mortally wounded. When the last round had been expended, Vincent, who was later awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, crawled back to the Canadian lines, dragging his gun behind him. Lieutenant Campbell received the Victoria Cross.⁵²

Bombers of the 2nd Battalion and two reinforcing platoons from the 3rd were carrying on the fight from the mine crater, but a company of the 3rd Battalion sent forward shortly before nine was held at the Canadian front line by the enemy's fire. Cut off from reinforcements and stores the remnants of the 1st Battalion's advanced companies had already been forced to fall back to the German first line, and between 9:00 and 10:00 this position too had to be evacuated. The battalion had suffered 366 casualties; its losses of 20 officers being particularly crippling.

The 3rd Battalion was ordered to renew the attack half an hour after midnight, but because of the uncertain situation on the rest of the Corps front and the time required to mount a fresh artillery bombardment there were several postponements. The new assault was made on all three divisional fronts at 4:45 p.m. on the 16th, after a two-hour bombardment—all that ammunition stocks would allow. Yet again the enemy was fully prepared, and nowhere did the

assaulting troops gain a permanent hold on the opposing front line. As soon as the barrage lifted the Germans manned the parapet, and the 3rd Battalion, this time unaided by mine or advanced field guns, met such a hail of rifle and machine-gun bullets that its leading waves could not cross no man's land.⁵³ Reports of gains by the 51st Division proved unfounded, and arrangements for a new assault at 9:00 p.m. by the Royal Canadian Dragoons were cancelled. That night the 1st Brigade reverted to a role of "passive defensive"; and on 19 June Sir John French instructed General Haig that since the French offensive in Artois had now ended the First Army should make no further attempt to gain ground.⁵⁴

On the 24th the 1st Canadian Division began moving to the Ploegsteert sector, about seventeen miles northward of Givenchy, and some three miles north of Armentières. In returning to the Second Army the Division came under the command of the 3rd Corps (Lieut.-General Sir W. P. Pulteney) and was made responsible for 4400 yards of front line between Messines and Ploegsteert. It was the beginning of a period of three months of relative inactivity along the British front, during which neither side undertook other than local operations.

There was much entrenching to be done. At the direction of the C.-in-C. the Corps Commander ordered the construction of a strong defensive zone immediately behind the front line. As we have seen, while British strength in France had been growing during the first half of 1915, German forces were being transferred to the Eastern Front, so that it no longer seemed probable that the enemy would attack in sufficient numbers to compel a major withdrawal. Accordingly work on such rearward positions as the G.H.Q. line was discontinued.⁵⁵ The Corps Commander declared adequate support trenches about seventy yards behind a well maintained front line "to be a matter of the very first necessity", and the early stages of the programme saw 2000 men employed nightly from the 1st Canadian Division.⁵⁶ Depth was given to the two forward lines by the construction of a series of mutually supporting defended localities in farm buildings or sandbagged redoubts, each well-wired and sited for all-round defence by a garrison of about platoon strength. In these were mounted eight guns of the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade (the new designation of the former Automobile Machine Gun Brigade No. 1), which had arrived from England on 21 June. Covering these strongpoints was a subsidiary line of trenches and breastworks about a mile behind the front trenches.

From late June to mid-September 1915 a strange tranquillity persisted across the Canadian front. Apart from the activity of snipers on both sides and one small patrol clash in no man's land, the only hostilities were an occasional exchange of light shelling by the opposing artilleries, which in general confined their attention to registering targets. On three occasions the Royal Engineers exploded mines in front of the Canadian trenches, and detachments of the 13th Battalion (on 9 and 13 July) and the 4th Battalion (on 31 August) occupied the resulting craters without difficulty.⁵⁷ Mobile anti-aircraft sections formed from the Motor Machine Gun Brigade occasionally engaged enemy aircraft reconnoitring behind the Canadian lines.⁵⁸ July brought a visit from Sir Robert

Borden; and in August the Minister of Militia, Major-General Sam Hughes, spent two days with the Canadians, witnessing a shoot by three field batteries and reviewing the P.P.C.L.I. and the R.C.H.A.⁵⁹

Before the end of September the arrival of a second division in France had increased Canadian representation in the field into a full army corps. For the decisions and events which led to this expansion we must briefly retrace our steps.

Raising the 2nd Canadian Division

On 6 October 1914, three days after the First Canadian Contingent had set sail, the Governor General telegraphed the Secretary of State for the Colonies an offer by the Dominion Government "to place and maintain in the field a second oversea contingent of twenty thousand men". He explained that since Canada had already parted with nearly all her 18-pounder guns, she could not supply a complete division, but that besides infantry she was prepared to "furnish mounted rifles and units fighting or administrative required for special purposes".⁶⁰ Correctly anticipating a favourable reply, Ottawa immediately ordered the mobilization of a second contingent. Fifteen new infantry battalions were to be raised, and to ensure a steady stream of reinforcements it was decided to keep thirty thousand men continuously under arms in Canada in addition to forces required for home defence.⁶¹ In November the Government authorized a number of divisional, line of communication and unallotted units and increased the training quota in Canada to 50,000.⁶²

At the end of October 1914 the United Kingdom confirmed its acceptance of a second Canadian contingent, which would form with the balance of the Canadian troops then in England a full division complete with L. of C. units. The War Office warned, however, that if it had to provide guns for the division, these could not be available "for at least 9 months or possibly more".⁶³ Recruiting had begun in mid-October. Volunteering was brisk, particularly in the west, where quotas were filled as soon as clothing and equipment became available.⁶⁴ The new units remained in their respective Military Districts until just prior to embarkation in the spring of 1915. The Minister of Militia had come to prefer local preliminary training under District arrangements to the "call to arms" method employed in the case of the First Contingent; moreover, the lack of adequate winter quarters and training facilities prevented the concentration in Canada of even a brigade. Because of a shortage of accommodation in the United Kingdom, and the demands on shipping space for the movement of reinforcements for the 1st Divisions the War Office preferred that the new force should not cross the Atlantic until the 1st Division had gone to France.

We have noted that it was first intended that the existing units of the 4th Infantry Brigade (which had accompanied the First Contingent to England) should form part of the 2nd Division, so that only eight of the new battalions

would be required to fill the other two brigades. The remainder would be used as reinforcements. But, as we have previously seen (above, p. 39), the 1st Division was to need all the 4th Brigade's personnel; furthermore three of the battalions newly formed in Canada (the 23rd, 30th and 32nd) sailed in February as additional reinforcements for that division. The other twelve were brigaded as far as possible territorially. The new 4th Brigade had the 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st Battalions, all mobilized in Ontario; the 5th Brigade, from Quebec and the Maritimes, comprised the 22nd (French Canadian),* 24th, 25th and 26th Battalions; the 6th Brigade was made up of the 27th, 28th, 29th and 31st Battalions, all from the west. After December 1914 all battalions, like those of the 1st Division, were organized on a four-company basis. Until the new brigades could be concentrated in the United Kingdom, only temporary commanders, drawn from officers serving in Canada, were appointed.

