CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLES OF THE SOMME, JULY-NOVEMBER 1916

(See Maps 5 and 6, and Sketches 25-36)

The First Two Months

BEFORE FOLLOWING the Canadians to the Somme it may be useful to survey the situation awaiting them there and to look briefly at the general progress of the war to the end of August 1916.

The Somme offensive had no great geographical objectives. Its purpose was threefold - to relieve pressure on the French armies at Verdun, to inflict as heavy losses as possible on the German armies, and to aid allies on other fronts by preventing any further transfer of Germany troops from the west.[1] (To these motives may be added Sir Douglas Haig's hope of convincing those critics of Allied strategy who advocated offensives only in distant theatres that Germany was not invincible on the Western Front.)[2]

The time and place of the offensive were largely dictated by the demands of Marshal Joffre. Although Haig enjoyed independent command-"unity of command" in France was still almost two years away - it was his practice to meet French wishes wherever possible if the tactical implications were not likely to be seriously disadvantageous to his own forces. He would have preferred to mount an offensive north of the River Lys, in the Messines area, with the possibility of cutting off the Germans to the north and then turning south to roll up the enemy flank.[3] But Joffre's determination to launch an offensive at the Somme (in a sector that held few strategic possibilities) meant that the British effort would take place there, immediately on the French left. There was indeed no other place for a joint attack; the relief of General d'Urbal's Tenth Army in the Arras sector by British forces early in March had left no large body of French troops north of the Somme valley. Left to himself Haig would have postponed his assault until his striking power had been strengthened by the arrival of more men and ammunition, and a new weapon as yet untried in battle - the tank; but, as he recorded in his diary on 26 May, "The moment I mentioned August 15th, Joffre at once got very excited and shouted that 'The French Army would cease to exist if we did nothing till then'."[4] The date was set at 1 July.

Joffre had originally intended a frontal assault by two French armies and one British on a sixty-mile front. But the costly defence of Verdun, coming on top of the staggering French losses in the first two years of war, was to reduce France's initial participation to a single army of only eight divisions. The weight of the offensive would thus be borne by the British, whose contribution was increased to an army and a corps, involving 21 divisions (with eight more, five of them cavalry divisions, in G.H.Q. reserve). The area of attack was shortened to 24 miles. It extended from the Gommecourt sector, midway between Arras and the Somme, to a point four miles south of the river.[5]

From Peronne to Amiens the Somme flows westward through a broad valley cut in the great northern French plain. In contrast to the flat country south of the river, to the north were rolling chalk downs intersected by occasional streams and numerous sunken roads. The most prominent feature in the battle area was the eight-mile long low ridge running from Thiepval to Ginchy and Morval, which rose to a height of 500 feet above sea level, dominating the uplands to the north and east, and forming the watershed between the Somme and its tributary the Ancre. It was sometimes called the Pozières ridge, from the village of that name near the highest part of the crest on the Amiens-Cambrai road. The whole rich countryside was dotted with large villages, and isolated farms were few. The only natural obstacle to the movement of troops was an occasional wooded area and the marshy flats of the two rivers.

At the end of June the front ran generally south from Gommecourt, cutting the Amiens-Cambrai road a mile and a half north-east of Albert; three miles farther south it went eastward for another three miles to skirt the southern slopes of the Thiepval-Morval ridge, before continuing southward to a 1oop of the marshy Somme flood-bed near Maricourt. The enemy's forward position, which was protected by two great belts of wire entanglement each thirty yards wide, consisted of three trench lines about 150 yards apart. The first of these held a row of sentry groups; the front-line garrison lived in the second; and in the third were the local supports. From 2000 to 5000 yards to the rear a strong second position occupied a commanding site along the Poziéres ridge. This was as well wired as the forward defences, and in both of them dug-outs excavated 20 to 30 feet deep in the chalk subsoil, each able to hold 25 men, were designed to give ample protection against artillery bombardment. An intermediate line of strongpoints had been constructed 1000 yards behind the front position.

In accordance with General von Falkenhayn's adherence to the doctrine of the rigid defence of a line, the front position was strongly garrisoned, so that the bulk of each front-line regiment was within 1000 yards of no man's land. (At the beginning of the Somme battles it was customary for a front-line regiment to have two of its battalions in or near the foremost trench system and the third divided between the intermediate strongpoints and the Second Position.)[6]

On the right the French Sixth Army (General Marie Emile Fayolle) was to attack astride the Somme on a six-mile front with two divisions on the north bank and four on the south. North of the inter-allied boundary, which ran through

Maricourt, just north of the river, General Sir Henry Rawlinson's new Fourth Army would deliver the main assault with thirteen divisions (plus five in reserve) on a front of sixteen miles. On his left a corps of three divisions from General Sir Edmund Allenby's Third Army was to make a subsidiary attack on Gommecourt in order to hold German forces there and attract enemy reserves to that sector. As an added deception, during the latter part of June the remainder of the Third Army farther north, and the First and Second Armies beyond, had been simulating preparations for an offensive on their fronts.

These activities do not appear to have had the desired effect. On the right wing of the German Second Army, which was holding the sector north of the Somme, preparations for attack had been observed since the end of February, and on the basis of accumulating evidence by 19 June Crown Prince Rupprecht was certain that a big attack here was imminent.[7] The movement of German divisions in early summer to the Fourth and Sixth Armies had been modest attempts to replace first class troops that had been withdrawn for service in the battle of Verdun. But as early as 23 May the High Command had made it possible for General von Below to strengthen the northern wing of his Second Army by inserting the 2nd Guard Reserve Division in the Gommecourt sector. On 1 July von Below had in the line north of the Somme five and two-thirds divisions; south of the river in the sector to come under attack he had three divisions.[*] These formations were supported by 598 light and 246 heavy pieces of artillery, and 104 aircraft.[8]

The Royal Flying Corps dominated the sky above the Somme with 185 aircraft; but on the ground, even with 471 heavy guns and howitzers (including sixteen 220-mm. howitzers attached from the French), the British superiority in artillery was to prove insufficient. The objectives given by Sir Douglas Haig reflected the optimism caught from General Joffre, who was convinced that a strong initial assault on a wide front could break through both the German front line and Second Position.[9] The Fourth Army was to seize and consolidate a position on the Pozières ridge extending from Montauban, near the boundary with the French, to Serre, two miles north of the Ancre. This meant in effect an advance of about a mile and a half on a front of 22,000 yards, and from Pozières north would involve the capture of nearly five miles of the German second line of defence.

The Allied attack went in at 7:30 a.m. on 1 July. A devastating seven-day bombardment interspersed with repeated discharges of gas over the enemy lines had kept the Germans continually on the alert, but they were expecting trouble only on the north side of the river, in the British sector. Consequently the French forces were only lightly opposed, and reached their initial objectives with comparative ease. General Rawlinson's right wing succeeded in taking the

[*] North of the Somme were, from north to south, the 2nd Guard Reserve, 52nd Infantry, 26th (Württemberg) Reserve, 28th Reserve and 12th Infantry Divisions, with two-thirds of the 10th Bavarian Infantry division distributed at salient points. South of the river in the sector of the Allied attack were the 121st, 11th and 35th Infantry Divisions. Four more divisions completed the Second Army's Order of Battle. In addition, in army reserve were two and one third divisions, and in High Command reserve (place directly under the Second Army on 1 July) were three more.

German forward position, but elsewhere on the British front most of the gains, achieved at tremendous cost, were only temporary and were relinquished before nightfall. Although the million and a half shells fired during the preliminary bombardment and the opening day of the assault had wrought havoc with the German surface positions, it had left many of the deep dug-outs intact - a failure that was blamed upon a shortage of heavy howitzers and a large amount of defective ammunition. As a result the recruits of the Territorial and New Armies (whose valour that day proved itself beyond question), as they pressed forward at a "steady pace" in the then orthodox but inelastic line formation, were mowed down by the German machine-gunners who, having remained safe below ground during bombardment and barrage, had quickly emerged from their dug-outs to man their weapons. British losses in this day's fighting numbered 57,470.[10] It was on this day that the 1st Newfoundland Regiment was virtually annihilated when attacking German trenches south of Beaumont Hamel. (See below, p. 508).

For twelve more days the Battle of Albert continued, as Sir Douglas Haig attempted to exploit the success of his right wing. Then in a great dawn assault on 14 July (the Battle of Bazentin Ridge) the 13th and 15th Corps, attacking midway between the Somme and the Ancre, broke into the German Second Position on a front of six thousand yards. In this operation the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was attached to the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division. (Although the division was not called on for exploitation, a squadron of the Fort Garry Horse* carried out a minor task.)[11] Nine days later the 13th Corps captured most of Delville Wood, a mile west of Ginchy, while the 1st Anzac Corps took Pozières, on the Amiens- Bapaume-Cambrai road. These operations secured a substantial footing on the Thiepval-Morval ridge. During August and the first half of September the British maintained heavy pressure on the Germans. Haig's intention was by "giving the enemy no rest and no respite from anxiety"[12] to wear down his weakening resistance to a point where another powerful attack would break through his remaining defences. By the time Ginchy fell on 9 September most of the Second Position was in British hands, and along the Somme the French had almost reached Peronne. At the point of deepest penetration the line had been advanced about 7000 yards. But the Thiepval end of the plateau was still untaken, and the line to the north stood as at the beginning of the offensive. The two months of ceaseless fighting to the end of August had cost nearly 200,000 British and more than 70,000 French casualties. The Germans, committed to a costly defence by von Falkenhayn's order of 2 July not to abandon one foot of ground, or to retake it at all costs if lost, had suffered an estimated 200,000 casualties. It was being found necessary to replace German divisions after only fourteen days in the line.

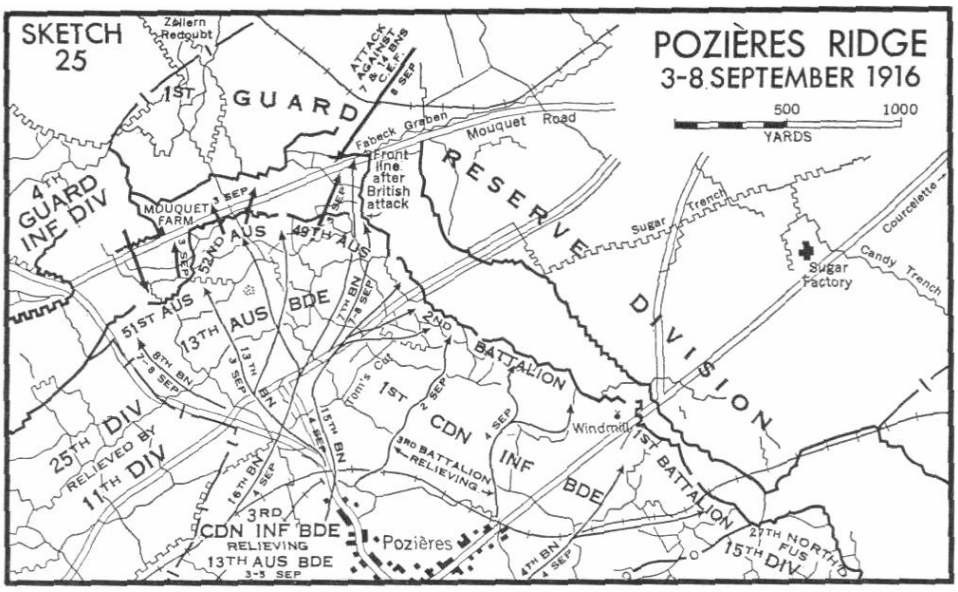
One of the Allied purposes had quickly been achieved. Early in July the enemy had abandoned his offensive against Verdun, thereby freeing further forces on both sides for action on the Somme. Meanwhile in the other land

* This unit had joined the Brigade at the end of February 1916, replacing the 2nd King Edward's Horse.

theatres, and on the sea, the war was going reasonably well for the Entente. The Battle of Jutland (31 May-I June), although claimed as a German victory, had not shaken Britain's naval supremacy; and after one more sortie by the German High Sea Fleet in mid-August the enemy largely restricted his naval activity to submarine warfare. Italy and Russia were both carrying their share of the Allied programme of coordinated operations. The Austrian Tyrol offensive of May having failed, the Chief of the Italian General Staff, General Luigi Cadorna, had been free to renew operations across his north-eastern border into Austria. An attack with 22 divisions over the Isonzo (the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo), begun on 6 August, had resulted in the capture of Gorizia on the 9th. At the same time the Russians, having successfully withstood a German counter-effort south of the Pripet marshes in reply to the June Brusilov offensive, launched a new attack in Galicia on 7 August. They drove the Austrians back in front of Lemberg, and farther south they made substantial progress towards the Carpathians. To meet this threat the enemy brought down all the forces that he could spare from the northern end of his long Eastern Front and, in spite of the demands of Verdun and the Somme, he reinforced from the west. By the end of August ten complete German divisions had moved east, including one for a campaign against the Central Powers' newest adversary, Rumania, which after a long period of sitting on the fence had declared war on Austria on the 27th.[13]

The entry of Rumania, added to the German failure at Verdun and the heavy losses on the Somme, led to the dismissal of von Falkenhayn. One of Germany's ablest leaders, he had restored the confidence of the German armies after their failure under von Moltke at the Marne, and in 1915 had driven the Russians out of Poland and Galicia and brought about the defeat of Serbia. But in 1916, instead of exploiting these successes in the east he had turned to an offensive in the west, where he was now blamed for having underestimated the power of the Allies and for becoming involved at Verdun while Russia was still a formidable antagonist. The new Chief of the General Staff, and soon in effect the Supreme Commander of all the armies of the Central Powers, was Field-Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, who since November 1914 had been Commander-in-Chief in the East. Lieut.-General Erich Ludendorff, who had been closely associated with Hindenburg since August 1914, came with him. Together they had won the battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, and devised the great drive against the Russians in 1915. Now, as First Quartermaster General, Ludendorff was to share joint responsibility with von Hindenburg in the conduct of operations.[14]

Von Falkenhayn's last action before leaving to lead an offensive against Rumania was to reorganize the command of the German forces at the Somme. In mid-July von Below's troops north of the Somme had been formed into a new First Army, under his command; across the river the front remained Second Army, now under General von Gallwitz, who was given temporary charge of the two-army group. On 28 August von Falkenhayn added the Sixth Army (opposite Arras), placing the enlarged group under Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria.



