CHAPTER XII

# THE GERMAN OFFENSIVES OF 1918

(See Map 10 and Sketch 46)

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## Relative Strengths of the Opposing Armies

AS THE YEAR 1918 opened it was apparent to the members of the Entente that a crisis in the war was fast approaching. It is true that the disappointment of Cambrai had been to some extent offset by good news from the outer theatres of war. In Palestine General Allenby had more than wiped out the sting of Sir Archibald Murray's earlier defeats at Gaza by the brilliant campaign which carried his army from Beersheba to Jerusalem in six weeks. He entered the holy city, humbly on foot, on 11 December. In Mesopotamia, where General Sir Stanley Maude had captured Baghdad on 11 March 1917, the British force made some further advances at the end of the year, though it failed by a wide margin to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the preoccupation of the Turks with General Allenby's Palestine operations.

But in Europe the outlook was less encouraging. The "October Revolution" earlier in the winter had brought the Bolsheviks to power under Lenin and Trotsky. A Russo-German armistice signed at Brest-Litovsk on 18 December was confirmed by a peace treaty in the following March. Early in 1917 the Allies had enjoyed numerical superiority over the Central Powers, but as a result of the heavy attrition of the summer and autumn fighting, and with Russia out of the war and the United States not yet effectively in, the balance had been reversed. It would be the middle of 1918 before the flow of American divisions would be great enough to tilt the scales in the right direction once more.*

Throughout the winter the Germans had been steadily transferring troops from Italy and the East, and by mid-February they had 178 divisions on the Western Front - two more than the number held a year earlier by the Allies, who now had the equivalent of only 173. Yet the Allies enjoyed greater overall strength, for in spite of the recent reduction of British infantry brigades from four to three battalions (above, p. 231), Allied divisions were generally larger than those of the enemy. The enemy forces in France and Belgium amounted to some 1,232,000 rifles, 24,000 sabres, 5500 heavy and 8800 field guns; as against,

* There were nine American combat divisions in France by the end of April. The next three months brought 20 more divisions. By the end of October the total arrivals numbered 42 divisions.[1]

1,480,000 Allied infantry, 74,000 cavalry, 6800 pieces of heavy and 8900 of field artillery.[2] In other infantry weapons the Germans held a distinct advantage. Each enemy division outnumbered its British counterpart 50 to 36 in trench mortars, and 350 to 64 in heavy or medium machine-guns, and held a heavy superiority in light machine-guns.[3] In air strength, taking the Western Front as a whole, the Allies outnumbered the enemy almost three to one (in the British sector 1255 aeroplanes to 1020 German; in the French, about 2000 to 470). The German air concentration in the actual area of the assault, however, gave the enemy a nominal superiority of nearly thirty per cent.[4]

The decision to reduce from twelve to nine the number of battalions in a British infantry division had been taken in January 5 on the recommendation of a Cabinet Committee on Manpower which saw the need to subordinate the demands of the army to those of the naval and air forces, the construction of ships, aeroplanes and tanks, and the production of food and timber. British divisions in the minor theatres (five in Italy, four in the Balkans, and fourteen - including six Indian divisions - in the Middle East) for the time being retained the four battalion brigade, as did the divisions of the Dominions[*] (though in September Australia began reducing her brigades to three battalions). The British reorganization resulted in increasing the proportion of artillery and machine-guns to infantry, but unforeseen delays in putting the change into effect meant that when the Germans struck in March some brigade commanders were still unused to handling only three battalions.[6]

In January, as agreed between the British and French governments and approved by the Supreme War Council, the British line on the Western Front had been extended by 25 miles to a point five miles south of the Oise. This meant that in March British Armies (from south to north the Fifth, Third, First and Second) were holding 126 miles of front with a total of 59 divisions (including reserves and two Portuguese divisions) supported by 1640 heavy guns and 432 tanks. The French, whose front was now 300 miles long, had 97 divisions. The Belgians had ten divisions, the Americans five.[7] Early in December Haig had told his Army Commanders, "We must be prepared to meet a strong and sustained hostile offensive". How was this to be done?