Troops of other arms and services were drawn from Military Districts across Canada. The 2nd Divisional Cavalry Squadron was formed at the end of March 1915 by detaching "A" Squadron from the 7th Canadian Mounted Rifles—one of thirteen such regiments raised in Canada during November and December. On 26 November the War Office had accepted the Militia Department's offer of the first four C.M.R. battalions, announcing its intention to "use them for service in Egypt", and inquiring how many more such regiments could be mobilized. But neither these four nor any of the other nine regiments ever saw the Middle East. They reached England between June 1915 and July 1916.⁶⁶ There the 7th to 13th C.M.R. battalions were broken up as reinforcements. The first six regiments crossed to France in September and October 1915 and were subsequently converted to infantry (below, p. 134).

As had been foreseen, lack of guns delayed completion of the Divisional Artillery. Batteries of the 4th, 5th and 6th Brigades C.F.A. trained in Canada on obsolete 12-pounders. A 7th Brigade was authorized in February when the 6th was sent to England to furnish artillery reinforcements for the 1st Division. Only the 4th Field Brigade, which crossed the Atlantic with the infantry brigades, accompanied the 2nd Division to France; headquarters and the 5th and 7th Brigades, held in the United Kingdom to complete equipment, and the 6th Howitzer Brigade (formed from reserves in September 1915) followed in January 1916. The Divisional Artillery's first commander was Brig.-Gen. H.C. Thacker; but at the end of September he became C.R.A. of the 1st Division and was succeeded by Brig.-Gen. E.W.B. Morrison. Until all its artillery joined it the 2nd Division was supported first by borrowed British units and subsequently (from 4 October) by the 55th (West Lancashire) Divisional Artillery.⁶⁷

* Formation of the 22nd Battalion followed a request made to the Prime Minister on 25 September 1914 by a distinguished delegation from the Province of Quebec for "authorization to levy a French Canadian Contingent to enrol in active service for Great Britain". When it was decided to merge the battalion in an infantry brigade of the 2nd Division, the unit was brought up to establishment by drafting French Canadian recruits from other battalions raised in Quebec.⁶⁵

The Divisional Engineers (the 4th, 5th and 6th Field Companies) were quickly mobilized from Militia field companies. The major medical units, Nos. 4, 5 and 6 Field Ambulances, were formed respectively in Winnipeg, Toronto and Montreal.⁶⁸ Following the authorization of the Canadian Army Dental Corps on 17 May 1915, dental surgeons were attached to field ambulances, hospitals and combatant formations.⁶⁹ The line of communication units formed surplus to the divisional establishment consisted of eleven Army Service Corps units of various types, four medical units (including No. 3 General Hospital and No. 3 Stationary Hospital), a mobile veterinary section and an infantry base depot.

Public-spirited citizens, such as had already equipped one motor machine gun brigade, wished to provide three more M.G. units. Although the British and Canadian military authorities were then opposed to the inclusion of a motor machine gun battery in the new division, the Minister of Militia was loath to discourage such offers. Three units were formed - Borden's Armoured Battery (recruited chiefly in Ottawa and Northern Ontario), the Eaton Machine Gun Battery (from Toronto), and the Yukon Detachment. They encountered many obstacles. Guns and horses were withheld or even withdrawn according to the needs of overseas units, and cars were not immediately available. The three units went to England in the spring of 1915, with little or none of their equipment, and with their future employment uncertain. The battery named for the Prime Minister, however, on the strong recommendation of General Alderson accompanied the 2nd Division to France in September as the Borden Machine Gun Battery. The two remaining units reached France in 1916 respectively with the 3rd and 4th Divisions.⁷⁰

On 11 March 1915 Lord Kitchener advised General Hughes that the "Second Contingent should be prepared to arrive about the first of May". Instead of sailing in a single large convoy, as had the First Canadian Contingent, it was the wish of the War Office that the force should cross the Atlantic in groups of about 5000, each escorted by a cruiser.⁷¹ On April 18 a group of engineer, medical and service corps units embarked at Halifax in two transports chartered by the Department of Militia. But shipping was so difficult to secure that the Department was forced to request the Admiralty to divert sufficient transports to carry the remainder of the contingent. The Admiralty detailed seventeen vessels, and these were secretly loaded and dispatched singly and without escort. In this manner the bulk of the Division reached England in May and June, several weeks behind schedule.

By the time the foremost elements of the Second Contingent arrived in the United Kingdom, the bulk of the Canadian troops already in the country (with the exception of the Canadian Cavalry Depot at Canterbury) had moved to the Shorncliffe area in Eastern Command. Here they were under Brig.-Gen. J.C. MacDougall, who on the departure of the 1st Division for France had been appointed to the temporary command of all Canadian troops in Great Britain.⁷² The 2nd Division also concentrated at Shorncliffe, and to avoid confusion and keep the two commands separate, General MacDougall's was designated the

Canadian Training Division. On 25 May Major-General SB. Steele assumed command of the 2nd Division. Steele was a veteran officer with long service in the North West Mounted Police whose military career went back to the Red River and North-West Campaigns. During the South African War he had raised and commanded Strathcona's Horse, and after commanding successively Military District No. 13 and No. 10 he had recently been appointed Inspector General for Western Canada. His nomination as G.O.C. by the Minister of Militia was opposed by Lord Kitchener, on the grounds that "to do justice to the troops very experienced officers" were necessary in such positions, and in spite of heated protests General Hughes* had to agree that Steele should not take the Division to France?⁴

Lord Kitchener's offer of the pick of "all unemployed generals on active list" as a successor to Steele⁷⁵ was rejected by Hughes, who sent through the Prime Minister a strong recommendation that Brig.-Gen. Turner, then commanding the 3rd Brigade, be appointed to command the 2nd Division. "I would again urge on you", wrote Perley to Kitchener, "the wisdom of giving the appointment to a Canadian Brigadier if on enquiry you find one that is suitable."⁷⁶ In replying on 24 June Kitchener expressed his willingness to appoint Brig.-Gen. Currie, who had been recommended by Sir John French as "the most suitable of the three [Canadian] brigadiers"⁷⁷ Decision was deferred pending Sir Robert Borden's visit to the United Kingdom, and on 26 July Hughes, who was then in London, cabled Ottawa that Turner was to command the 2nd Division, and that later General Currie would take over the 1st Division.⁷⁸

On 17 August Brig.-Gen. Turner, having relinquished command of his brigade in France to Brig.-Gen. R.G.E. Leckie, took over the 2nd Division with the rank of major-general. By the beginning of September all three infantry brigades of the Division were under the commanders who were to take them to France. Appointed to command the 4th Brigade, at the instance of General Hughes, despite his oft expressed opinion that qualified Canadian officers could be found for almost all positions of command, was Brig.-Gen. Lord Brooke, an Imperial officer who had come to Canada in 1913 at the request of the Minister of Militia to command the 2nd Mounted Brigade in its annual training, and in the summer of 1914 had been in charge of Petawawa Camp⁷⁹ Commanding the 5th Brigade was Brig.-Gen. David Watson, formerly CO. of the 2nd Battalion. The 6th Brigade remained under Brig.-Gen. H.D.B. Ketchen, the only one of the three temporary commanders appointed in Canada to be given permanent command. General Turner's senior general staff officer was Lt.-Col H.D. de Prée, an officer of the Royal Artillery who was transferred from the corresponding appointment with the Lahore Division. The new A.A. and Q.M.G was Lt.-Col. P.E. Thacker, a Permanent Force officer who since April 1912 had been attached to the War

* Yet in a letter to Lord Roberts the previous September Hughes had disparaged Steele's fitness to command the 1st Division on the grounds of age and a lack of "the faculty of thinking and acting rapidly when occasion might demand it".⁷⁸

Office, representing Canada on the Dominion Section of the Imperial General Staff. Most of the remaining staff appointments were held by officers of the Canadian Permanent Force.