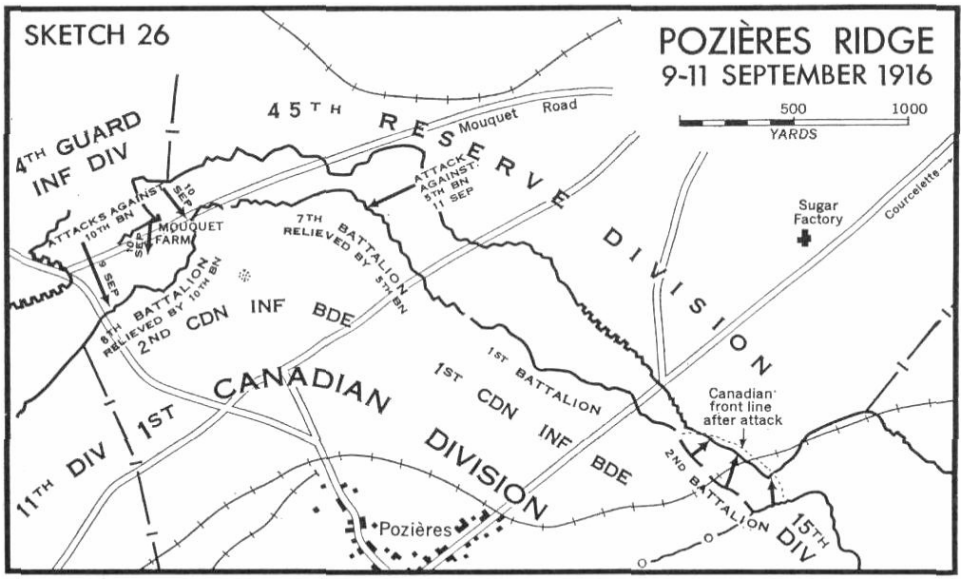
It was the first time on the Western Front that the Headquarters of a Group of Armies had been formed as a separate command, with its own special staff.[15]

Von Falkenhayn's final instructions were to maintain a strict defensive, in order to conserve forces for an emergency. Better than anyone he now realized Germany's perilous shortage of trained troops. "Beneath the enormous pressure which rests on us", he wrote on 21 August, "we have no superfluity of strength. Every removal in one direction leads eventually to dangerous weakness in another place which may lead to our destruction if even the slightest miscalculation is made in estimating the measures the enemy may be expected to take."[16] The Allied decisions taken at Chantilly seemed to be bearing fruit.

Canadians at the Somme

On 30 August the Canadian Corps began relieving the 1st Anzac Corps about Pozières. General Byng assumed command of the new sector on 3 September. It was the first strategical move for the Corps, and involved an exchange of responsibility with the Australians for fronts fifty miles apart. The Corps now formed part of General Sir Hubert Gough's recently constituted "Reserve Army", which on 3 July had taken over from the Fourth Army the northern part of the Somme battlefront.

It was General Sir Douglas Haig's wish that the Canadians should have a chance to settle in before taking part in an offensive. A G.H.Q. directive on 19 August had announced the Commander-in-Chiefs intention to deliver a strong attack about the middle of September using "fresh forces and all available resources".[17] This was the role to which the Canadian Corps had been summoned. While the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions prepared for the battle, the 1st



Division held the whole of the Corps front - three thousand yards of battered trenches running westward along the Pozières ridge from the boundary with the Fourth Army (just east of Pozières) to a point 700 yards west of Mouquet Farm, a stronghold in the German Second Position based on a nest of deep dug-outs which six bitter Australian assaults had failed to capture. As we shall see, the Division's tour of duty was not as uneventful as Sir Douglas Haig had intended it should be.

The Australians' final attempt to capture Mouquet Farm was made on 3 September by their 13th Brigade, which had the 13th Battalion, of the relieving 3rd Canadian Brigade, temporarily under command. The attack, while failing to secure the farm, gained 300 yards of Fabeck Graben, a German trench running north-eastward towards Courcelette. In attempting to extend this holding two companies of the Canadian battalion suffered 322 casualties. The relief of the Australians was completed on the morning of the 5th, and for three more days the 3rd Canadian Brigade continued to hold under heavy fire and frequent counter-attack more than two thousand yards of line, including the captured portion of Fabeck Graben. The brigade's 970 casualties in this period gave it good reason to remember its first tour of duty at the Somme. Early on 8 September, during a relief by the 2nd Brigade, the Germans regained the now almost obliterated section of Fabeck Graben.[18]

Next day the Canadians slightly improved their positions, when the 2nd Canadian Battalion captured a portion of a German trench about 500 yards long south of the Cambrai road. In gaining and retaining its objective (and thereby earning the congratulations of the Commander-in-Chief) the battalion owed much to the valour of one of its junior N.C.Os.-Corporal Leo Clarke. While clearing a continuation of the newly-captured trench during the construction of a

permanent block on the battalion flank, most of the members of his small bombing party were killed or wounded and their supply of grenades was exhausted. Clarke was building a temporary barricade when an enemy party of twenty, led by two officers, counter-attacked down the trench. Coolly the corporal fought them off. Twice he emptied into the Germans his own revolver, and then two abandoned enemy rifles. He shot and killed an officer who had bayoneted him in the legs and he is credited with having killed or wounded at least sixteen enemy before the rest turned in flight. Then he shot down four more of the fleeing Germans, and captured a fifth -the sole enemy survivor.[19] His courageous action brought Corporal Clarke the first of two Victoria Crosses to be won by his battalion. He was killed five weeks later, before the award was announced.

The Battle of Flers-Courcelette

The Battle of Flers-Courcelette, the two-army assault launched by Sir Douglas Haig on 15 September, was fought on a wider front than its name suggests. The two villages are three miles apart, but the battle area extended for ten miles from Combles, on the French left, to Thiepval, overlooking the east bank of the Ancre. General Rawlinson's Fourth Army, delivering the main attack with three corps, had as objectives Flers and the neighbouring villages of Morval, Lesboeufs and Gueudecourt, all of which were defended by the German Third Position. Work on this strong system had begun in February 1916, and had been completed since the offensive opened on 1 July. It was hoped that a breakthrough here would open the way for cavalry to advance on Bapaume. The Reserve Army's task was to protect the left flank, and to attack with the Canadian Corps to secure in the neighbourhood of Courcelette points of observation over the Third Position. On the left of the Canadians the Second Corps would exert pressure south of Thiepval. Two innovations were expected to give considerable support to the assault-a creeping barrage, which the artillery had only recently adopted*, and the employment of a completely new engine of war, the tank.[21]

The heavy toll exacted in 1915 by German automatic fire had stimulated efforts to invent some form of "machine-gun destroyer" which could negotiate hostile wire and trench. Early in the war an officer of the Royal Engineers, Lt. Col. (later Major-General Sir) E. D. Swinton, had experimented extensively on such a machine but had failed to interest the War Office in his project. He was helped considerably by the foresight of Mr. Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, who in January 1915 had urged on the Prime Minister the capabilities of "caterpillars"; and in the late summer of that year he won approval for the construction of a prototype of the new machine. A successful secret trial held on 2 February 1916 resulted in an order for 100. To conceal the nature of the new weapon, the designation "land-cruiser" or "land-ship" used in the

* Use of such a barrage had been discussed before the war, but because of ammunition shortages it had not been tried before the Somme offensive. Although not very effective in the Battle of Albert, by mid-September it had become an accepted factor of the attack.[20]

experimental stage was changed to “tank”, and rumours that these odd creations were water-wagons intended for the Middle East or snow-ploughs for the Russian front were not discouraged.[22]

The model that was soon to appear in battle (the Mark I) was 26½ feet long with a six-foot “tail” (two heavy wheels in rear to minimize shock and aid steering); it was almost 14 feet wide and about 7-1/2 feet high. Fully equipped it weighed 28 tons. A six-cylinder, 105-horsepower Daimler engine gave it a maximum speed of 3.7 miles an hour, a pace that would be reduced to half a mile an hour in heavily shelled ground. It could cross a trench ten feet wide. Tanks were designated “male” or “female” according to armament. The “male” was armed with two six-pounder guns and four Hotchkiss machine-guns for destroying enemy machine-gun posts; the “female” carried only machine-guns - five Vickers and one Hotchkiss - for employment against enemy personnel.[23] The crew, provided by the Heavy Branch Machine Gun Corps (later renamed the Tank Corps), numbered one officer and seven men. The first tanks were shipped to France in mid-August, and early in September a small training centre was set up near Abbeville for the two newly formed companies (each comprising 25 machines) allotted to the forthcoming battle. There was time only for crews to acquire skill in driving and gunnery, and very little opportunity for infantry and tanks to train together.[24]

One other novel feature of the attack on 15 September was that in general (except in the Canadian Corps’ sector) it was planned not as a continuous advance to a final line but in limited bounds to a series of successive objectives. The July battles had exposed the fallacy of trusting to the preliminary bombardment to wipe out all opposition. No longer army commanders dared emphasize that “nothing could exist at the conclusion of the bombardment in the area covered by it”,[25] and imply that the infantry would be able to walk over at leisure and take possession. Almost invariably the infantry had encountered bitter resistance, so that frequently even if the first wave reached its distant goal it had become too exhausted and reduced by casualties to complete its task; and later waves, following across no man’s land at intervals of 100 yards, had found themselves similarly exposed to deadly fire from the uncaptured position. Official doctrine was not as yet ready to accept the idea of advancing by small detachments instead of in waves; infiltration was yet unknown. Once the artillery had done its allotted part the responsibility was the infantry’s -and there was supreme faith in numbers. To the end of the Somme battles unit and formation commanders were to be governed by the training instructions issued by General Headquarters in May: “.... in many instances experience has shown that to capture a hostile trench a single line of men has usually failed, two lines have generally failed but sometimes succeeded, three lines have generally succeeded but sometimes failed, and four or more lines have usually succeeded.”[26]

Although limited, the bounds prescribed at Flers-Courcelette were long enough by later standards, amounting to as much as 1900 yards on the Fourth Army’s front. The Canadian Corps, attacking on the Reserve Army’s right flank

with two divisions on a 2200-yard front, was to advance in a single bound which from 1000 yards on the right fell away to less than 400 yards on the left. Objectives of the 2nd Division, making the main effort astride the Albert-Bapaume road, were the defences in front of Courcelette. These included Candy Trench (which ran north-west from Martinpuich), the strongly fortified ruins of a sugar factory beside the Bapaume road, and some 1500 yards of Sugar Trench, which cut across Candy. On the left Major-General Lipsett's 3rd Division, its front held by the 8th Brigade, was charged with providing flank protection.

Of the forty-nine tanks available for the operation, the Reserve Army's share of seven were all allotted to General Turner. This Canadian armour was organized in two detachments of three tanks each, one tank being kept in reserve. The right-hand detachment, working with the 4th Canadian Brigade, had orders to advance at top speed astride the Bapaume road through a lane in the artillery barrage, and to engage hostile machine-guns in Martinpuich and at the sugar factory. The tanks supporting the 6th Brigade on the left were to move up behind the barrage and "cover the left flank of the advancing Infantry and assist in mopping up." On reaching the sugar factory they would "attack any machine guns there or in Courcelette that they can deal with".[27] Five infantrymen were assigned to each tank, to walk ahead and remove casualties from its path.

Zero hour was at 6:20 a.m. on 15 September, and promptly the guns standing almost wheel to wheel in Sausage Valley behind Pozières joined in the tremendous bombardment that burst from the mile upon mile of batteries of all calibres massed along the front. The mechanical roar of the tanks as they ground their way forward added an unfamiliar note to the general din. In spite of sturdy resistance (from the 45th Reserve Division) the attack went well. The artillery had crushed opposition in the German front line trenches, which were taken in fifteen minutes. On the Canadian right the three assaulting battalions of the 4th Brigade were on their objectives by seven o'clock, the 21st Battalion taking 145 prisoners out of the ruins of the sugar factory. Half an hour later the 6th Brigade reported success west of the road.

The presence of the tanks encouraged many Germans to surrender, and brought from some of these bitter criticism that it was "not war but bloody butchery".[28] On the whole, however, the armour in its initial action failed to carry out the tasks assigned to it (though one tank, besides inflicting both physical and moral damage on the enemy, laid telephone wire from the forward infantry positions to the rear). All six tanks with the Canadians, either through becoming stuck or breaking down, were put out of action before or during the attack, in four cases as a result of shellfire. One failed to cross the start line; and of the other five, only one reached its objective.[29] Of the 32 tanks on the Fourth Army's start line at zero hour, only ten got fully forward to help the infantry win their objectives.[30] The rest bellied down or failed mechanically (for they had not been designed for such heavily cratered ground, and many miles of trial and demonstration had almost worn them out before the battle), or were destroyed or damaged by artillery fire. The tactical employment of armour had received little

study. It seems a questionable procedure to have distributed the machines piecemeal along the battle front, thereby removing them from the tank company commanders' control.* Properly coordinated action of artillery, tanks and infantry was still to be learned.

In reporting on the action General Turner, while forecasting that mopping up "will, in future, be the chief role of these engines", hinted at greater possibilities. "A portion of the tanks", he wrote, "should however be sent through to the final objective with the object of increasing the enemy's demoralization and keeping him on the run...Had we adopted some such policy on September 15th... Courcelette might well have been in our hands by 10 a.m." The Corps Commander's enthusiasm was similarly restrained: 'Tanks are a useful accessory to the infantry, but nothing more."[32] Nevertheless the Commander-in-Chief was highly pleased with the performance of the new weapon, and four days after the battle he asked the War Office for a thousand tanks.[33] Senior German commanders, on the other hand, were so little impressed with the tank that they did not -much to our advantage - immediately attempt to copy it; nor did they give due attention to the problem of anti-tank defence.[34]

Fabeck Graben and Zollern Graben, 15-20 September

Over on the left in front of Mouquet Farm the 8th Brigade had carried out its role successfully. To push home the advantage, less than an hour after the 2nd Division had reached its objectives General Turner directed the 4th and 6th Brigades to establish posts at the south end of Courcelette and along a sunken road which joined Courcelette and Martinpuich. German attempts later in the day to drive in these outposts suffered heavily from British artillery fire. At 11:10 a.m. General Byng issued orders for an attack that evening (the 15th) on Courcelette and on Fabeck Graben, which from the western end of the village ascended the long slope towards Mouquet Farm. To give time for the 3rd British Corps to occupy Martinpuich during the afternoon, the Canadian assault was scheduled for 6:00 p.m. The 5th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. A.H. Macdonell) was brought forward from corps reserve to make the effort on the right; the left-hand objectives were given to the 7th Brigade (Brig .-Gen. A.C. Macdonell).[35]

The second Canadian attack of the day was launched in broad daylight without any jumping-off place, a feature described by the Army Commander as being "without parallel in the present campaign".[36] After ten minutes of "smart bayonet fighting" on the right by the 22nd Battalion and five minutes on the left by the 25th, both units advanced straight through the town while the 26th Battalion began to mop up. Many of the defenders - the 210th and 211th Reserve

* Mr. Winston Churchill records that he was shocked when he learned from Mr. Lloyd George of a War Office proposal "to expose this tremendous secret to the enemy upon such a petty scale". He made a fruitless appeal to Mr. Asquith, the Prime Minister, to have the introduction of tanks into operations postponed until they could be employed in tactically profitable numbers.[31]

Regiments of the 45th Reserve Division - still remained in cellars and dug-outs, whose well-screened entrances made the clearing of Courcelette a two-day operation. Meanwhile, in front of the town, the 22nd and 25th Battalions came under repeated counter-attack - 14 in the case of the 22nd, seven during the first night. "If hell is as bad as what I have seen at Courcelette," Lt.-Col. T.L. Tremblay, commanding the 22nd, wrote in his diary, "I would not wish my worst enemy to go there."[37] Between 15 and 18 September, inclusive, the 22nd suffered 207 casualties, the 25th Battalion 222, and the 26th Battalion 224. German losses in the first five days included an estimated 1040 prisoners.[38] The regimental histories of the 45th Reserve Division indirectly pay tribute to the fighting qualities of their Canadian opponents at Courcelette.*

There was difficult fighting in the 3rd Division's sector. On the 7th Brigade's left the 42nd Battalion had gained its portion of the new line without much trouble. The Corps order had given no time for reconnaissance, however, and on the right the Patricias lost their way in broken ground from which all landmarks had been obliterated. Though raked by rifle and machine-gun fire as they struggled forward between the shell-holes, the Patricias reached the Fabeck Graben on their right, making contact with the 5th Brigade in Courcelette. Farther west two platoons linked up with the 42nd Battalion, but a 200-yard stretch of the German trench remained in enemy hands. Before dark the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles (8th Brigade) on the extreme left, in spite of heavy punishment from the German barrage and enfilade fire from Mouquet Farm, captured a further length of Fabeck Graben and established two blocks to form a firm flank. Shortly after eight the 49th Battalion helped to consolidate the 7th Brigade's holdings by taking some chalk pits beyond Fabeck Graben, though the nearby section of that trench remained in German hands. The Corps report of the day's operations made special mention of the excellent support provided by the 1st Motor Machine Gun Brigade,† whose Vickers had been in almost continual use. Throughout the night engineers of the 4th, 5th and 6th Field Companies directed parties from pioneer battalions working on communication trenches and strongpoints. In the meantime the infantry beat off a number of counter-attacks mounted from German positions north and east of Courcelette.