Before the 2nd Division left Canada, Ottawa expressed to the War Office its concern that there should not be a repetition of the unfortunate conditions encountered by the First Contingent at Salisbury Plain. The selection of Shorncliffe Camp, near Folkestone, was warmly welcomed, and early in March the Militia Department offered to furnish all tentage required by the Second Contingent. War Office acceptance did not come until the end of July, and it was November before the first shipment of tents was made. By that time the 2nd Division was in France, having been accommodated in England in tents, huts and barracks provided by the War Office without charge.

During June 1915 the Division (still incomplete in artillery) completed its concentration in the Shorncliffe area. Divisional Headquarters, the 4th and 5th Infantry Brigades and the 4th Brigade C.F.A. found accommodation in hutments at St. Martin's Plain, East and West Sandling and Westenhanger. The remaining units were distributed under canvas at Dibgate, Otterpool and New Inn Green. It was a dry summer, and life under canvas presented no hardship. The open fields beside Shorncliffe and the rolling Kentish countryside beyond provided ideal conditions for company and battalion training, and the ranges at Lydd and Hythe were convenient for musketry. Experienced British and Canadian officers attached as special instructors laid special emphasis on the siting and construction of trenches and methods of attacking and defending them. Many officers and men of the 2nd Division attended courses at British schools established primarily to train the rapidly expanding B.E.F. To gain practical experience in the field, staff officers and senior commanders went to France and were attached for seven-day periods to corresponding headquarters and units of the 1st Division. August brought brigade and divisional training. Finally, before sailing, units received written instructions on the trench routine practised by a typical company of the B.E.F.⁸⁰

On 2 September H.M. The King, accompanied by Lord Kitchener, inspected the Division—a sure sign that embarkation would not long be delayed. It crossed the Channel, by night, between 13 and 17 September - Divisional Headquarters and the three infantry brigades from Folkestone to Boulogne, and the remaining units by the route Southampton-Le Havre. On disembarking the troops moved by rail to St. Omer, Cassel or nearby stations, and then marched to the Hazebrouck area, where by 21 September training was once more in progress. It is recorded that both at Folkestone and in France the physical demands of marching in hot weather under full loads and in newly-issued heavy British pattern boots severely tested the endurance of the men, some battalions having 25 per cent stragglers from sore feet and exhaustion.⁸¹

It was customary for a new division arriving in France to be held for some time in corps reserve to allow further training and a gradual indoctrination into trench warfare. But entry into the front line was to come almost immediately

for the combatant units of the 2nd Canadian Division - as a formation of the newly-formed Canadian Corps. Deprived of a preliminary schooling in the ways of semi- siege warfare, they would now have to learn the hard way.

The Canadian Corps is Formed

The creation of a Canadian army corps was a natural but by no means inevitable result of the decision to send the 2nd Division to France. Under British practice the largest permanently organized formation in the field was the division, and the divisions of a corps were subject to frequent interchange; the retention of two or more divisions together under the same corps headquarters, with the same corps troops permanently attached, was a recent Australian-New Zealand innovation.⁸²

In a letter written on 1 April 1915 to the Minister of Militia, his special representative in the United Kingdom, Colonel Carson, asked, "Why do you not ... have our two divisions in the field as an Army Corps with your good self in command?"⁸³ Further mention of the corps appears in a communication dated 26 April from Hughes to Lt.-Col. J.J. Carrick, the Minister's liaison officer at G.H.Q. It was "the earnest desire of all in Canada", the message read in part, "to increase the existing division in this country [France] into an army corps, first of two, later of three divisions."⁸⁴ Carrick showed this to Sir John French, who immediately sent him to London to see Lord Kitchener, at the same time wiring the latter a strong recommendation that Canada's offer be accepted. The C.-in-C. regarded General Alderson as quite capable of commanding an army corps, and referred to the utmost mutual confidence between him and the Canadians. The telegram concluded, "I think best return we can make for splendid service rendered by Canadian Division is to meet their wishes."⁸⁵

Kitchener concurred in the recommendation that Alderson should be Corps Commander,^{*} and on 15 June the Secretary of State for the Colonies informed the Governor General that "the Army Council think that it would be advantageous, when the 2nd Canadian Division takes the field, to join the two Divisions into an Army Corps".⁸⁸ Although the initial reply, eleven days later, was non-committal, Ottawa took immediate steps to furnish the necessary Corps Troops. Organization of the Corps proceeded during the summer, when the Prime Minister and Hughes were in England, and was completed by the end of August.⁸⁹

On 13 September 1915 Lieut.-General Alderson opened his Headquarters at Bailleul. His successor as G.O.C. 1st Division was Major-General A. W. Currie, whose former command (2nd Brigade) was taken over by the CO. of the 8th Battalion, Lt.-Col. L.J. Lipsett.⁹⁰ Canada's shortage of staff-trained officers meant that the principal staff appointments in the Corps were

* In a message dated 28 April, criticising the conduct of operations at Ypres, General Hughes informed Carson that "many here demand that if Army Corps is formed I should command it, but this would probably not be satisfactory".⁸⁶ On this proposal Sir Robert Borden was to comment in his *Memoirs*, "To remain Minister of Militia and to hold an import military appointment at the Front would have been the ideal situation so far as his outlook was concerned".⁸⁷

given to British officers. The two senior posts went to Brig.-Gen. C.H. Harington, who became B.G.G.S., and Brig.-Gen. T.B. Wood, who was transferred from the 1st Division to be D.A. & Q.M.G. These two officers were succeeded in June 1916 by Brig.-Gen. PP. de B. Radcliffe and Brig.-Gen. G.J. Farmar. The first G.O.C. Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery, which was formed in April 1916, was Brig.-Gen. A.C. Currie, a British officer. Among Canadians appointed to Alderson's headquarters were Brig.-Gen. H.E. Burstall, G.O.C. Royal Artillery, Canadian Corps, and Brig.-Gen C.J. Armstrong, Chief Engineer, both of whom moved up from corresponding posts in the 1st Division.