On the left of the Canadian Corps the 2nd British Corps had advanced its line some 400 yards nearer Thiepval. On the right, however, results had fallen short of expectation. The Fourth Army had broken through the German Third Position on a front of 4500 yards and captured Flers and Martinpuich, but the villages of Morval, Lesboeufs and Gueudecourt were still untaken. Farther south

* In one of the most moving passages of all Germans war literature the History of the 210th Reserve Regiment describes the annihilation of the Regiment's 2nd Battalion near Courcelette on 15 September 1916. The adjoining 211th Reserve Regiment, which carried the main burden at Courcelette itself, grimly recorded in its History casualties for the period (out of 75) and 1820 other ranks.

† During July and August 1916 the Borden, Eaton and Yukon Batteries had been attached to the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade for tactics. After 19 August Canadian infantry divisions ceased to have a motor machine gun battery on their strength. The entire motor machine gun strength became Corps Troops, being allotted special tasks at the discretion of the Corps Commander.[39]

the French Sixth Army, attacking astride the Somme, had made very little progress.[40]

A thousand yards beyond Mouquet Farm the Zollern Redoubt on the crest of the ridge formed one of the major strongholds of the German Second Position. It marked the midpoint of a long trench, Zollern Graben, which ascended the western slope from Thiepval and from the redoubt continued eastward to join Fabeck Graben about half a mile west of Courcelette. From their commanding position in Zollern Redoubt the Germans could enfilade the adjoining trenches with the most destructive machine-gun fire. Zollern Graben and Redoubt were given to the 3rd Division for a surprise attack on the evening of the 16th. The 7th Brigade would strike northwards from Fabeck Graben to Zollern Graben in order to secure a line from which the 9th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. F.W. Hill) might attack the redoubt from the east. But the first phase failed (for the opening bombardment had overshot the objective) and Brigadier Hill's attack had to be cancelled. In the meantime, bombing parties from the two battalions of the 7th Brigade on either side of the break in Fabeck Graben had worked their way inward on the German stronghold and sealed the gap, taking some sixty prisoners. The end of enemy resistance here was hastened by the action of Private J.C. Kerr (49th Battalion) who, though wounded, ran alone along the top of the trench, firing down upon the defenders and killing several; this heroism earned him the Victoria Cross.[41] The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles attacked Mouquet Farm with apparent success. That night troops of the 2nd British Corps began to relieve the Canadians, the 34th Brigade (11th Division) taking over the farm. It turned out, however, that the German garrison, far from being annihilated had taken refuge in tunnels. The 34th Brigade finally secured the troublesome position on the 26th.

The next few days were very wet, and there was only minor activity by both sides. The enemy had brought in fresh troops to hold the maze of trenches immediately east of Courcelette; and on the 17th an attempt by the 5th Brigade to push the line ahead there failed. On the morning of the 18th the 1st Canadian Division took over General Turner's sector, and two nights later the 4th Battalion twice had to fight off German attempts to re-enter Courcelette. Soon after the second of these, in a surprise dawn assault on the 20th, the 43rd and 58th Battalions of the 3rd Division gained a temporary footing in Zollern Graben; but the enemy, employing the newly arrived 26th Regiment of the 7th Division, counter- attacked under a smoke-screen, and after an all-morning struggle recovered most of his losses. Only the eastern end of Zollern, immediately adjoining the junction with Fabeck Graben, remained in Canadian hands. Over on the right the 1st Battalion on the evening of 22 September advanced some 500 yards east of Courcelette on a continuous front of half a mile, and in heavy fighting captured sections of the German front-line trenches.[42]

In its first major operation at the Somme the Canadian Corps had acquitted itself with credit, though the week's fighting had cost 7230 casualties.[*]

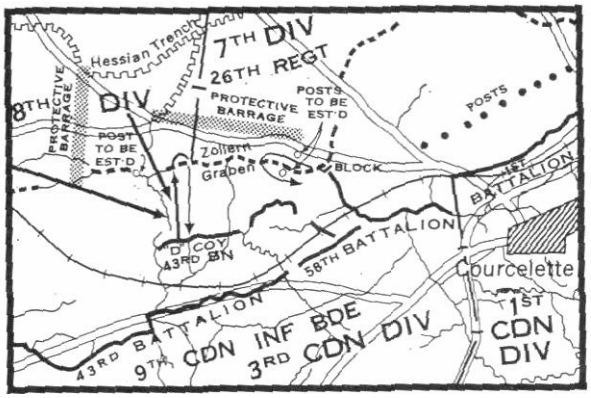
[*] All such figures, except where otherwise noted, refer to total Canadian losses in France and Belgium, and thus include some casualties outside the Corps.

SKETCH 27

THE COURCELETTE SECTOR

20 SEPTEMBER 1916

1000 500 1000
YARDS

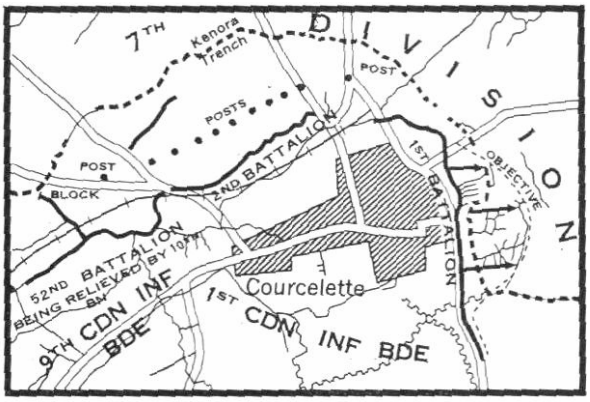


SKETCH 28

THE COURCELETTE SECTOR

22 SEPTEMBER 1916

100 500 1000
YARDS



"The result of the fighting of the 15th September and following days", wrote Sir Douglas Haig in his despatch, "was a gain more considerable than any which had attended our arms in the course of a single operation since the commencement of the offensive." Breaking through two of the enemy's main defensive systems, Allied troops had advanced on a front of six miles to an average depth of a mile and captured three large villages which the enemy had organized for a prolonged resistance.[43] Yet the main objectives were still untaken. The way to Bapaume was blocked by the strongly defended villages of Morval, Lesboeufs and Gueudecourt, and the enemy still held Combles and Thiepval at either end of the ridge. Bad weather and a shortage of ammunition for the French artillery postponed a renewal of the offensive until the 25th. The next phase was to be known as the Battle of Morval on the Fourth Army front, and by the Reserve Army as the Battle of Thiepval Ridge.

General Rawlinson's attack went in shortly after noon on the 25th, following a bombardment of nearly thirty hours. By nightfall Morval and Lesboeufs were in British hands, but Gueudecourt, which lay behind the enemy's fourth main system of defence, held out until the next day. With Morval lost the

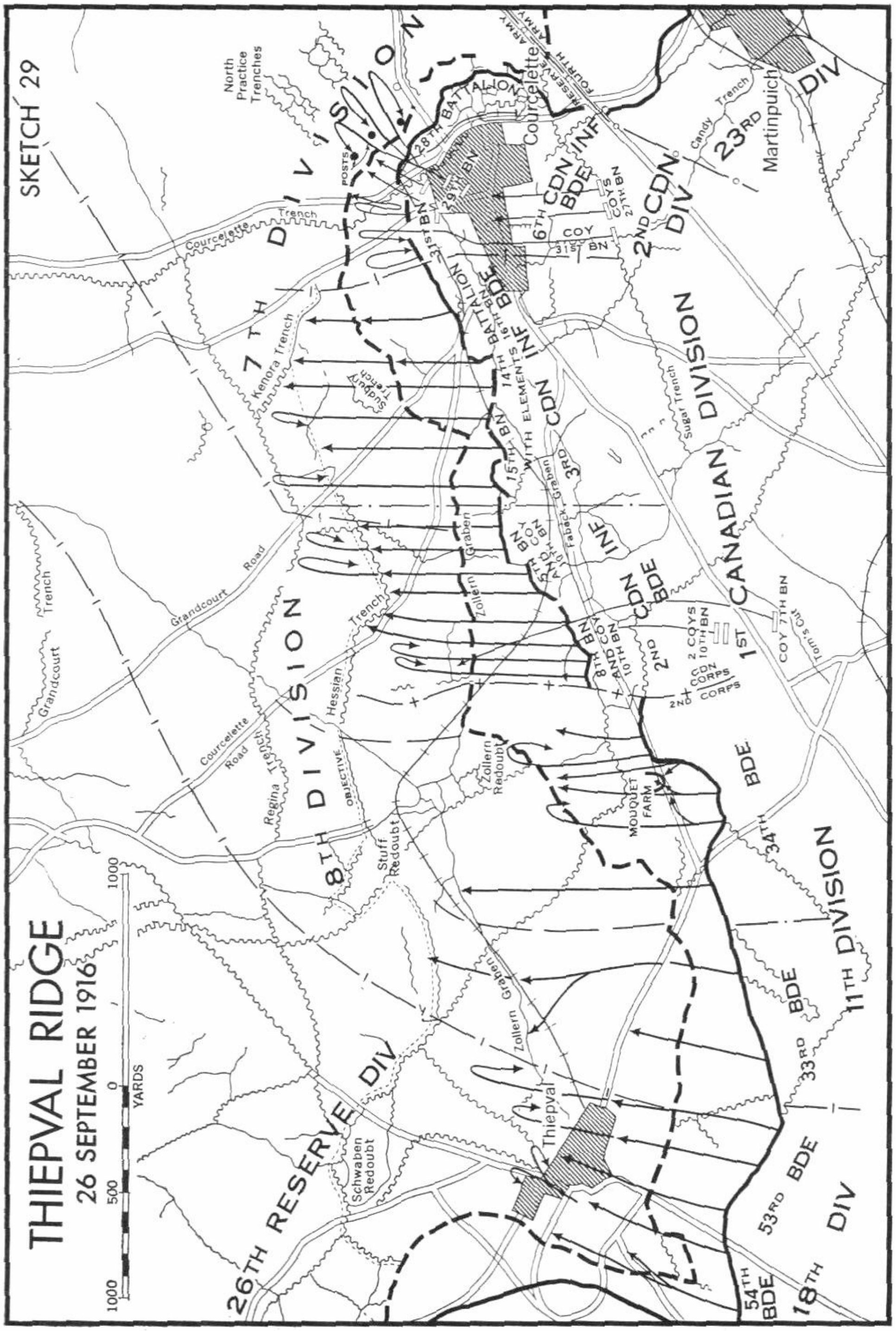
Germans withdrew from Combles under cover of darkness, and early on the 26th French and British patrols found the ruined village abandoned. The Battle of Morval had gained another belt of ground from Martinpuich to Combles averaging 2000 yards wide. To bring the left flank into line it was now necessary to capture the flattened rubble that had once been the village of Thiepval, and drive the Germans from their strong positions on the ridge above. This was the task given to General Gough's Reserve Army.

Thiepval Ridge, 26-28 September

The orders for the operation emphasized the necessity of driving the Germans from the whole crest-line, both so as to hide from enemy view our rear areas on the southern slopes leading down to Albert, and to give us observation over the valley of the upper Ancre. The 6000-yard front from Courcelette to Thiepval was divided evenly between the Canadian Corps on the right and Lieut.-General C.W. Jacob's 2nd Corps on the left. The British divisions were assigned objectives that had become notorious as German strongholds since the offensive opened at the beginning of July. General Jacob's right had to take Mouquet Farm, and in subsequent stages Zollern Redoubt, and on the crest 500 yards to the rear, Stuff Redoubt, another bulwark of the old German Second Position. His task on the left was to assault Thiepval and then storm the strong Schwaben Redoubt, which overlooked the Ancre from the western tip of the ridge.[44]

The defences which the Canadians were to break lay along a low spur projecting eastward from the main ridge. Linking up with the redoubts in the 2nd Corps' sector were three trench lines which were originally given as successive objectives to the 1st Canadian Division on the Corps left - Zollern Graben, Hessian Trench and Regina Trench, with its branching Kenora Trench. The east end of Zollern was already in our hands, and intelligence maps showed Hessian Trench merging with Regina Trench opposite the 1st Canadian Division's centre. Although low reconnaissance patrols of the Royal Flying Corps had reported on the condition of the German defences in some detail, Hessian Trench, "owing to the uncertainty as to the condition of the wire in front of Regina Trench", was made the limit of General Currie's attack.[45] On the divisional right at the tip of the spur the isolated Sudbury Trench formed an intermediate line to Kenora Trench, which was afterwards described as "one of the deepest and strongest trenches the men had ever seen".[46] Their eastward projection behind Courcelette as far as the Bapaume road became the single objective of the 2nd Division.

For three days the artillery harassed the German positions, 500 tear-gas shells fired on the 24th silencing enemy mortars at Thiepval. The Reserve Army's assault was made with fresh troops, brought into the line between 22 September and the night of the 25th. Zero hour was 12:35 p.m. on the 26th, a warm, sunny day. At 12:34 the massed machine-guns of both the 2nd and the

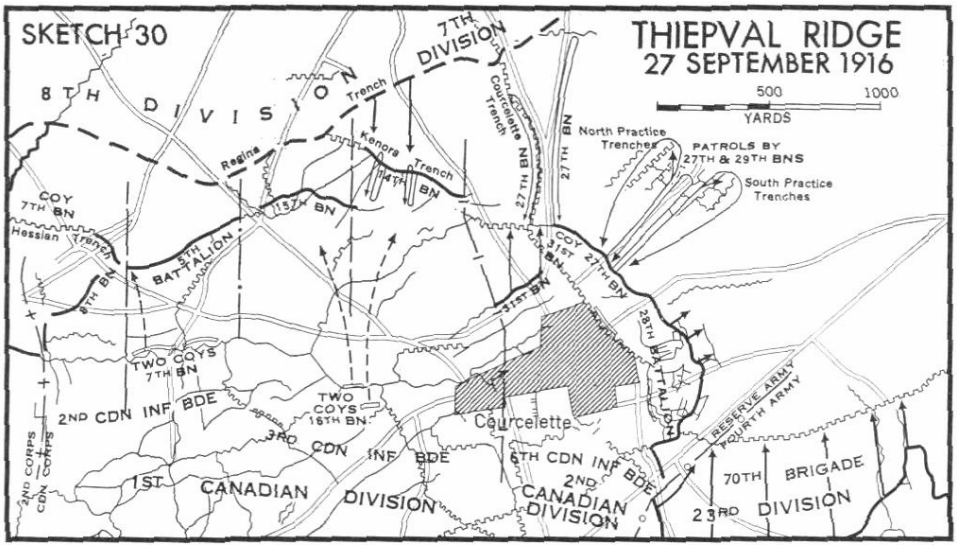

SKETCH 29
THIEPVAL RIDGE
26 SEPTEMBER 1916
YARDS
1000
500
0
1000
26TH RESERVE DIV
8TH DIVISION
7TH DIVISION
Thiepval
Schwaben Redoubt
Stuff Redoubt
Zollern Graben
Zollern Redoubt
Hessian Trench
Regina Trench
Kenora Trench
Sudbury Trench
Grandcourt Trench
Grandcourt Road
Courcelette Road
Courcelette Trench
North Practice Trenches
POSTS
OBJECTIVE
Courcelette
Martinpuich
Candy Trench
Sugar Trench
Fabeck Graben
MOUQUET FARM
28TH BATTALION
29TH BN
31ST BN
6TH CDN INF BDE
COYS 27TH BN
COY 31ST BN
2ND CDN DIV
23RD DIV
FOURTH ARMY
RESERVE ARMY
15TH BN
14TH BATTALION
16TH BN
WITH ELEMENTS
3RD CDN INF BDE
5TH BN
AND 10TH BN
2ND CDN BDE
8TH BN AND COY 10TH BN
2 COYS 10TH BN
1ST CANADIAN DIVISION
COY 7TH BN
Tom's Cut
CDN CORPS
2ND CORPS
34TH BDE
11TH DIVISION
33RD BDE
53RD BDE
54TH BDE
18TH DIV

Canadian Corps opened overhead fire. One minute later eight hundred guns, howitzers and mortars put down a mighty barrage of shrapnel and high explosive as the first wave of infantry climbed the parapet. A second wave, a mopping up party, and third and fourth waves followed (in the case of at least one battalion) at intervals of 70 to 100 yards.[47]

Brig.-Gen. Ketchen's 6th Brigade carried out the 2nd Division's attack on the right. North-east of Courcelette the 29th Battalion reached and occupied the enemy's front trenches in ten minutes. On its left the 31st, advancing against heavy machine-gun and rifle fire, encountered a battalion of the German 72nd Regiment (transferred from its parent 8th Division to the centre of the 7th Division's front) and achieved only limited success. On the extreme right, next to the Bapaume road, the 28th Battalion had been charged with making a subsidiary attack supported by the only two tanks allotted to the Canadian Corps. (Of 20 tanks still fit for service, the Fourth Army had twelve in the Morval battle and six were being used against Thiepval by the 2nd Corps.) But one tank broke down before reaching the start line, and the other caught fire when a German shell exploded its ammunition. As a result the battalion remained in its trenches.[48]

In the 1st Division's sector, the 3rd Brigade (Brig.-Gen. G.S. Tuxford) on the right assaulted with the 14th and 15th Battalions. Both immediately met heavy counter-fire from hostile batteries and suffered costly casualties from nests of German machine-gunners, who having survived our barrage caught the second infantry wave as it mounted the parapet. It was a striking demonstration of the improved defensive tactics which the enemy was employing in the later battles of the Somme as he sought an answer to the overwhelming power of the Allied artillery. To escape destruction by our barrage, which was invariably concentrated on known trench lines, forward German troops were ordered to abandon their trenches whenever an assault seemed imminent, and to occupy shell-holes or ditches well in front of where the attacking troops expected to find them. The device was to succeed with heavy cost to the attackers as long as Allied commanders remained wedded to the doctrine of "fire-effect preceding movement" instead of putting into practice some form of "fire-effect ... *combined* with movement".[49]

The 14th Battalion on the brigade right quickly advanced 400 yards to Sudbury Trench, where it took some forty prisoners; shortly after one o'clock it was on its way up the slope to the eastern end of Kenora Trench, its final objective. On its left the 15th Battalion, having met with heavy and unexpected resistance from strong groups in no man's land, was unable to keep pace; and the 31st, as we have seen, was also held up, particularly its left wing. Thus the men of the 14th Battalion on reaching their objective about mid-afternoon came under bitter counter-attack from both flanks. Enfiladed by machine-gun fire they were subject to considerable shellfire during the rest of the day and the following night, and several times had to fight off enemy bombing parties. Kenora Trench was to change hands twice before six o'clock on the evening of 27 September, when the terribly few survivors of a company of the 14th (which had been

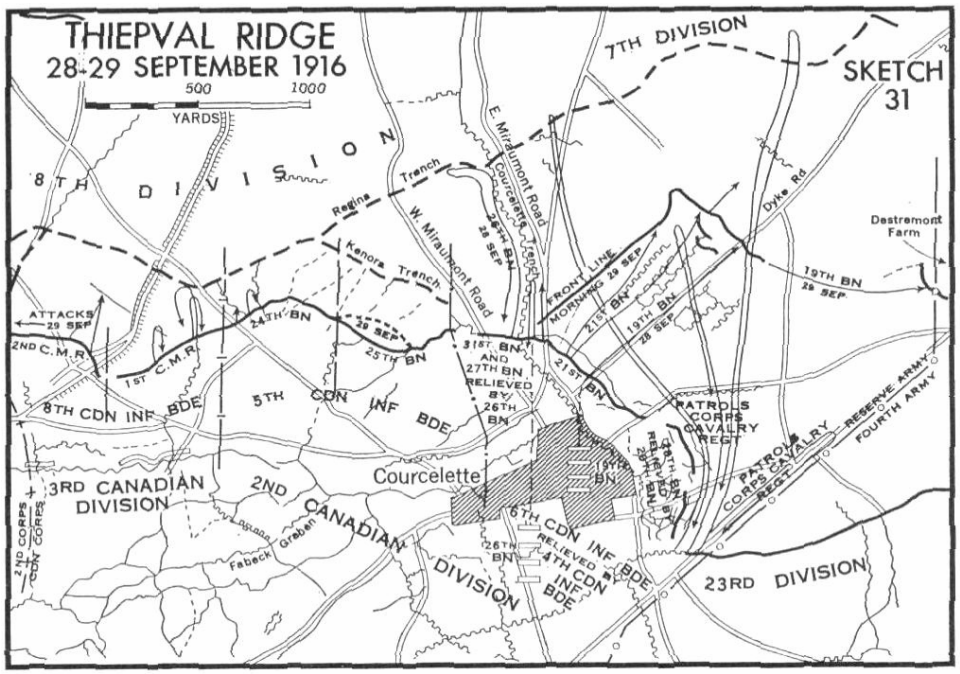


reinforced by two companies of the 16th Battalion) fell back halfway towards Sudbury Trench.[50] The l5th Battalion, advancing during the afternoon of the 26th in the open space not covered by Hessian or Kenora trenches, got well up the slope to within 150 yards of Regina Trench before digging in.

In the 1st Division's left sector, the 2nd Brigade (Brig.-Gen. F.O.W. Loomis) had to advance over the highest part of the main Thiepval Ridge. It attacked with the 5th Battalion on the right and the 8th (left), each augmented by a company of the 10th Battalion. Despite heavy machine-gun fire from Zollern and Stuff Redoubts and the Mouquet Farm area, and continual shelling by the enemy's artillery, the troops reached both objectives. Neither one, however, could they completely secure. Enemy pockets remained in Zollern Trench, while the left (German right) of Hessian was still in enemy hands. Not until next day did the Canadians clear both trenches to the corps boundary. In an afternoon counterattack on the 27th the enemy again occupied part of Hessian Trench, though not for long.[51]

While the Canadian Corps had thus been achieving results which it considered "not unsatisfactory", over on the left the 2nd Corps had taken all but a small corner of Thiepval and most of the western half of Zollern Graben. But the diverging directions of their attacks had left a serious gap between the two corps. The enemy still held the commanding portions of Thiepval Ridge, and in spite of having suffered many casualties he seemed capable of further stout resistance. At 8:45 that evening General Gough called for the completion next day of the tasks of the 26th. Lieut.-General Byng accordingly directed the 2nd Division to secure the German front line north-east of Courcelette and the 1st Division to attack Regina Trench and link up with General Jacob's right.[52]

During the night of 26-27 September the enemy opposite the 2nd Division fell back to Regina Trench. This defence line angled away from the



apex of the Canadian salient to link up with the German Third Position about 1500 yards north- west of Le Sars, on the Bapaume road. Thus units and companies of the 6th Brigade were able to make satisfactory gains with relatively little fighting. The 28th Battalion seized German positions west of the Bapaume road (the army boundary), while astride the Dyke road the 27th and 29th Battalions patrolled as far as the North and South Practice Trenches. Between the two Miraumont roads, however, the Germans withdraw only gradually, and under pressure. Not until 8:30 p.m. on the 27th did the 31st Battalion link up with the 3rd Brigade west of the West Miraumont road.[53] On the extreme left the 7th Battalion occupied Hessian Trench, putting in a block at the corps boundary. Opposite the 3rd Brigade, however, the enemy stood firm and his counter-attacks continued on the 27th. This made it impossible for the 1st Division to carry out its assault.

General Byng had hoped that both Kenora and Regina Trenches would be in Canadian hands prior to an early relief of the 1st Division by the 2nd Division. But with the second loss of Kenora on the evening of the 27th the chances of this being achieved became very remote. Nevertheless the 14th Battalion, at the insistence of Brig .-Gen. Tuxford - who in turn was under considerable pressure from Divisional Headquarters -made one further attempt.[54] At 2:00 a.m. on the 28th the Battalion, which after forty hours of continuous fighting could only assemble about 75 men, attacked through the mud and rain. As they neared the Kenora position the Canadians were brightly illuminated by enemy flares and became easy targets for the German frontal and flanking fire. After thirty minutes the attack was called off having brought the 14th Battalion’s

total casualties in the battle for Thiepval Ridge to ten officers and 360 other ranks. Kenora Trench was not to be taken for five more days. Regina Trench would defy capture until 21 October.

On 28 September a series of Canadian reliefs brought the 4th and 5th Brigades into the line on the right; on the left the 8th Brigade replaced the 2nd which had linked up with the 2nd Corps back towards Zollern Trench. On orders from General Turner to press the advance early on the 28th the 19th Battalion moved forward up the Dyke road. It found the Practice Trenches abandoned, and swung eastward. When halted by fire from the strongly-held Destremont Farm,* just north of the Bapaume road, the Canadians succeeded in establishing a position west of the farm.[56]

Meanwhile in the 5th Brigade's sector the 26th Battalion attacking astride Courcelette Trench (which ran northward from the village ruins), had made two fruitless attempts to gain Regina Trench. Late that afternoon in a coordinating move on the brigade left the 24th Battalion had embarked on a plan of storming Regina Trench and then bombing its way eastward, while the 25th Battalion assaulted in the centre. The combined effort failed, as leading parties of both battalions ran into wire entanglements uncut by our artillery, and heavy machine-gun fire mowed them down.[57]

The situation was tidied up on the Canadian Corps left where no contact had existed beyond Zollern Trench between the Canadian and British flanks. Orders issued to the Reserve Army by General Gough on 28 September set deadlines for the reduction of Stuff and Schwaben Redoubts; and at noon on the 29th the 3rd Canadian and 11th British Divisions made a joint attack against the part of Hessian Trench still held by the Germans east of Stuff. The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles, already in Hessian, began clearing it westward across the inter-corps boundary in conjunction with a frontal assault by a battalion of the 3rd Brigade. Bitter hand-to-hand fighting gained three hundred yards of trench. Besides losing many killed and wounded the enemy yielded up sixty prisoners. Two German counter-attacks achieved initial but short-lived success, as Canadian bombers regained ground temporarily lost to the enemy. Two hundred yards of Hessian Trench still in German hands fell the next afternoon to converging attacks by three battalions of the 11th Division, but all efforts failed to expel the enemy completely from the northern part of his two redoubts.[58]

The Battle of Thiepval Ridge had ended (the official dates for the operation are 26-28 September) though the Reserve Army had failed to capture the north- western tip of the blood-soaked feature. North of the main ridge Regina Trench remained an untaken objective of the Canadian Corps as the month ended. Prompted by the Corps Commander's urgings that "no opportunity for gaining ground was to be lost", General Turner had issued orders on the 29th

* Earlier that morning Canadian cavalry patrols drawn from the 19th Alberta Dragoons and the 1st Canadian Hussars had ridden out of Courcelette to probe deep into enemy territory. Two patrols reached Regina Trench; others moving upt the Bapaume road were repulsed by machine-gun fire from Destremont Farm.[56]