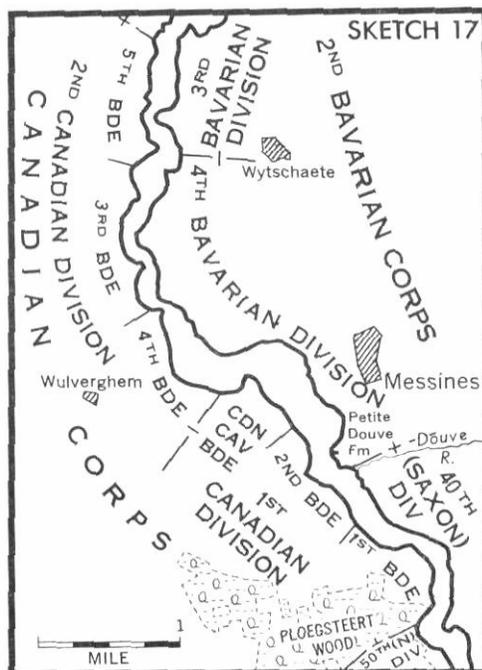
Command of the Corps Troops was given to Major-General M.S. Mercer, who was succeeded in the 1st Infantry Brigade by Brig.-Gen. G.B. Hughes, son of the Minister of Militia. Inauguration of Mercer's command brought together a number of Canadian formations which had been serving separately under various headquarters. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade (Brig.-Gen. J.E.B. Seely) was transferred from its infantry role with the 1st Division, to be rejoined by the R.C.H.A. Brigade, which had been serving as G.H.Q. Troops. Forming part of the Corps Troops was a group of infantry and dismounted cavalry units later to become two brigades of the 3rd Canadian Division. The 7th Brigade would comprise Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, The Royal Canadian Regiment, and the 42nd and 49th Battalions; the 8th Brigade, made up of the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th C.M.R. Battalions, was formed from the six regiments of the 1st and 2nd C.M.R. Brigades. By the end of September 1915 the Canadian Corps, comprising the two infantry divisions and Corps Troops and attached units, had reached a strength of 1354 officers, and 36,522 other ranks.⁹¹

The front taken over by the new corps on 13 September was that which the 1st Canadian Division had been holding as the left sector of the 2nd Corps, under the Second British Army. From Ploegsteert Wood the line extended 4400 yards north-westward across the valley of the Douve River to the Wulverghem-Messines road. The entire area was under enemy observation from the southern end of the Messines-Wytschaete spur, which rising from the left bank of the Douve, joined the main ridge stretching fifteen miles north-eastward to beyond Passchendaele. Since the 2nd Corps' other forward division, the 28th, needed a rest before taking part in forthcoming operations, the Army Commander (General Sir Henry Plumer) extended the Canadian front some three miles northward to the Vierstraat- Wytschaete road, which formed the boundary with the 5th Corps. Between 19 and 23 September two brigades of the 2nd Division (with the 3rd Brigade, temporarily under command from the 1st Division) relieved British formations. Opposite the Canadian newcomers - at distances varying from 500 down to only a few yards - were regiments of the 2nd Bavarian Corps of the German Sixth Army.⁹²

The Canadian Corps was soon to have a role, though a minor one, in active Operations. On 23 September General Alderson issued orders setting forth its part in the Allied offensive due to be launched on the 25th - the British share in which was to become known as the Battle of Loos.⁹³

THE CANADIAN CORPS IN THE LINE

23 SEPTEMBER 1915



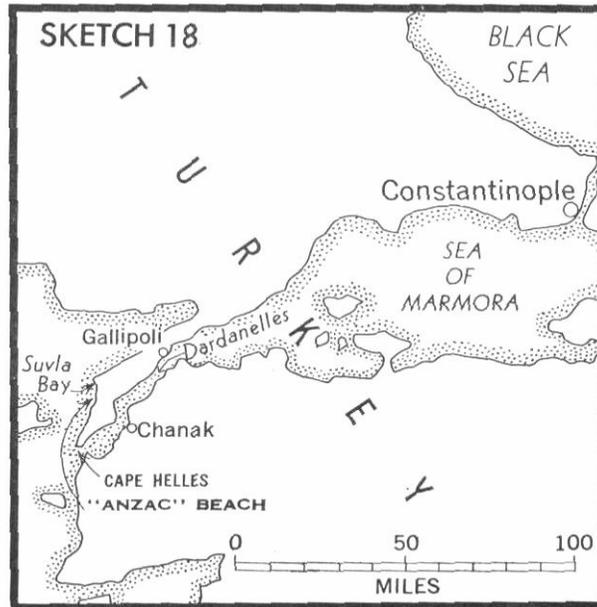
The General Situation

As the summer wore on, the news from the various battle fronts on which the Allies were campaigning had continued to be bad. It was a record of disappointments and defeats that was to make 1915 the most unsatisfactory year of the war for the Allied cause.

High on the list was the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. The decision to support the naval operation by military forces if needed proved to be an unfortunate bit of unsound planning. In the light of events there seems every likelihood that an initial combined operation using both naval and land forces would have achieved surprise and success. Alternatively a purely naval attack, with no land forces nearby to rely on, could undoubtedly have been pressed home to ultimate victory. As it was, the operations fell between these two stools.

A naval bombardment which began on 19 February 1915, had by 2 March destroyed all the outer forts of the Dardanelles. On 18 March the fleet attacked the Narrows in force, silencing almost all the inner forts. But three battleships were lost to undiscovered mines, and although the Turkish command believed defeat was inevitable if the attack was continued next day, the naval attempt to force the Narrows was called off. The British Government now agreed to a landing on the Gallipoli peninsula. What was to have been a mere demonstration to draw off Turkish forces from the Caucasus now became a major operation to open a passage for Allied warships to reach Constantinople and

THE
APPROACHES
TO THE
BLACK
SEA
1915

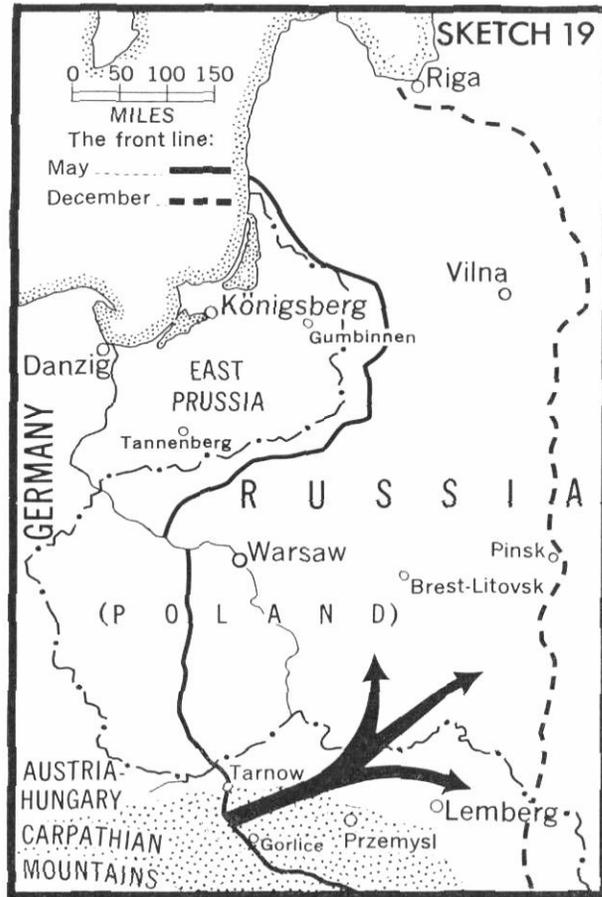


destroy the Turkish fleet and the national arsenals, thereby restoring communication with Russia through the Black Sea. Some 250,000 tons of merchant shipping locked up in Russian and Danube ports would be released, and there was hope, as Mr. Churchill emphasized, that “Bulgaria, Greece, and Rumania, perhaps even Italy, might be attracted to the banners of the Entente”.⁹⁴

An expeditionary force was organized under the command of General Sir Ian Hamilton, and at dawn on 25 April four British, Australian and New Zealand divisions and a French colonial division began landing at Cape Helles, at the tip of the peninsula and at “Anzac”, fifteen miles up the west coast. All the landings were contained by Turkish forces, and three months of trench warfare ensued. Both sides reinforced. By the end of July nine more Allied divisions had been sent to the Mediterranean, while the German commander at Gallipoli, General Liman von Sanders, had increased his defensive force to 22 Turkish divisions.

Then came the fiasco of Suvla Bay, when on the night of 6-7 August two green British divisions (the 10th and 11th) made a confused landing north of Anzac and failed to exploit the surprise they gained. By the time supporting divisions were brought in strong Turkish reinforcements arriving on the heights inland had ringed the British positions. As at the other landings fighting subsided into trench warfare, with all the Allied positions completely dominated by the Turks. Both sides were suffering heavily from exhaustion and disease. The 1st Battalion, The Newfoundland Regiment, which arrived to reinforce the 29th Division on 19 September, saw its first action of the war at Suvla Bay, where it underwent a trying ordeal in the trenches from 16 November until the end of the campaign.⁹⁵

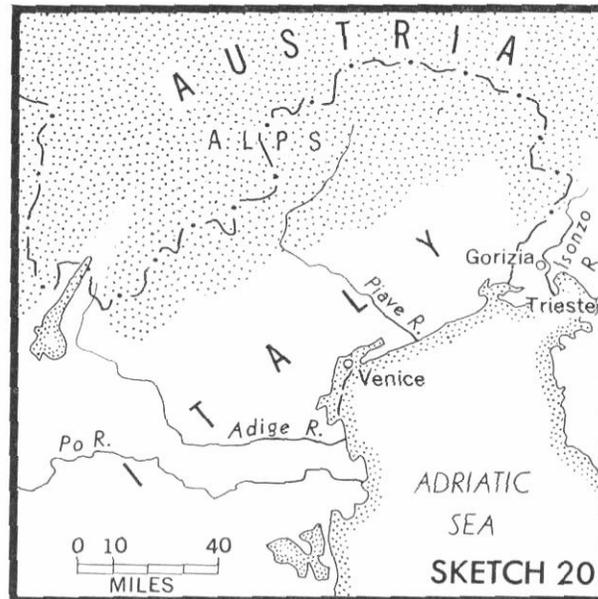
THE EASTERN FRONT 1915



The deadlock continued, and by mid-September the French were recommending a transfer of operations to Salonika. Considerations of prestige, however, kept the Dardanelles Committee (the name taken by the War Committee on 1 June) from reaching a decision to evacuate, and it was not until December, after Lord Kitchener had visited Gallipoli, that a withdrawal was ordered from Suvla and Anzac. Evacuation of the peninsula was finally completed on 9 January 1916. By that time British army casualties had numbered 205,000.⁹⁶

The picture was equally gloomy on the Eastern Front, where von Falkenhayn was putting forth every effort to achieve a complete victory over the Russians that would leave the armies of the Central Powers free for operations elsewhere in 1916. Early in May the Eleventh German Army, flanked by two Austrian armies had broken through on a thirty-mile front between Gorlice and Tarnow, in Galicia. Gradually the gap was widened, and a renewal of the offensive in July forced a Russian retreat along the entire front from the Baltic to Carpathians. Warsaw fell on 5 August, and before the end of the month Brest-Litovsk, 110 miles to the east. Towards the end of September von Falkenhayn

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called a halt to the five months' offensive. His armies had outrun their communications, and developments on other fronts were claiming his attention. There was a threat from Italy, which having signed a secret treaty the day after the initial Gallipoli landings to join the Allies had declared war against Austria on 23 May, Italian armies had crossed the Austrian frontier at the head of the Adriatic and fought two indecisive battles along the Isonzo River. Furthermore plans were in the making for a combined German-Austrian-Bulgarian invasion of Serbia; and on the Western Front the Allies were known to be preparing for a September offensive.

In spite of the common danger confronting them, however, France and Britain were still disagreed on a policy for the Western Front. From the beginning of the year the British Cabinet had favoured a strict defensive in this theatre until Kitchener's New Armies could take the field in the spring of 1916. It was in accordance with this design that men and material had been dispatched to the Dardanelles.⁹⁷ A Franco-British conference on munitions held at Boulogne on 19-20 June concluded that not until the summer of 1916 would sufficient heavy guns and howitzers and enough shells of all calibres be available to launch an offensive on the Western Front with reasonable hope of success. (It was estimated that such a British undertaking would require a force of at least 36 divisions across a continuous front of 25 miles, supported by 1150 heavy guns and howitzers besides the normal complement of field artillery.)⁹⁸ For a while both governments were virtually agreed to postpone an offensive in France until 1916 and to work towards a successful conclusion of the Gallipoli campaign. But General Joffre, who had consistently opposed the Gallipoli enterprise and indeed any undertaking that would hinder operations on the Western Fronts persuaded

the French cabinet to reverse its stand and to insist on the offensive in the West being carried out that autumn.

The depressing news that came from the Dardanelles and Russian fronts in August so strengthened French arguments for an early offensive and weakened British objections, that following a visit to Joffre's headquarters Lord Kitchener secured the British Cabinets approval for support of the French plan.⁹⁹ On 21 August he instructed Sir John French "to take the offensive and act vigorously".¹⁰⁰ General Joffre's plan was similar to that proposed earlier in the year (above, p. 50). Briefly, the new plan called for two converging thrusts in the direction of Namur, on either side of the large salient which the enemy was holding between the River Aisne and the Scarpe with its apex at Noyon. The southern drive would be made by the French Second and Fourth Armies attacking northward from Champagne against the front of the German Third Army. In the north the French Tenth Army and the British First Army would strike eastward from Artois against the German Sixth Army. Successful offensives would cut off the three German armies (the Second, First and Seventh) holding the Noyon salient, leaving them to be defeated in detail.¹⁰¹

At 6:30 a.m. on 25 September the British First Army attacked with six divisions between the La Bassée Canal and Lens on a five-mile front centred on the village of Loos. About six hours later seventeen divisions of the French Tenth Army struck along a front which extended twelve miles northward from Arras to include the area of the unsuccessful May offensive against Souchez and Vimy Ridge. In the meantime the Champagne offensive began with twenty French divisions advancing against six German divisions. The assaults on the French fronts were supported by a considerably greater weight of artillery than in any previous operation. While the British had only 19 heavy guns to each mile of frontage, the French Tenth Army had 35, and the two armies in Champagne 47 per mile.¹⁰² In all, as General Joffre pointed out in a message of encouragement to his forces, the 53 French divisions engaged in the offensive were supported by 2000 heavy and 3000 field guns-as contrasted with the 15 divisions and 300 heavy guns that had been employed in the Artois offensive in May. To make up for the relative British weakness in artillery and ammunition the attack on the First Army's front was preceded by a discharge of chlorine gas.