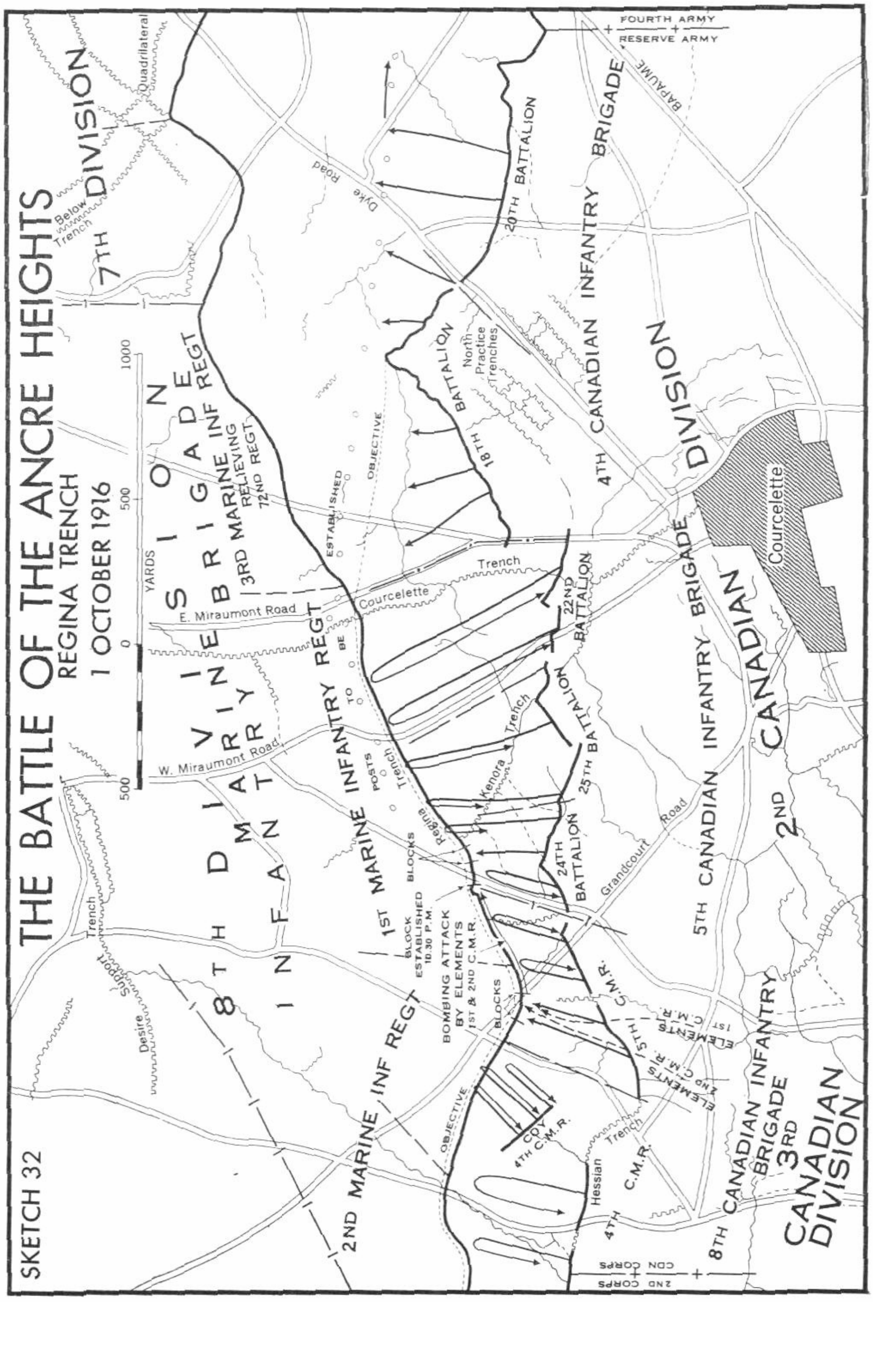
for the 5th Brigade to seize Kenora Trench and some 1500 yards of the Regina position. Originally planned for the 29th, the operation was twice postponed 24 hours to allow the artillery to deal more effectively with the enemy's defences, and because the 5th Brigade, as reported in appreciations by battalion commanders, was "too exhausted and too few in numbers" (its fighting strength being only 1134).[59]

Across the Reserve Army's front territorial gains had brought a general straightening of the line as had been intended, the greatest progress being on the left, where the 2nd Corps had advanced 2000 yards through Thiepval to Hessian Trench. On General Gough's right, the Fourth Army had taken Destremont Farm and closed on Le Sars (midway between Pozières and Bapaume). The British Commander-in-Chief had handed over Morval on the right of the Fourth Army's line to General Fayolle in order that the French Sixth Army might more easily carry out its next attack.[60] From Combles the French line ran eastward to take in some two miles of the Péronne-Bapaume road before bending back to the south-west to cross the Somme two miles below Péronne.

The Battle of the Ancre Heights Begins

On 29 September, General Haig, deciding that the time was at hand to renew the offensive on an increased scale, instructed the Fourth and Reserve Armies and the Third Army, which was on the left facing eastward, to undertake preparatory operations for a major attack to be launched by 12 October. His goal fell about two miles short of that urged by General Joffre, who was calling for a combined effort by maximum forces to reach a line through Bapaume.[61] The new objectives, capture of which would represent an advance averaging two miles across the front of the Fourth and Reserve Armies, extended from Le Transloy and Beaulencourt (both on the Péronne-Bapaume road) across the valley of the upper Ancre to Gommecourt in the Third Army's sector. One of General Rawlinson's immediate targets, a spur covering the two villages on the Bapaume road, was to give the Fourth Army's operations the name, the Battle of the Transloy Ridges; the Reserve Army's fighting became known as the Battle of the Ancre Heights. General Gough's was to be a two-fold offensive-with a northward attack from Thiepval Ridge (to capture the villages of Pys, Grandcourt, Irles and Miraumont), and on the other side of the Ancre, in the Beaumont Hamel sector, an eastward drive on a three-mile front to converge at Miraumont with the advance of his right.[62]

The immediate task of the Canadian Corps was to capture Regina Trench, in order to secure a jumping-off place for the Reserve Army's attack to the north. The artillery had intensified its shelling of the Regina defences, but General Turner still did not consider that these had been sufficiently reduced. The trench lay just over the crest of the spur, and could not easily be found by our guns. A considerable quantity of concertina wire rolled out by the Germans to supplement the existing entanglements had suffered little damage from bombardment. The garrison which thickly manned the forward position was


SKETCH 32
THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE HEIGHTS
REGINA TRENCH
1 OCTOBER 1916
YARDS
500 0 500 1000
FOURTH ARMY
RESERVE ARMY
CDN CORPS
2ND CORPS
7TH DIVISION
8TH MARINE INFANTRY DIVISION
3RD MARINE INF REGT RELIEVING 72ND REGT
2ND MARINE INF REGT
1ST MARINE INFANTRY REGT
4TH CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
4TH CANADIAN DIVISION
5TH CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
2ND CANADIAN DIVISION
8TH CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
3RD CANADIAN DIVISION
20TH BATTALION
18TH BATTALION
22ND BATTALION
25TH BATTALION
24TH BATTALION
5TH C.M.R.
4TH C.M.R.
COY 4TH C.M.R.
1ST C.M.R. ELEMENTS
2ND C.M.R. ELEMENTS
BOMBING ATTACK BY ELEMENTS 1ST & 2ND C.M.R.
BLOCK ESTABLISHED 10.30 P.M.
BLOCKS
POSTS TO BE ESTABLISHED
OBJECTIVE
Quadrilateral
Below Trench
Support Trench
Desire
Dyke Road
BAPAUME
North Practice Trenches
E. Miraumont Road
W. Miraumont Road
Courcelette Trench
Regina Trench
Kenora Trench
Grandcourt Road
Hessian Trench
Courcelette

composed of fresh troops of a Marine Infantry Brigade, brought in at the end of September from the Naval Corps on the Belgian coast. In their rear a deep ravine and several sunken roads afforded covered routes for supplying and reinforcing them. Opposite the Canadian right were the 360th and 361st Infantry Regiments of the 4th Ersatz Division. General Byng agreed to delay the attack "till there is a reasonable chance of getting in", but insisted that "the 2nd Division has got to carry through the operation and will therefore have to stay in until it has completed it'.[63] This brought new orders to the 5th Brigade to take the objectives assigned to it on the 29th. On the Corps left the 3rd Division was ordered to attack Regina Trench with one brigade; on the right the 4th Brigade had the subsidiary task of advancing in conjunction with an attack by the Fourth Army's left flanking division.

Regina Trench: (1) The Corps Attack on 1 October

Zero hour was 3:15 on the afternoon of 1 October, and as the Canadians waited in drizzling rain in their advanced positions many were hit by our own shells falling short all along the line. The 8th Brigade attacked obliquely across the Grandcourt road with two battalions of the Canadian Mounted Rifles - the 4th on the left and the 5th on the right. It was the responsibility of one company of the 4th C.M.R. to establish a block in Regina Trench on the extreme left in order to seal off interference from the west That the enemy had been missed by our barrage was evident in the hail of machine-gun bullets which met the C.M.Rs. the moment they mounted the parapet. As had been feared, the uncut German wire proved a formidable obstacle. One company was practically wiped out in no man's land. Part of another reached its objective, but was there overpowered and perished to the last man. The left forward company of the 5th C.M.R. reached Regina Trench and succeeded in establishing blocks, only to be driven out early next morning by repeated counter-attacks. The other assaulting company was held up by the enemy wire and the blistering machine-gun fire; all but fifteen were either killed or taken prisoner.[64]

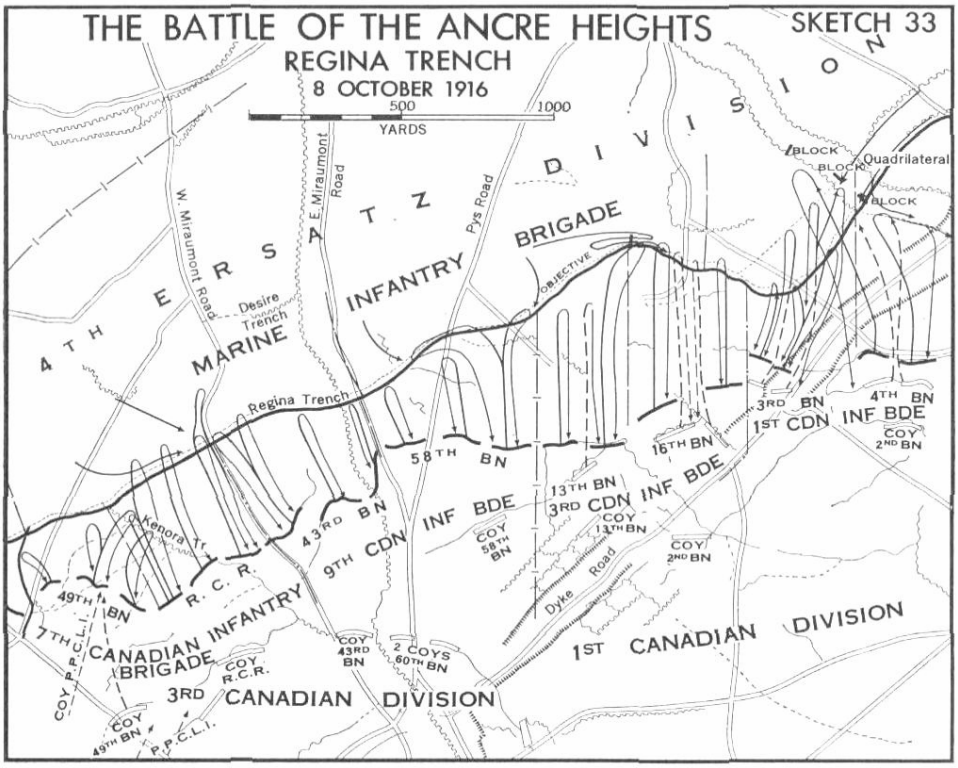
The 5th Brigade, attacking on a 1200-yard front which included the two barriers of Kenora Trench and the main Regina position, fared little better. With his strength seriously depleted by earlier battles, Brig.-Gen. A.H. Macdonell was compelled to use three battalions in the assault (from right to left the 22nd, the 25th and the 24th Battalions) and to place the 26th Battalion in support of the 22nd. This left him as brigade reserve only part of the 6th Brigade's decimated 27th Battalion, which had a company detailed to support each of the 24th and 25th Battalions.[65] The French Canadians had an advance of nearly half a mile to their objective - the portion of Regina Trench between the East and West Miraumont roads. Attacking in three waves, each of eighty men extended at five yards' interval, they had advanced a quarter of a mile when they ran into an intense German artillery barrage and heavy rifle and machine-gun fire. Then came the bitter realization that the enemy's wire entanglements were virtually

unharmed. “From this moment,” records a regimental account, “the attack failed.”[66] Less than fifty men reached Regina Trench, and these could not be reinforced either from support battalion or brigade. After a sharp fight with bayonet and bomb, all survivors were forced to withdraw to their original trenches.[67]

In the centre the 25th Battalion was charged with capturing “at all costs” the greater part of Kenora Trench and the corresponding section of Regina Trench beyond. “To do this”, reported the CO. later, “I had 200 all ranks and 12 M.Gs., counting the Brigade M.Gs.”[68] He ordered his two leading waves to push on past Kenora Trench directly to the final objective. Enemy fire cut them down, however, and only thirty reached the wire in front of Regina Trench. Finding what protection they might in shell-holes and hastily dug ditches, they waited out the daylight under steady machine-gun fire. Then they fell back to Kenora, which a following company had secured to within 140 yards of the junction with the main position. Before the day ended more than half the attacking force had become casualties.

It was the same bitter story of defeat on the Brigade left, where the 24th Battalion’s objective was some 300 yards of Regina Trench, including the important junction with Kenora. One company gained a footing on the final objective, but with its flank exposed by the 8th Brigade’s failure on the left, it was soon annihilated by strong parties of Marines bombing eastward along the trench. The only bit of success came at the junction of Kenora and Regina Trenches, where men of the 24th Battalion managed to establish and maintain a double block fifty yards wide which prevented the Germans from penetrating the newly won sector of Kenora. Meanwhile north-east of Courcelette the 4th Brigade, adjusting the front line, had advanced some 400 yards under spasmodic machine-gun fire and dug in level with the Fourth Army’s left flank.[69] Early on 2 October Brig.-Gen. Macdonell handed over to the 6th Brigade. The 5th Brigade had gone into the line on 27 September with a trench strength of 1717 all ranks. It came out five days later with 773.[70]

Bad weather prevented further large-scale operations on either army’s front for another week. General Gough left it to General Byng to select his own date for taking Regina Trench, provided this was done and the Canadian Corps in position to attack Pys on 11 October in the opening stages of the proposed three-army offensive.[71] In the meantime Sir Julian handed his left brigade sector over to the 2nd Corps, and on the right the 1st Canadian Division relieved General Turner’s battle-worn formations. Preparations for a renewed effort went steadily forward. Working under fire, and further hampered by rain and mud, the Canadians connected advanced posts to form a new jumping-off line which in places came within 300 yards of Regina Trench. The artillery bombarded the German trenches and wire, but though the wire was cut in many places during the day, by night the enemy would fill the gaps with loose concertina. The objectives given to the Corps were somewhat to the east of those of 1 October. They included nearly two miles of Regina Trench from a point 500 yards west of the



Kenora junction, and at its eastern extremity the "Quadrilateral" formed by the intersection of a double row of trenches opposite the Fourth Army's left flank with the dual trench system of the old German Third or Le Sars Position.[72]

Regina Trench: (2) The Corps Attack on 8 October

The Canadian attack was launched on the 8th at 4:50 a.m. It was still dark and a cold rain was falling. In order from right to left across the front were Major-General Currie's 1st and 3rd Brigades, and Major-General Lipsett's 9th and 7th Brigades, each assaulting with two battalions. On the extreme eastern flank the 4th Battalion, advancing behind a creeping barrage in four waves 75 yards apart, with the 3rd on its left, had little difficulty in reaching the first objective, Regina Trench. While the 4th Battalion was held up by wire, the 3rd Battalion pushed forward into the Quadrilateral and took its objectives.