In the south the French assaults made satisfactory gains on the first day, with advances of 3000 yards in some places - for the enemy, anticipating an attack, had thinned out his forward troops and disposed his reserves for a defence in depth. As a result next day the attackers encountered stiff Opposition and could make little further progress. In Artois the Tenth Army achieved only minor gains in the first three days; one division reached the crest of Vimy Ridge on 28 September, but was driven back.¹⁰³

General Haig's First Army did no better. A preliminary four-day bombardment had suffered from a shortage of shells (heavy guns being limited to 96 rounds in 24 hours); and except in a few places unfavourable wind conditions

had rendered the gas attack largely ineffective. At first there was some progress, for the Germans had not expected an attack so far north, and many of their foremost defences (including the commanding Hill 70 on the northern outskirts of Lens) fell into British hands. But this success could not be effectively exploited, for in spite of repeated requests from the Army Commander, Sir John French delayed releasing the required divisions from his general reserve until too late. When the assault was renewed the following morning the Germans, who had reinforced their second position with 22 battalions, drove the attackers back with heavy losses.¹⁰⁴

On Haig's left the Second Army's contribution to the offensive was restricted to subsidiary attacks designed to mislead the enemy as to the direction and frontage of the main British effort. (These included a diversion by the 3rd Corps at Bois Grenier, south of Armentières, in which the 3rd Brigade C.F.A. fired in support of the 8th (British) Division.) Shortly before 6:00 a.m. on the 25th the Canadian Corps staged a feint gas attack from dummy assembly trenches. Six thousand oat sacks and sandbags, filled with damp straw and with a handful of sulphur added, were distributed all along the 10,000-yard front. Though adverse winds prevented all the bags from being ignited, the demonstration induced a German gas-alert and drew artillery fire. Nowhere in the Second Army's sector, however, was the deception taken seriously enough to influence the real battle.¹⁰⁵

On the 28th General Joffre halted both the Champagne and Artois offensives and ordered preparations for a new general attack. But bad weather and an unsuccessful counter-attack against the British on 8 October interfered, with the result that the new assaults were delivered more or less piecemeal. On the 6th the French captured a village in Champagne; five days later they gained some ground in Artois. On 13 October British forces, attacking north of Loos on a front of four divisions, seized some German trenches but could not hold their gains. (This final effort was the occasion of another demonstration by the Canadian Corps. Some 3500 commercially-prepared chemical smoke bombs and 1500 lbs of phosphorus were discharged, and in addition each division released smoke from 600 home-made bombs which had been fashioned from stovepipe, tallow, gunpowder, coaldust, nitre and pitch by parties of Canadian Engineers Working round the clock.)¹⁰⁶ On 4 November the Allied offensives were formally abandoned. The operations which began on 25 September had cost more than 60,000 British, nearly 200,000 French, and about 150,000 German casualties.¹⁰⁷

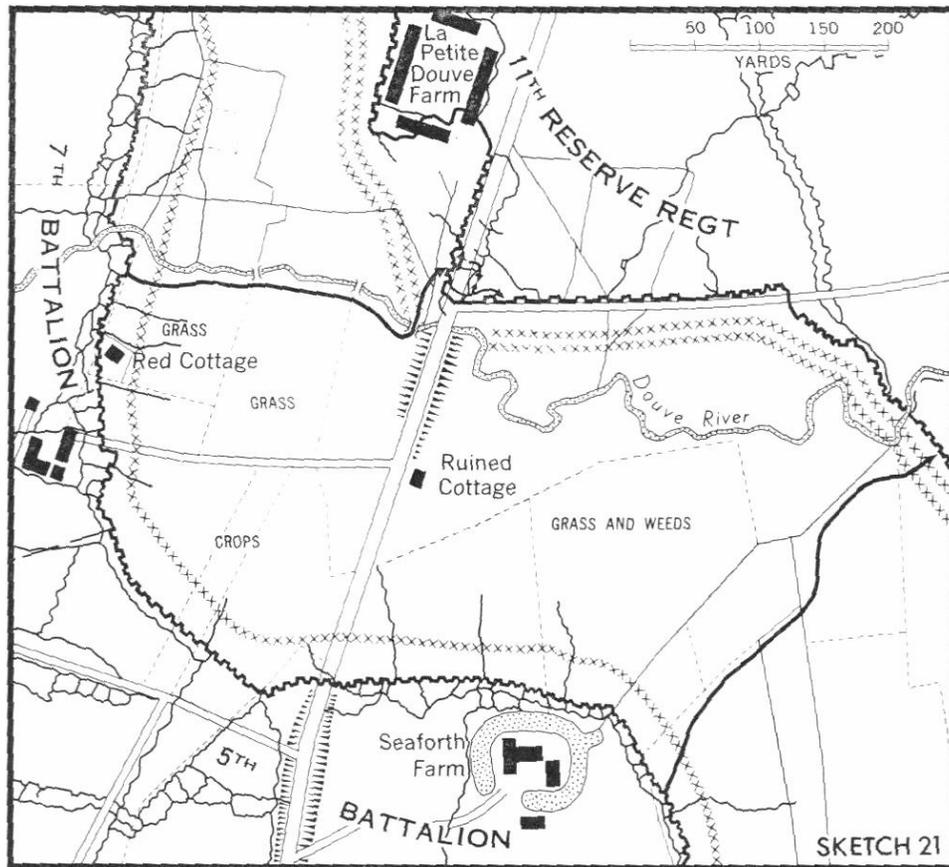
For this expenditure the Allies had little to show. The Noyon salient was merely blunted; the German position in the West was as strong as before, if not stronger. The British First Army, having achieved a maximum penetration of two miles on a two-mile front, now held a narrow salient at Loos which, though costly to defend, the higher command insisted must be retained. In Champagne, gains of upwards of three miles had merely moved the French farther into the low ground and exposed them all the more to observation and fire from the adjacent enemy-held heights.¹⁰⁸

The Battle of Loos had been undertaken against the better judgment of both the British C.-in-C. and the Commander of the First Army. Lord Kitchener gave direct orders to “do our utmost to help France in their offensive, even though by so doing we may suffer very heavy losses”.¹⁰⁹ Haig’s objections proved well founded - the shortage of heavy artillery and ammunition, the unfavourable ground assigned for the First Army’s attack, the strength of the German defences, and the lack of training of the new divisions and the inexperience of the staff officers. Apart from all this the over-all direction of operations at G.H.Q. level left much to be desired. Sir John French was criticized for his general conduct of the offensive, and particularly for his mishandling of reserves; on 19 December he was transferred to the post of Commander-in-Chief Home Forces. His successor in the field was Sir Douglas Haig.

The First Trench Raids

Though major operations for 1915 had come to an end, the higher command was at pains to ensure that the coming winter in the trenches should not be a time of idleness. In contrast to the French, who when not engaged in a major offensive tended to observe an unofficial truce, British G.H.Q. emphasized the necessity for continual aggressiveness in defence.¹¹⁰ A Second Army directive towards the end of October set down a policy of impressing on all ranks “that the forthcoming winter months are to be utilized not for passive defence but for exhausting the enemy’s troops and for training all branches for future operations”.¹¹¹ There were to be surprise bombardments, sniping was encouraged, and preparations were made to resume trench-raiding - an activity introduced by the British the previous winter. The essence of a raid was that the participants should make a surprise entry into the opposing trenches, inflict as many casualties as possible and return before the enemy could take counter-measures. Sometimes special tasks were added -the capture of prisoners for identification purposes, damaging mine shafts, or the destruction of enemy positions which could not be permanently held. Depending upon the size of the allotted task, raids were made in strengths varying from ten up to 200.¹¹² It may not be out of place to describe in some detail one or two of the earliest of these ventures.

The first recorded raid by Canadian troops had been staged by Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry on the last day of February 1915 (above, p. 88), less than a week before the 1st Canadian Division entered the line. The first such venture carried out by the Canadian Corps was a joint effort astride the Douve River by parties of the 5th and 7th Battalions (2nd Infantry Brigade) on the night of 16-17 November. There had been a postponement from the previous night because rains had swollen the Douve (at that time of the year usually eight to ten feet wide and three to four deep) to three times its normal width and to a depth often feet.¹¹³ The sudden flood precipitated many a hasty move to higher ground, in the course of which some battalion headquarters lost part of their regimental records. But there was a silver lining, as one regimental historian



LA PETITE DOUVE: NIGHT RAID, BY 2nd CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
2.30 A.M. 17 NOVEMBER 1915

points out. Thereafter, whenever a harassed adjutant was asked to furnish “inconvenient information”, the relevant document would almost invariably turn out to have disappeared in the flood!¹¹⁴

The object of the double raid was threefold: to secure prisoners, to induce the Germans to bring up their reserves and so offer a good target for the Canadian artillery, and to lower the enemy’s morale. Preparations began ten days beforehand with the selection of five officers and 85 volunteers from the 7th Battalion (including 23 men to be in reserve), and a similar party from the 5th Battalion. Excused all other duties, these rehearsed night and day on ground which closely reproduced the objective and its approaches. Their training included practice with portable bridging ladders and in crossing wire by means of specially prepared “traversor” mats.¹¹⁵ Immediately north of the river the German line curved outward across the Messines-Ploegsteert road to form a salient 500 yards long which took in the farmstead called La Petite Douve, west of the road.

The strongly-held angle of the trenches between the river and the farm was the 7th Battalion's objective. As a diversion the 5th Battalion party would strike some 400 yards to the south-east. Patrolling by the 2nd Brigade had not only served to familiarize battalion scouts with the approaches to the objective, but had been vigorous enough to force the enemy (the 11th Reserve Regiment, of the 117th Division) to abandon listening posts outside his wire.¹¹⁶

At 9:00 a.m. on 16 November, 18-pounders of the 1st Canadian Field Brigade and British howitzers joined by the 13-pounders of the R.C.H.A. began shelling the enemy wire, and during the afternoon a trench mortar battery bombarded Petite Douve Farm. That night, while two parties placed 60-pound portable bridges over the Douve, another group completed cutting the wire by hand where the guns had failed in their task.¹¹⁷

All identifying marks had been removed from clothing, and the raiders carried no distinguishing Canadian equipment such as the Ross rifle. All wore crepe masks. Attached to their Lee-Enfields were flashlights to be turned on in the enemy trenches so as to dazzle the occupants of the dug-outs. The route up to no man's land was marked by white stakes. So carefully had all details been arranged that "everything and every party", says the official report, "was in its place" to the minute. At 2:30 a.m. on the 17th, about an hour after an almost full moon had set, the two groups crept forward towards the German positions. A setback occurred when leading elements of the 5th Battalion's party became entangled in wire which had been placed in a water-filled moat along the foot of the German parapet. While they were extricating themselves with great difficulty, the enemy opened rifle fire, to which the raiders replied with grenades. Unable either to cross the obstacle or to get around it, the party withdrew shortly before three, surprisingly without having suffered a single casualty.

Meanwhile the 7th Battalion party had reached its objective and caught the enemy completely by surprise, for his sentries had taken cover from the rain which was just beginning to fall. There was virtually no resistance. Canadian blocking parties wired the flanks in anticipation of local counter-attacks which did not materialize. At the end of twenty minutes the raiders withdrew, having killed or wounded an estimated thirty Germans. They had gained useful information about the construction of the enemy trenches, and they escorted with them twelve prisoners, whose new rubber gas-masks were a prize to Canadian intelligence officers. So orderly was the Canadians' return to their own lines that they were able to salvage most of their special equipment, including one of the bridges. German reserves who counter-attacked in strength forty minutes later were promptly engaged with artillery and driven off. The 7th Battalion's only casualties had been one man accidentally shot and killed and another slightly wounded. The success of the whole venture was credited to the thoroughness with which the enemy's position had been scouted in advance, the careful selection of personnel and equipment, the thorough training and rehearsal to meet every contingency, the explicitness of the orders for the operation, and the excellent cooperation which the infantry had received from the artillery. In the

eyes of the British Official Historian it was in all respects a model raid.¹¹⁸

On the night of 14-15 December the 5th Battalion carried out another raid that resulted in the capture of an advanced barrier which the Germans had placed across the Messines-Ploegsteert road in no man's land, on the Canadian side of the Douve River. Preliminary bombardment on the three preceding days and nights deceived the enemy as to the time of attack, which was put in at four in the morning after an 18-pounder, brought right up to the front line, had fired 26 rounds at point-blank range. The assault went exactly as planned. The obstacle was seized in the face of little opposition. Of those members of the garrison who had not evacuated the position two were taken prisoner and the rest killed. The raiders had only one officer and one man slightly wounded.¹¹⁹

Winter in the Line

After the excitement of these raids had passed, the year drew uneventfully to its close. For all the emphasis on aggressiveness and training, the troops devoted much of their energies to trench maintenance and to making themselves as comfortable as possible. They had much to contend with. "The Flanders rain was like no other rain that had ever fallen on earth", comments one regimental historian.

There was no escape from it. The trenches, which were nothing more than sandbagged breastworks, simply dissolved. The earth within the sandbags liquefied and oozed out. Everything collapsed. Every indentation of the ground filled with water, and, to make things worse, the enemy, being on higher ground, delighted in draining his trenches across No Man's Land into those occupied by the Canadians.¹²⁰