West of the Quadrilateral the two forward waves of the 3rd Brigade's right-hand battalion, the 16th (The Canadian Scottish), were caught at the wire by a storm of rifle and machine-gun fire, not a man being able to get through. In this critical situation 18-year old Piper James Richardson, disregarding the German bullets, "strode up and down ... playing his pipes with the greatest coolness";[73] thus inspired, about a hundred of the Scottish rushed the wire and somehow

fought their way into Regina Trench.* For the 13th Battalion, on the left of the 16th, it was the same story of all but impassable wire. As elsewhere along the front, our barrage helped the attackers across most of no man's land relatively unmolested, but when it had passed on, the Germans, taking advantage of their concave front in the 3rd Brigade's sector, swept the wire with such deadly fire from the flanks that only a small party of the 13th reached the objective. At 7:00 a.m., however, contact aeroplanes sent up to observe the progress of the battle erroneously reported that the 1st Division was on its whole objective.[74]

The 3rd Division, attacking with as much vigour and determination as the 1st, had little success. The assaulting battalions of the 9th Brigade - the 43rd Battalion between the East and West Miraumont Roads, and the 58th on its right - found the wire mostly uncut; and in the darkness of the early-morning attack what gaps had been made could not readily be seen. Only on the flanks did small groups of men fight their way into Regina Trench, and their numbers were too small to withstand the German counter-attacks which quickly developed. A very few got back to the jumping-off trenches; the Brigade's casualties for the day numbered 34 officers and 907 men.[75]

In the 7th Brigade's sector on the Corps' extreme left The Royal Canadian Regiment found the wire well cut and quickly got two companies into Regina Trench east of its junction with Kenora. These took several prisoners from dugouts reported as being fairly numerous and deep, and while a party advanced 150 yards up the West Miramount Road, bombers began clearing westward along the main trench. Efforts to reinforce the R.C.R. companies were frustrated by the heavy machine-gun fire, and about nine o'clock, after fighting off three counter-attacks, they were driven back out of Regina Trench.[76] On the Brigade left, half the assaulting companies of the 49th Battalion lost direction and became committed in the German end of Kenora Trench. The remainder were stopped short of their objective, for though the wire there had been fairly well gapped, Regina Trench itself had been virtually undamaged by the artillery. Its garrison met the 49th's attack with a considerable volume of rifle fire and bombing, while from the German strongpoint at the Kenora junction machine-guns continually swept the front with enfilading fire.[77]

Over on the 1st Division's front our artillery and machine-guns had helped the 16th Battalion break up a counter-attack and had checked a German threat against the 1st Brigade. But towards mid-afternoon enemy forces advancing in strength down the trenches leading into the Quadrilateral from the north-east and north-west attacked behind a heavy barrage. The 1st Brigade, with all its bombs expended, was gradually forced back to its start line. Soon the enemy's counter-attack spread across the whole front. The few members of the 3rd Brigade in Regina Trench, further reduced by casualties and with no grenades left, had to withdraw or face annihilation. By last light the survivors of the assaulting battalions of both the 1st and 3rd Divisions were back in their original positions.[78]

* Piper Richardson, who was later reported missing and presumed, killed, was posthumously awarded the V.C.

The Canadian Corps' casualties on 8 October numbered 1364, more than double those in the fighting on the 1st. The Army Commander called on the Corps for a full report on the attack, to "include your considered opinion as to the reasons for failure".[79] Divisional commanders attributed defeat to various causes. There was strong criticism of the amount of wire remaining intact at the time of the assault. As we have seen, in spite of a deliberate programme of wire-cutting (by the 18-pounders of the Lahore and 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisional Artilleries), results had been disappointing. "Those who were there", writes General McNaughton (who commanded the 11th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery at the Somme), "will recollect their disheartening task of endeavouring to cut wire with field gun shrapnel".*[81] There had been a tendency for patrols to overemphasize the effect of our guns on the wire, and as we have seen, the Germans were prompt to repair any breaches.

More important (though this was given little prominence in post-operation reports) was the failure of the artillery to destroy or even substantially damage Regina Trench. In the Somme fighting heavy batteries did not attain the high accuracy of fire on unseen targets that came in later battles, and although there was no serious shortage of howitzer ammunition, the expenditure seems frugal when compared with what was used in subsequent operations. Instructions issued by the Corps G.O.C. Royal Artillery had allotted "at least 1 round Heavy or 2 of Medium Howitzer per yard of trench", and the 4.5s of the divisional artilleries (allowed 1000 rounds per division), having completed their other tasks were to expend "any surplus on Regina Trench".[82] After the fiasco of 8 October, however, orders for the deliberate destruction of Regina Trench and the Quadrilateral specified "No limit to number of rounds fired on each spot except that each section of trench must be completely obliterated".[83] And on 14 October the war diary of the Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery reported, "unable without putting guns out of action to fire amount of ammunition received." (The expenditure by the mediums and heavies on that day, principally against Regina and Courcelette Trenches, was 5700 rounds, compared with a maximum of 3300 rounds fired on any day up to and including the 8th.)[84] The situation was well summed up by the O.C. 49th Battalion (Lt.-Col. W.A. Griesbach):

> [The wire] was considered to be passable upon the assumption that the enemy trench had been well battered in and that the garrison had been severely shocked. With the enemy trench in being and the enemy garrison unshocked, the flimsiest wire constitutes an impassable obstacle.[85]

Prevented by the wire from completing a frontal assault overland the troops had sought to bomb their way laterally along the German trench system. This entailed a heavy expenditure of grenades and left the Canadians with few to meet the enemy's counter-attacks. Additional supplies could not be brought forward in daylight save through communication trenches; but communication

* The use of heavy shell was considered undesirable because the resulting craters constituted a fresh obstacle to the infantry.[80]

trenches could not be dug before nightfall. For this reason General Currie felt that zero hour had been too early: "If the attack had been delivered any time after midday I believe we would be there [on the objective] yet."[86] He noted too that though the attacking troops had fought with valour and determination, many were inexperienced reinforcements whose training, especially with grenades, was inadequate, and he observed, 'When drafts come to this country they should be already trained."[87]

The Canadian Corps was not destined to take part in further operations on the Somme. The 4th Canadian Division had arrived on 10 October and had successively relieved the 3rd and 1st Divisions. On 17 October the Corps, less the 4th Division and the artillery of the other three divisions, began to move to a relatively quiet sector of the First Army's front between Arras and a point opposite Lens. The Canadians remaining on the Somme came under command of the 2nd Corps (Lieut.-General C.W. Jacob), to whom the task of capturing Regina Trench was now entrusted.

Of the operations planned at the end of September little had been accomplished by mid-October. North of the Ancre the Third Army had not been called on to play an active part. On the immediate left of the Canadians the Reserve Army's 2nd Corps had completed the capture of Stuff Redoubt on 9 October, and on the 14th an attack by three British battalions drove the last Germans out of Schwaben Redoubt. The Fourth Army's Battle of the Transloy Ridges had opened on 7 October with the capture of Le Sars, but thereafter, except for a British advance of 1000 yards north-east of Gueudecourt, the line remained much the same as at the end of September.[88]

Though the prospect of completing this programme was now remote, the British Commander-in-Chief was opposed to any relaxation of the offensive. He felt that the enemy might be close enough to the breaking point for the Allies to achieve a success that would afford "full compensation for all that has been done to attain it".[89] He reported to the War Office that by the end of the first week of October the Germans had employed an estimated 70 divisions on the Somme -40 of these against his own forces[*] - and had suffered 370,000 casualties. Their new front-line defences lacked depth and the elaborate construction of those which had already fallen. If the winter were normal, Allied operations could continue with profit as long as sufficient reinforcements and greater supplies of ammunition were forthcoming, and if adequate communications and troop accommodation were provided in the devastated areas from which the enemy had been ousted. Haig strongly urged the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that the "utmost efforts of the Empire" should be directed to this end. A G.H.Q. order of 7 October reorganized the British Expeditionary Force so as to make the Fourth and Reserve Armies self-contained forces capable of offensive operations in the coming winter. The Third Army was to remain in reserve, always with three divisions in training. New divisions arriving from the United Kingdom would go

[*] The German Official History gives a total of 38 complete divisions engaged with the British to the end of September.[90]

to the First and Second Armies; and there would remain in G.H.Q. a spare corps headquarters which in an emergency could intervene wherever required with reserve divisions from the First, Second or Third Army.[91]

On 17 October the plans for the converging advance on both sides of the Ancre (above, page 180) were discarded in favour of separate attacks by the Reserve and Fourth Armies. Then disappointing results of an early-morning assault by the Fourth Army on the 18th led to further revision. The amended programme called for alternate, coordinated blows by the two armies. The Reserve Army was to capture Regina Trench on 21 October, as prelude to an attack astride the Ancre on the 25th; while on the 23rd the Fourth Army, with the French Sixth Army cooperating, would make the first moves towards Le Transloy, the main assault to be delivered three days later.[92] Of these operations, which were recognized as depending on the weather, only the first, in which the 4th Canadian Division was slated to take part, materialized as such.

In the meantime General Joffre, who more than anyone else was responsible for the coordination of all Allied operations in Europe, was becoming impatient about the situation on the Western Front. Elsewhere the overall picture was not bright. In the east the enemy had stabilized his position from the Carpathians to the Pripet marshes. At the head of the Adriatic the Italians, having gained little in two more actions to enlarge their Gorizia bridgehead, were preparing to launch a ninth battle of the Isonzo. Not only had von Falkenhayn thrown back the Rumanian invasion of Transylvania, but a Bulgarian army, stiffened by German and Turkish troops, had defeated Rumanian and Russian forces in the Dobrudja and (on 22 October) captured the Black Sea port of Constanza. A counter-offensive launched in mid-September by General Sarrail's Army of the Orient in an attempt to divert Bulgarian strength to the Salonika front had accomplished little.[93] A major Allied success was needed, and to this end, having learned of the revised British plan, the French Commander-in-Chief on 18 October called on Haig to renew a strong Somme offensive on a broad front as originally conceived (above, page 180). In reply Sir Douglas repudiated the implication that he was wasting time or slackening his efforts and reminded Joffre "that it lies with me to judge what I can undertake and when I can undertake it".[94]

The 4th Division at the Somme

It is necessary now to pick up the story of the 4th Canadian Division, which had landed in France in mid-August and entered the line on the 25th. When the bulk of the Canadian Corps moved to the Somme, the 4th Division remained in the north, and on 3 September became part of "Franks' Force", a temporary formation consisting otherwise of British, Belgian and Australian artillery and some miscellaneous units, and taking its name from its commander, Major-General G. McK. Franks, the Second Army's M.G.R.A.[95] The Division was then holding a 4-1/2 mile front extending from west of Messines to the Ypres-Comines canal. Opposite were the German 26th Division and elements of

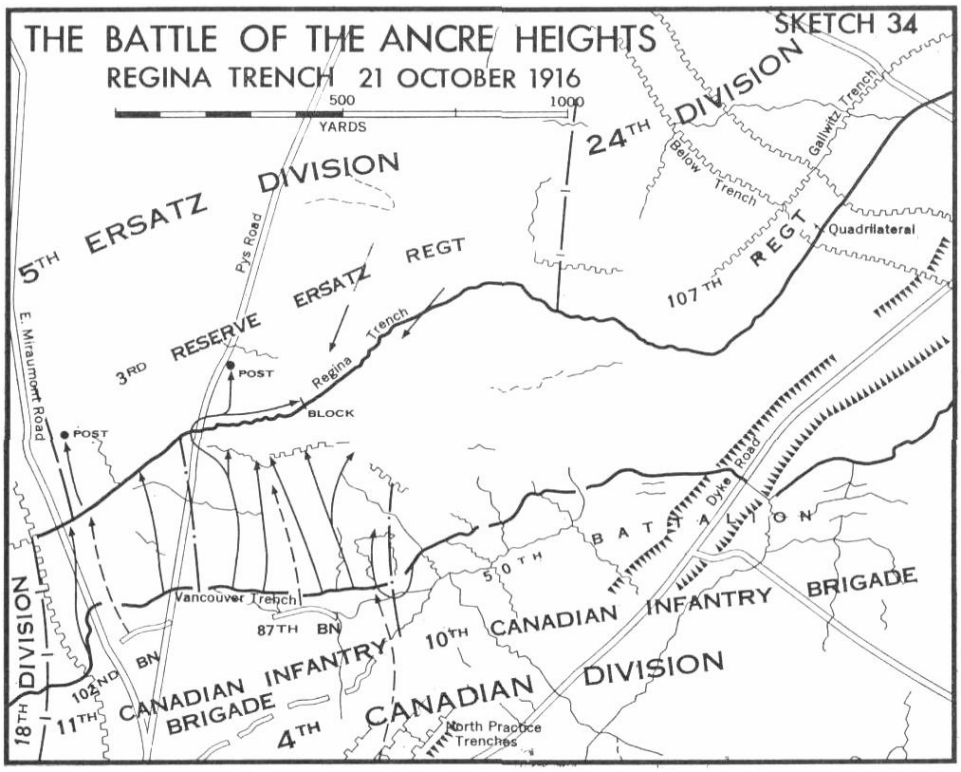
the 4th Ersatz Division.[96] Allied patrols found considerable portions of the enemy's front line unmanned - an indication of his willingness to treat the Ypres Salient as secondary to the Somme area and to contain the Allied forces there with a minimum of effort. On many days fire from his artillery and mortars was extremely light, and drew in reply three rounds to one.[97] Activity increased in mid- September, when the Second Army carried out some thirty raids as a diversion to the Fourth Army's assault in the Battle of Flers-Courcelette. Of ten raids on the night of the 16th-17th, seven were conducted by Canadians. In all, 274 officers and men took part, representing the 46th, 47th, 54th, 72nd, 75th and 87th Battalions.[98] In the six raids rated successful the Canadians captured 22 prisoners and killed a known 30 Germans, at comparatively light cost to themselves.[99]

On 18 September the 4th Canadian Division came temporarily under command of the 9th Corps as Franks' Force ceased to exist.* Three days later it went into Second Army reserve in the St. Omer training area. Here the troops learned to handle the newly issued Lee-Enfield rifle, and practised cooperation with aircraft and artillery. There was emphasis on methods of recognition-by ground flares, and chalk marks on helmets - and on advancing behind a creeping barrage at the rate of 100 yards in three minutes. Each man received a new box-type respirator, and tested it with tear gas. On the night of 2-3 October the Division entrained for the Somme.