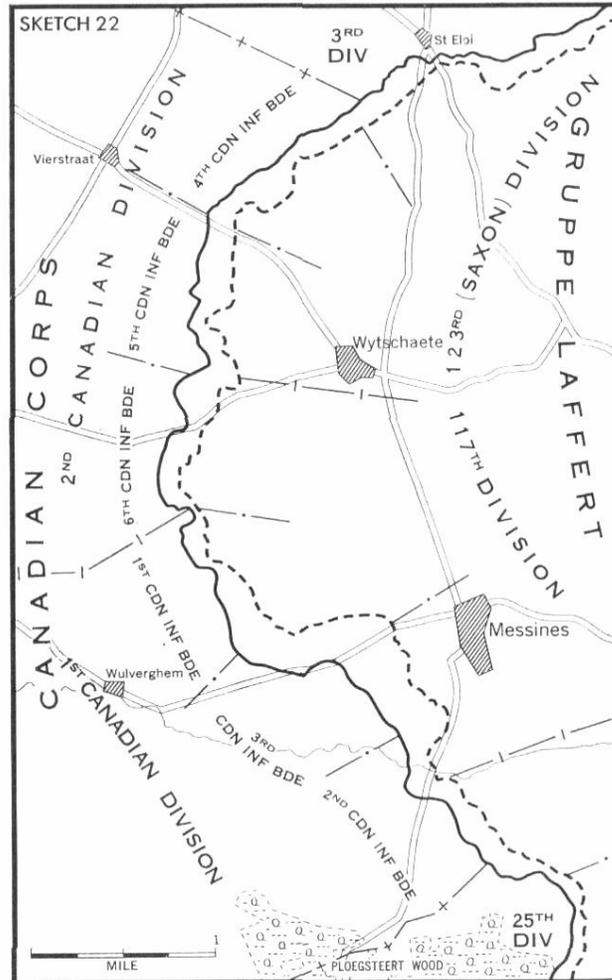
The misery of Salisbury Plain was being repeated, and the troops had no means of shielding themselves against the cold and the wet. Although men stood for days in thigh-deep water, there were not enough high rubber waders* to go round. Trench shelters caved in, leaving no protection from the teeming skies. Conditions were little better back in billets, where roofs leaked and it was all but impossible to coax more than a noxious-smelling smoke out of the damp coke and charcoal that came up with the rations. In the trenches the daily rum ration of half a gill (1/64 of a gallon) helped to ward off the ill effects of wet clothing and exposure to cold. Its distribution was regulated by Trench Orders, which directed that the rum should always be kept under the personal charge of the company commander and issued only in the presence of an officer. Men undergoing punishment for drunkenness would receive no rum for 14 days after the offence, except for medical reasons.¹²²

It was inevitable that there should be much influenza and other respiratory ailments. In spite of preventive efforts by the medical authorities, by

* These waders were issued as trench stores (to be used only in the trenches). Late in the previous winter 3500 pairs were ordered for the 1st Division but these did not arrive until the spring floods had subsided. Early in November 1915 the scale of issue was increased to 4000 for each division.¹²¹

THE CANADIAN CORPS FRONT

23 DECEMBER 1915



regimental officers and by the troops themselves, the number of such cases in the Corps rose from 796 in October to 1198 in November.¹²³ To reduce the wastage incurred in evacuating men back to a general hospital, minor cases of sickness requiring not more than seven days' treatment were retained at the Corps or one of the Divisional Rest Stations. Each of these had a capacity of about 250 beds, and was operated in turn by the field ambulances during periods of inactivity in the front line. During active operations the rest station closed and the unit would resume its function as a field ambulance.¹²⁴

One environmental ailment which was particularly distressing and hard to cure was "trench feet", resulting from "continued cold wetness ... with added secondary infection from the soil".¹²⁵ This condition, like frostbite (from which it differed only in degree), was characterized by a swelling of the feet and a

deterioration of the tissues which soon changed to gangrene if not checked. Preventive measures were the wearing of either rubber boots or well-greased leather boots-in either case, of large size-keeping puttees loose, rubbing feet and legs with whale oil, and frequently changing socks. Failure to prevent trench feet was considered a breach of discipline for which a whole unit might be punished by curtailment of leave; nevertheless 157 cases were admitted during the period 2-5 December 1915 by one hospital alone and before the end of the war nearly 5000 cases had been reported.¹²⁶

For those few who were able to avoid disease and exposure there was the inescapable monotony of static warfare. Enterprising sappers of the 1st Canadian Divisional Signal Company did much to lift the pall of boredom by constructing a long wave receiving set from parts salvaged in the battle area of the previous spring. These men operated "a most successful Press Bureau at Divisional Headquarters", and to them must go the credit for inaugurating the Wireless Service of the Canadian forces in France.¹²⁷

Christmas Day passed quietly. The more fortunate units were those in reserve who could eat their Christmas dinner in billets. There was little activity in the forward trenches. The German artillery was silent and in at least one instance the infantry of both sides walked about in the open behind their forward trenches, without a shot being exchanged. But there was none of the large-scale fraternization that had characterized the unofficial "Christmas Truce" between British and German troops in 1914. The memory of the gas attack at Ypres still rankled, and front-line battalions were instructed that any attempt by the enemy "to bring about a temporary cessation of hostilities" must be met by rifle, and if necessary artillery fire.¹²⁸

On Christmas Day instructions reached Corps Headquarters authorizing the formation of the 3rd Canadian Division. The work of transforming the headquarters of the Corps Troops into the new divisional headquarters began at once, and by the end of December two of the new brigades (below, p. 134) had assembled.¹²⁹ The turn of the year thus found the Canadian Corps well settled in and in process of expanding. Since its origin in mid-September the Corps, without having been involved in any major operations, had suffered 2692 casualties, of which 688 were fatal.

When the Canadian Corps and the 2nd Division were organized the shortage of staff-trained Canadian officers had resulted in a number of staff positions being filled by British officers. At the end of November, when command and staff appointments for the 3rd Division were being made, Sir Max Aitken asked the Minister of Militia for "explicit instructions on the whole question of British or Canadian officers filling junior staff posts". He declared, "I have practically exhausted my strength in fighting against selection [of] British officers for artillery commands, brigade artillery and even regimental artillery."¹³⁰ Sir Sam's* reply instructed Aitken to "protest most emphatically

* General Hughes had been knighted (K.C.B.) on 24 August 1915.

against staff and other positions in Canadian force being filled by British officers". Hughes assailed what he called "staff college paternalism", asserting that "the men who fought well at St. Julien and Festubert require no staff college theorists to direct them".¹³¹

The Canadian viewpoint was further impressed on the Colonial Secretary when Sir George Perley showed him a letter from Sir Robert Borden which went so far as to observe that "Apparently there is some movement by the British professional soldiers, or officials of the War Office and British Staff Officers to supersede Canadians in the higher commands of our troops.* Any such attempt would be fraught with the most disastrous consequences to British interest and the interest of the whole Empire. "You may tell Mr. Bonar Law, Lord Kitchener and Mr. Asquith for me that we will not permit anything of the kind." 133 After discussing the matter with Mr. Bonar Law, Perley wrote him a letter, which was referred by Lord Kitchener to Sir Douglas Haig.¹³⁴ On 7 January Perley received the Colonial Secretary's assurance that Lord Kitchener "is doing all he possibly can to fill all Canadian appointments with Canadian officers".¹³⁵

It must be concluded that Sir Robert Borden had allowed himself to be unduly influenced by the attitude of Sir Max Aitken and Sir Sam Hughes, and that in trying to meet the increasing demands for qualified officers the British authorities were indeed, as Mr. R.B. Bennett put it, "desirous of treating the Canadians more than well".¹³⁶ Yet while it cannot be denied that the War Office supplied the Canadian Corps with good officers, signs were not lacking of understandable British reluctance to relinquish control over the forces from the Commonwealth. Indeed it may be argued that if Hughes, Aitken and Borden had not taken such a strong stand when they did, the Canadian Corps might never have attained its high standard of morale and efficiency.

* In the opinion of Sir Robert Borden's Parliamentary Secretary, Mr. R.B. Bennett, the Prime Minister's strong criticism of the War Office was not justified. Bennett regarded some of Aitken's cables as unwarranted, and accused him of being "at war with what he calls the 'Trade Union' of the soldiers". And he added, "I do fear that we are being used to aid him in that quarrel."¹³²