At the completion of the series of reliefs which attended the departure of the Canadian Corps, Major-General Watson's Division found itself forming the 2nd Corps' right wing, and holding a 2000-yard front from the East Miraumont Road to Below Trench, the forward line of the old Le Sars position.[101] After a few days of fine weather rain began falling steadily, and conditions steadily became worse in the front line trenches. In many places these had been reduced by the rain and the enemy shelling to mere ditches knee-deep with water. In the less damaged trenches the absence of dug-outs had caused the troops to burrow under the parapet to gain protection, and there was a danger of caving in if wet weather persisted. But skies cleared temporarily, and spirits lifted in anticipation of action. The artillery was winning its battle against the wire in front of Regina Trench. Patrols reported that although the enemy persisted in rolling out fresh concertina each night he was unable to fill all the gaps made during the day.[102]

The Battle of the Ancre Heights was resumed on 21 October. It was a cold but clear day as the 2nd Corps launched a renewed attack on Regina Trench in the first of the operations prescribed three days earlier by the Commander-in-Chief. The advance was made on a 5000-yard front, the objectives being the whole of Stuff Trench and all but the most easterly 1000 yards of Regina Trench. Defending this line was the 5th Ersatz Division, which had relieved the Marine Brigade in mid-October. From right to left, the assaulting troops were the 11th Canadian Brigade, commanded by Brig.-Gen. V.W. Odium, the British 53rd

* A pioneer of the 72nd Battalion, Private A.E. McGubbin, is credited during this period with inventing the "Tommy Cooker" out of a pork-and-beans can, using a burning compound of sacking and fat. This miniature stove came into this battalion and was adopted by many other units.[100]



Brigade (18th Division), two brigades of the 25th Division and one brigade of the 39th. In support were seven divisional field artilleries (including those of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions) and 200 heavy guns and howitzers.

Regina Trench: (3) The Attacks of 21 and 25 October

The Canadian objective on 21 October was a 600-yard section of Regina Trench immediately east of Courcelette Trench. The 11th Brigade assaulted with the 87th and 102nd Battalions. This time there was no trouble with German wire, which had been broken to bits by systematic bombardment. Using the heavy barrage “like a wall”, the two battalions reached Regina Trench by 12:20 - less than 15 minutes after zero hour. They found many Germans killed by the barrage, and the survivors quick to surrender. By one o’clock the Canadians were consolidating, having taken some 160 prisoners. At three o’clock the 87th Battalion on the right reported having successfully blocked Regina Trench about 200 yards east of the Courcelette-Pys road.[103] Canadian casualties numbered 200, the majority from enemy shellfire after the objective had fallen. During the afternoon our own artillery broke up a series of counter-attacks against the 102nd

Battalion. An all-night howitzer barrage on the untaken portion of Regina Trench guarded the block on the right flank from interference. On the Corps left and centre the success of the British brigades had brought Stuff Trench and the greater part of Regina into Allied hands. When mopping-up operations were complete the 2nd Corps had taken more than 1000 prisoners.[104] The remaining part of Regina Trench was to resist one more Canadian assault before its final capture by the 4th Division.

On 24 October, in preparation for this next attempt, General Watson took over 400 yards of the Fourth Army's left front, thereby extending the 2nd Corps' line eastward to the Le Sars-Pys road. The ease with which the 11th Brigade had seized its objectives on the 21st seems to have prompted the decision to send a single battalion of the 10th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. W. St. P. Hughes) against the same re-entrant 700 yards of Regina Trench that had been the 3rd Brigade's objective in the fiasco of 8 October. The plan of attack followed "Proposals for Minor Operation", circulated on 22 October by 10th Brigade Headquarters (and reproduced for want of other stationery on the back of spare copies of the military "Form of Will").[105] After a postponement had held the attacking troops for 24 hours of pouring rain in jumping-off ditches half full of mud and water, the 44th Battalion assaulted at 7:00 a.m. on the 25th.

Tragedy struck immediately. The barrage, which was being supplied by three field brigades of the 1st and 3rd Canadian Divisional Artilleries, proved woefully light and ineffective. From the Quadrilateral on the right the enemy was able to sweep no man's land with intense enfilading machine-gun fire, and in Regina Trench German riflemen and machine-gunners were seen standing unscathed waist-high at the parapet.[106] With a hail of bullets mowing great gaps in their ranks, the attacking troops soon came under a deluge of shrapnel and high explosive, as a heavy defensive barrage burst relentlessly across the whole front. No one reached Regina Trench. Most of those who were not killed outright sought cover in shell-holes and disused trenches where they lay till darkness, a few managing to crawl back in daylight to their own front lines. From the 11th Brigade's holding on the left the 75th Battalion had managed to push its way 150 yards eastward along Regina Trench, only to be forced back to its original position when the planned junction with the 44th Battalion failed to take place.

In its blackest day of the war the 44th Battalion had suffered close to 200 casualties.[107] The charge of the battalion commander that "the barrage was a flat failure[*] is corroborated in numerous reports from infantry and machine-gun officers (including the admission by an artillery observer that the fire was "absolutely insufficient to keep down enemy machine gun fire, their being not enough guns on the zone and the rate of fire was too slow".)[109] Certainly it is a tragic commentary on the planning that, as revealed in the artillery task tables for the operation, the flanks of the attack received little attention in the barrage, and

[*] Brig.-Gen. Hughes has recorded that on the eve of the attack he personally advised the Divisional artillery officers that they had been ordered to move their guns and would not have them all in position for firing at zero hour and that "most of those that could fire would not be registered".[108]

not a single shell was directed against the enemy's strong Quadrilateral position.[110]

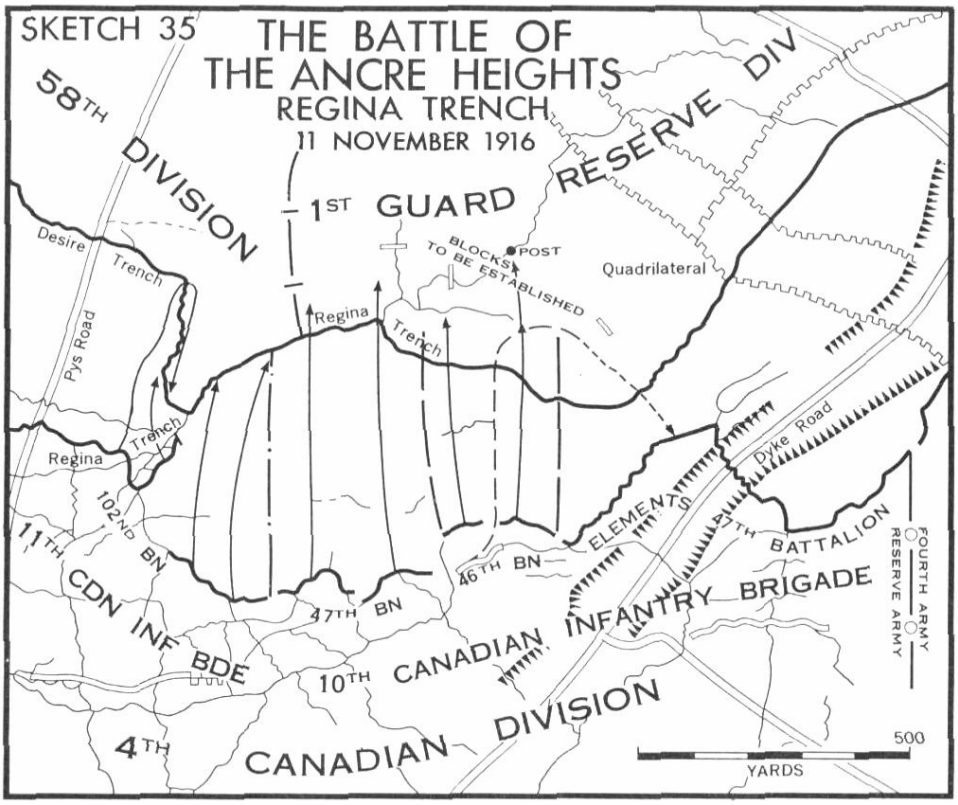
The weather during the next fortnight brought repeated postponements of further action. Since the 4th Division had entered the line there had been rain on 16 out of 21 days, and the war diary now reported the state of the front trenches as "indescribable". But on 8 November it turned cold and the weather remained dry long enough for the long-delayed offensive at last to seem feasible. The Reserve Army having acquired the extra services and staff to place it on a full army footing had been renamed the Fifth Army. General Gough, whose subordinate commanders were urging that repeated postponements were not fair to the troops, recommended that he should either attack on the 13th or take most of his forces out of the line for a rest. Sir Douglas Haig appreciated the favourable effect that a successful attack would have on the situation in Rumania and Russia. In his diary he suggested that the British position at the forthcoming Chantilly Conference would "be much stronger (as memories are short) if I could appear there on the top of the capture of Beaumont Hamel for instance, and 3,000 German prisoners." He felt "ready to run reasonable risks", and, on the afternoon of the 12th, approved the course proposed by Gough.[111]

Regina Trench: (4) The Capture of Regina and Desire Trenches

The 4th Canadian Division's next operation was a prelude to the new offensive. The objective was still the remainder of Regina Trench. The attack would be made whenever the heavy howitzers had had two successful days of bombarding the enemy's trenches and wire. This happened on 9 and 10 November, and at midnight on the 10th-11th the attack went in. The 10th Brigade, on the right, assaulted with the 46th and 47th Battalions; on the left was the 102nd Battalion, of the 11th Brigade. Each infantry brigade was supported by a full divisional artillery -the 11th Brigade by the 1st Division's four field artillery brigades, and the 10th Brigade by those of the 3rd Division.[112]

This time all went well. The barrage was reported by the infantry as "perfect".[113] By advancing from a start line 150 yards ahead of their own trenches, the Canadians were able to move well inside the enemy's counter-barrage, and aided by a full moon and a clear sky quickly reached and stormed their objective. Taken by surprise the enemy offered little resistance. The 102nd repulsed two counter-attacks, and by 2:20 a.m. consolidation was complete. The enemy left behind some 50 dead and almost 90 prisoners, members of the 58th Division and the 1st Guard Reserve Division. Canadian casualties were light-the 47th had been the only battalion to encounter machine-gun fire.[114] From Major-General Watson went a letter to the artillery commending them for "the very splendid way that your arm of the service co-operated with us."[115]

Thus ended the Battle of the Ancre Heights. Except for a spur immediately west of Pys, all the ground overlooking the low-lying villages of Grandcourt and Miraumont from the south was in our hands. Regina Trench, the



capture of which had cost so much blood, was no longer a position of strength. Repeated bombardments had reduced it to a mere depression in the chalk, in many places blown twenty feet wide, and for long stretches almost filled with debris and dead bodies.[116]

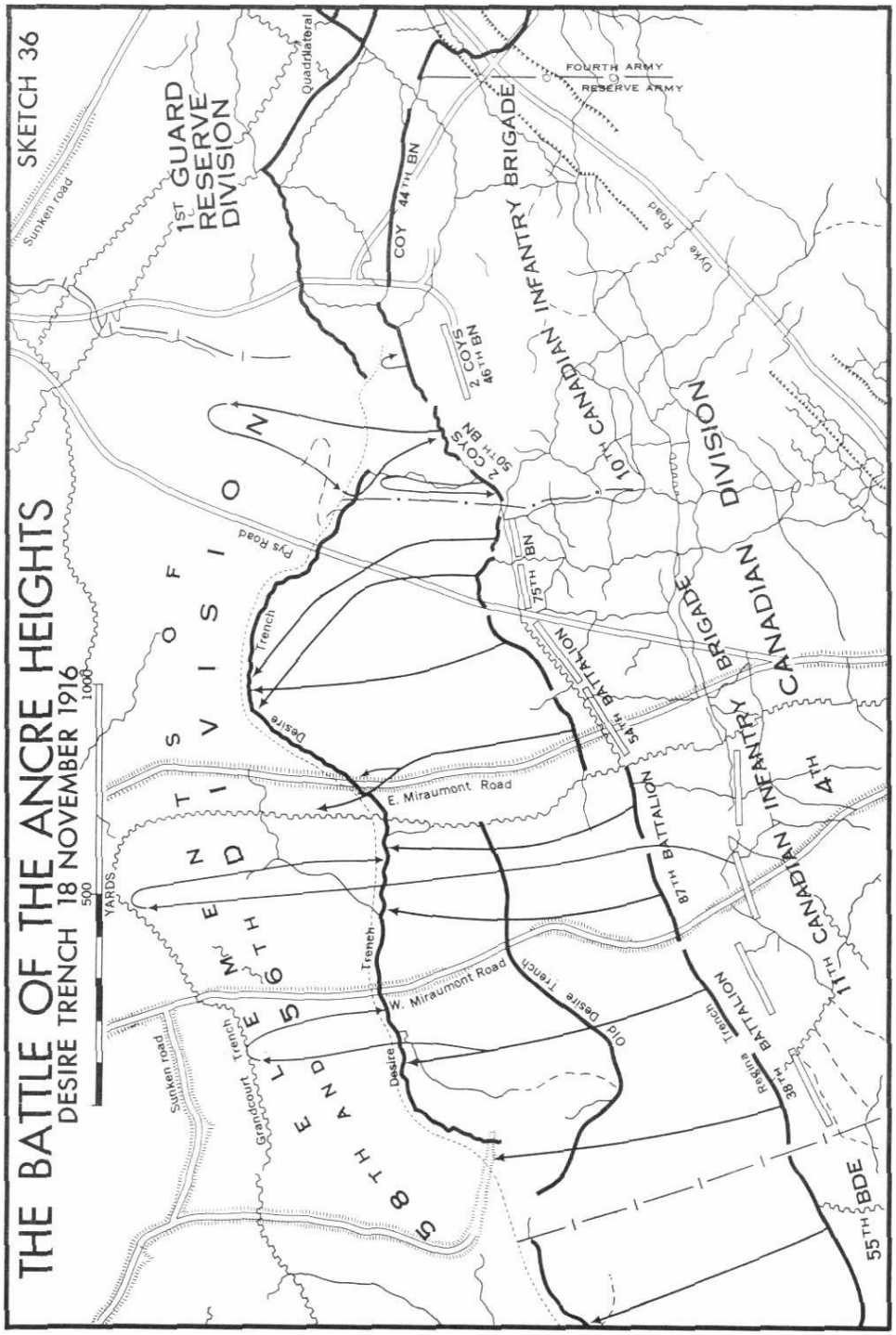
On 13 November, when the Battle of the Ancre opened, the Fifth Army's front line encircled the valley on the west and south. On the left, holding a four-mile front which had not changed since the beginning of July, the 13th and 5th Corps faced east towards the ruins of Serre and Beaumont Hamel. Crossing the river just below St. Pierre Divion the line bent eastward and, as we have seen, was held by the 2nd Corps along the northern edge of the Thiepval Ridge as far as the army boundary at the Quadrilateral north-west of Le Sars. General Gough's principal objective was the Beaumont Hamel salient, to be taken by the 5th Corps with four divisions. A division of the 13th Corps was to capture Serre, and in the valley the 2nd Corps was to assault northward from Schwaben Redoubt and Stuff Trench with two British divisions. The artillery support (which included the guns of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions) was on a grander scale than for any previous operation, and provided for a 48-hour intense bombardment of all German-held villages and trenches and all enemy approaches to the battle area.[117]

At zero hour (5:45 a.m.) a 30,000-pound mine was exploded near the tip of the German salient and a terrific barrage burst along the whole army front. The operation went best on the right and centre. Astride the Ancre the 2nd and 5th Corps made gains of 1200 to 1500 yards, capturing St. Pierre Divion and Beaumont Hamel. The converging attacks trapped large numbers of Germans in the valley; the total captured for the day was not far short of Sir Douglas Haig's earlier aspirations. General Ludendorff styled the British penetration "a particularly heavy blow, for we considered such an event no longer possible, particularly in sectors where our troops still held good positions."[118] But on the northern flank the attack failed, as battalions advancing through mud in many places waist-deep were hurled back by the enemy's desperate defence of the Redan Ridge and the trenches in front of Serre. Next day, in a thin mist, the forces immediately north of the Ancre advanced another 1000 yards to the outskirts of Beaucourt, a village one mile east of Beaumont Hamel.

The two days which followed saw little action, as the mist thickened, and Haig, who was attending the Chantilly Conference, had ordered any further major operations postponed until his return.[119] But the commander of the 5th Corps was optimistic that more could be accomplished, and General Gough obtained the C.-in-C.'s approval to resume the offensive on the 18th. Intentions changed more than once with varying estimates of the enemy's powers of resistance, and the final plan assigned the main attack to the 2nd Corps. Its left division (the 19th) was to take Grandcourt and cross the Ancre to occupy Baillescourt Farm on the opposite bank. In subsidiary operations on the right, the 18th Division and the 4th Canadian Division were to capture the new Desire (German "*Dessauer*") and Desire Support Trenches, which lay from 500 to 800 yards north of Regina Trench. On the left there would be no further attempt to reduce the strong Serre defences, but two fresh divisions of the Fifth Corps were given as objectives German reserve trenches farther east running northward from Grandcourt to Puisieux. In spite of uncertain weather and conflicting intelligence reports preparations went ahead with a haste that augured no good for their outcome.[120]

The first snow of the winter fell during the night of 17-18 November, and the operation began shortly after six next morning in blinding sleet which later changed to driving rain. The battle was fought under the worst possible conditions. The infantry, groping their way forward through the freezing mud, had difficulty in identifying their snow-covered objectives and repeatedly lost direction. Deprived of observation the artillery batteries, with little knowledge of the infantry's progress, could only adhere to their pre-arranged programme and hope that the support was effective. The wonder is that in circumstances so desperately bad our troops could make any gains at all. What they accomplished is a tribute to their physical stamina, self-sacrifice and dogged determination.

The Canadian attack took place on a front of 2200 yards, the 4th Division having taken over on 16 November the positions held by the 18th Division's right brigade. General Watson's main effort was on the left, where the 11th Brigade, strengthened with a battalion from the 12th Brigade (Brig .-Gen.


SKETCH 36
THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE HEIGHTS
DESIRE TRENCH 18 NOVEMBER 1916
1000
500
YARDS
1ST GUARD RESERVE DIVISION
DIVISION OF THE SOMME
FOURTH ARMY
RESERVE ARMY
COY 44TH BN
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2 COYS 50TH BN
1ST CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
1ST CANADIAN DIVISION
10TH BATTALION
75TH BN
54TH BATTALION
2ND CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
4TH CANADIAN DIVISION
87TH BATTALION
11TH CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
58TH BATTALION
55TH BDE
58TH DIVISION
56TH DIVISION
E. Miraumont Road
W. Miraumont Road
Old Desire Trench
Desire Trench
Grandcourt Trench
Sunken road
Quadrilateral
Dyke Road
Pys Road

J.H. MacBrien), assaulted astride the two Miraumont roads with four battalions (from right to left the 75th, 54th, 87th and 38th). East of the Courcelette-Pys road the 10th Brigade attacked with the 46th Battalion on the right and the 50th on the left. The Division had the support of the 2nd Corps Heavy Artillery, four divisional artilleries (the three Canadian and the 11th British) and the Yukon Motor Machine Gun Battery. A smoke-screen fired by No. 2 Special Company Royal Engineers effectively hid the advance from observation from the front and right flank.[121]

The Canadian task was to seize Desire Support Trench and establish a new line 100-150 yards beyond, exploiting farther if possible. (A late order issued by General Watson's headquarters at 2:30 a.m. directed the 11th Brigade to advance to Grandcourt Trench, some 500 yards beyond Desire Support.) At zero hour, while maintaining a concentrated standing barrage on the enemy trenches, the guns put down a creeping barrage, behind which the infantry companies (two from each battalion except the 46th) advanced in four waves at intervals of 50 yards or less. Fine coordination between artillery and infantry brought excellent results. In less than an hour the 54th Battalion had sent back its first group of prisoners. By eight o'clock both brigades had gained their initial objectives and were hastily digging in beyond Desire Support. Prisoners from the 58th Division were coming back in groups of as many as fifty at a time. A German counter-attack against the 54th Battalion ended suddenly as the enemy threw down their weapons and surrendered; a second threat was broken up by artillery fire. On the left the 38th and 87th Battalions, having overrun both Desire and Desire Support, pushed strong patrols down the slope to Grandcourt Trench, establishing machine-gun posts there and taking more prisoners. The day's total harvest by the 4th Canadian Division was 17 officers and 608 other ranks.[122]

Unfortunately the success achieved by Brig.-Gen. Odium's troops was not matched on either flank. The situation with the 10th Brigade on the right - never as favourable as it seemed - had changed for the worse. The one assault company of the 46th Battalion had suffered so heavily from small-arms fire that it could not hold the ground it had won. On its left the 50th Battalion, having lost touch with the 11th Brigade, was forced back to Regina Trench by heavy machine-gun fire from both flanks. The 18th British Division, too, had been less successful than early reports suggested. The 55th Brigade (on Odium's immediate left) seized about 300 yards of the east end of Desire Trench, linking this up with the Canadian-won portion of Desire Support, but the rest of its objective was still in enemy hands. There had been partial success in the valley of the Ancre, where the inner wings of the 2nd and 5th Corps had pushed a salient forward half a mile beyond Beaucourt. But General Jacob's left wing had failed to reach Grandcourt or Baillescourt Farm; and north of the river the 5th Corps had added very little to its gains of 14 November. Both corps had suffered heavy casualties and were in no condition to continue the offensive.[123]

The relief of the German 58th Division by the 56th during the day pointed to the likelihood of a fresh counter-attack in strength against the 2nd Corps' right wing; and as early as 12:30 p.m. General Watson decided to

withdraw the Patrols from Grandcourt Trench and to shell the position in preparation for making a full-scale assault. At 7:50 p.m., however, in view of the unsatisfactory situation elsewhere on the army front Jacob cancelled any further advance by the 18th or the 4th Canadian Division. There seems little doubt, as the British Official History points out, that the Canadians could not have permanently occupied Grandcourt Trench.[124] Yet even so, their gains had not been inconsiderable. In what proved to be its final action on the Somme the 4th Division had advanced almost half a mile on a 2000-yard front. It had suffered 1250 casualties, in return taking half that number of prisoners and inflicting heavy losses in killed and wounded.[125]

The heavy rain which fell on 19 November would have prevented further attacks even had either of General Gough's corps been capable of renewing the struggle. It ended the fighting at the Ancre - the last of the Somme battles. 'The ground, sodden with rain and broken up everywhere by innumerable shell-holes, can only be described as a morass", Sir Douglas Haig informed the Chief of the Imperial General Staff on the 21st.[126] In such conditions, even when there was a lull in fighting, merely to maintain themselves made severe physical demands upon the men in the trenches. For the soldier in the front line existence was a continual struggle against cold and wet, as he crouched all day in the rain and the mud, gaining what protection he could from a rubber groundsheet wrapped around him. Hip boots were issued to help guard against "trench feet", but often these had to be abandoned when their wearer became mired in the clay. For health's sake frequent reliefs were necessary, even though effecting these was an exhausting process. Towards the end of the Canadians' tour on the Somme infantry battalions had as much as eight miles to march to the trenches from their billets in Albert, and at least four miles from the nearest bivouacs at Tara Hill. "With the bad weather", reported General Watson to Canadian Corps Headquarters, "the men's clothing became so coated with mud, great coat, trousers, puttees and boots sometimes weighing 120 pounds, that many could not carry out relief."[127]

Nor did these exchanges bring escape from the continual round of working parties. The demand for nightly carrying parties had to be met alike by units in the line and units at rest. From the point on the Bapaume Road at which German shelling halted the forward movement of wheeled transport, all rations, ammunition and supplies for the front line trenches had to be borne on human backs, or by pack transport. A regimental historian depicts the grim nightly scene.

> Men toil through the darkness under heavy loads, floundering, at times, waist deep in water; climbing wearily over slimy sandbags, stumbling across dismembered corpses - tired, dazed and shaken by the incessant bombardments; clothes soaked and equipment clogged with mud; faces grey from want of sleep.[128]

The main tasks which now faced the Fourth and Fifth Armies were to replace tired and depleted divisions with fresh troops, improve their forward communications and strengthen the new front line for a winter defence. The Fourth Army took over from the French four miles of front line, moving the inter-allied boundary from Le Transloy to within four miles of Peronne. The

adjustment freed three French corps as part of the preparation for the spring offensive which General Joffre was planning.[129] The 4th Canadian Division was not relieved immediately; that it was to complete nearly seven weeks continuously in the front line was recognition that it had satisfactorily won its spurs. Between 26 and 28 November it handed over to the 51st British Division and rejoined the Canadian Corps on the Lens-Arras front.

Canadian battle casualties at the Somme had totalled 24,029.[130]

The Somme Balance Sheet

"The three main objectives with which we had commenced our offensive in July had already been achieved", wrote Sir Douglas Haig in his despatch. "... Verdun had been relieved; the main German forces had been held on the Western Front; and the enemy's strength had been very considerably worn down. Any one of these three results is in itself sufficient to justify the Somme battle."[131]

The conclusion thus reached by the British Commander-in-Chief was by no means unanimously accepted either during the war or afterwards. It has continued to be a matter of controversy. The failure to gain much ground and the heavy losses suffered by the Allied forces aroused considerable criticism both in France and the United Kingdom. Especially in question was the extent to which the Allied policy of attrition had succeeded in reducing the enemy's powers of resistance. Writing as late as 1952, the editor of Sir Douglas Haig's private papers declared that it "has probably by now come to be the generally accepted view of the Somme campaign" that it was "a costly failure which did far more damage to the Allied than to the German cause".[132]

Such criticism was based largely on a comparison of the casualties suffered by the German and the Allied armies. How valid is it?

Unfortunately there exist no thoroughly reliable statistics, particularly with respect to German losses. Unofficial figures published shortly after the war gave British and French losses as more than double those of the enemy. In a memorandum submitted to the Cabinet on 1 August 1916, Mr. Winston Churchill charged that during the first month of the Somme offensive British casualties outnumbered German losses by 2.3 to 1. Later (in The World Crisis, 1911-1918) he set almost as wide a ratio for the whole of the Somme campaign.[133] In similar vein Mr. Lloyd George asserted in his memoirs that on the Somme "our losses were twice as great as those we inflicted".[134] These comparisons, unfavourable to the Allies, became widely accepted; and it was argued that Haig's intelligence officers in their attempt to balance the cost to each side had grossly overestimated the German losses.

On the other hand, the German casualty figures cited by those who sought to discredit the Allied conduct of the war on the Western Front have been seriously disputed, especially by defenders of Haig. It was charged that the German Government had contrived to conceal from the German public the truth concerning the immense losses suffered by their armies. It is a fact that whereas

British casualty figures included as wounded all who passed through a casualty clearing station. German published totals disregarded the less serious cases which were treated in hospitals in the corps areas-a proportion that, by German statistics, averaged 30 per cent of all losses. (Thus in giving figures for "the great losses of the summer of 1916" the German Official History points out that these do not include "the wounded whose recovery was to be expected within a reasonable time".)[135]

The British Official Historian took fully into account the difference in these systems of reporting casualties. In 1931 (in his first volume dealing with the operations on the Western Front in 1916) he estimated that Allied casualties at the Somme were somewhat less than 600,000, and that German losses totalled 582,919.[136] In 1938, however, after Germany had published official figures of 465,525 German casualties (against 700,000 British and French losses)[137] he revised his estimates. He calculated that a fair basis of comparison would show the following gross figures (including prisoners and missing) for the contending armies for the whole of the Somme campaign: German (including the seven-day bombardment at the end of June), between 660,000 and 680,000; British, 419,654; French, 204,253;[*] or an Allied total of 623,907.[139]

While the objectivity of these figures of enemy losses must be held in question, from the Germans themselves has come ample testimony to the heavy punishment which the Allies inflicted upon them. "The Army had been fought to a standstill and was now utterly worn out", admitted Ludendorff in his memoirs.[140] The Allied offensive had sapped the strength of no fewer than 95 German divisions; 43 of these had been committed twice, and four had been thrown in three times.[141] Unit and formation histories reiterate the story of the liquidation at the Somme of the old German field army. One infantry regiment after another, each nominally 3000 strong, records losses of from 1500 to more than 2800. Among these were the best trained and stoutest-hearted officers, non-commissioned officers and men. Their steadfastness and spirit of sacrifice replacements would never match. No wonder that in January 1917, Ludendorff was to declare at the conference which approved unrestricted submarine warfare, "We must save the men from a second Somme battle".[142] It was largely this realization that caused the Germans, before the Allies could strike again, to renounce their policy of holding and recovering ground at all costs, and to retire to semi-permanent defences fifteen to thirty miles in the rear (below, p. 241).

"In the air the victory had been more complete", the historian of the British flying forces records. "From beginning to last of the battle the air war was fought out over enemy territory."[143] The Royal Flying Corps made the most of its local air superiority - a happy situation which it was to enjoy all too infrequently during the rest of the war - to follow the British naval tradition of "seeking out and destroying the enemy wherever he may be found".[144] The German tendency

[*] These totals are considerably higher than those obtained in an independent analysis by Sir Charles included the investigation of German casualties. He produced comparative figures of 523,000 German losses to 490,000 British and French combined.[138]

at this time was to over-emphasize fighters, using them mainly in a defensive role. The enemy's air policy remained a defensive one, while the R.F.C. continued to wage offensive warfare.[145]

Not the least significant result of the Somme offensive was that, as Sir Douglas Haig had hoped (above, p. 160), it shattered the illusion of German invincibility on the Western Front. Not all the attempts by German writers to disparage the Allied armies' use of their superior weight of war apparatus-"*die Material-Schlacht*" - could hide the fact that German military prestige had been struck a severe psychological blow from which it was not to recover.

Yet after all this has been said in vindication of Haig's achievements at the Somme, we cannot close our eyes to the horror of the mass butchery to which the C.-in-C.'s tactics had condemned the troops under his command. The proof of successful attrition is to be found in convincing casualty figures - and, as we have seen, the casualty figures for the Somme are not convincing. At best the five-month campaign that had opened on 1 July with such high expectations had resulted in a costly stalemate.