Allied statesmen who recalled unsuccessful offensives when the odds had been nearly three to two in their favour, were slow to admit the possibility of a German break-through with lesser odds. The military members of the Supreme War Council, however, alarmed at the paucity of the existing British and French reserves - the latter amounting to 33-35 divisions - advocated creating a more adequate, international emergency force. A board composed of all four military representatives requested of the French, British and Italian commanders-in-chief a total of thirty divisions as a general reserve for the Western and Italian fronts, which would be treated as a single theatre. Italy offered six divisions, but for the Western Front Pétain and Haig preferred, in effect, to form a separate Franco-

[*] As already noted (above, p. 232) the Canadian divisions in France increased each battalion by 100 men over establishment.

British reserve. In the event of an attack on one the other pledged himself to render assistance in twelve hours. Mr. Lloyd George at first opposed this arrangement which ran counter to his interest in the Italian theatre, but on 14 March, "in view of the apparent imminence of a large attack"[8], he reluctantly accepted it. The Supreme War Council, being merely an advisory body, could only do likewise.[9]

The British Prime Minister had at last rid himself of General Sir William Robertson, with whom his relations had never been happy. The new C.I.G.S. (as of 16 February) was General Sir Henry Wilson, whose place as British military representative at Versailles was taken by General Sir Henry Rawlinson, formerly commanding the Fourth Army.

## The Offensive in Picardy, 21 March-5 April

The original plan for the German offensive had been laid the previous winter, when on 11 November-a significant date-Field-Marshal von Hindenburg's Chief of Staff, General Ludendorff, met at Mons with the chiefs of staff of the two army groups involved. Neither von Hindenburg nor any other commanders were present, and it is apparent that the German C.G.S. was content to leave the planning and conduct of the battle largely in Ludendorff's hands.[10] Ludendorff appreciated that the situation in Russia and Italy would, "as far as can be seen, make it possible to deliver a blow on the Western Front in the new year". Everything would be thrown into the one effort; he ruled out the possibility of a simultaneous large-scale offensive as a diversion. If possible the operation would be launched at the end of February or early March, in order that the British might be beaten before strong American forces arrived to turn the scale.[11]

Ludendorff's final decision was not made until 21 January 1918, but preparations to launch separate attacks near St. Quentin, Arras, Armentières and Ypres began at once.[12] During the winter German divisions underwent special training for the offensive. There was an overriding emphasis on the maintenance of momentum. Storm troops-whole battalions or smaller groups-were to by-pass opposition where they could not overcome it, accepting open flanks. Pockets of resistance would be dealt with by regimental or battalion reserves; counter-attacking tanks would be handled by artillery in rear. These tactics, to which no special name was given at the time, later came to be known as "infiltration".

In the form adopted on 21 January, the German plan called for an initial break-through to the Somme on both sides of Péronne; the German right wing would then wheel northward, rolling up the British flank. The attack, code-named "Michael", was to be launched on a 50-mile front by the Eighteenth Army of Crown Prince Wilhelm's Army Group in the sector from the Oise at La Fère to just north of St. Quentin, and from there to the Scarpe by the Second and Seventeenth Armies of Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group. These armies would employ 71 divisions, which by the third week in March had been brought up to a strength of 850 men per battalion* through ruthless reinforcement from other

* In addition each battalion had 130 men in its machine-gun company. Excluding these, the infantry strength of a German division was 7650, the total rifle strength being somewhat lower.[13]

division, at the expense of the latter's combat efficiency and mobility.[14] The actual assault would be carried out by 32 divisions, supported by some 2500 guns. Ludendorff planned that when Operation "Michael" had succeeded, "George" would be launched in the region of Armentières.

Both these planned blows would fall on British armies. "It need not be anticipated that the French will run themselves off their legs and hurry at once to the help of their Entente comrades", wrote the Eighteenth Army's Chief of Staff in mid-January. 15 Demonstrations designed to keep the French expecting an attack south of the Oise were assigned to Crown Prince Wilhelm's Group. Most of the front on which the German Eighteenth and Second Armies were to attack was thinly held by General Gough's Fifth Army, which because of the increased British commitment to General Pétain, with only twelve divisions was responsible for 42 miles of front from the boundary with the French Sixth Army northward to the Péronne-Cambrai road. Opposite the German Seventeenth Army and the Second Army's right wing General Byng's Third Army had fourteen divisions with which to defend a front of 28 miles.

Some thought had been given to strengthening the British defences, and during the winter work on these had to be carried out within the limitations of a shortage of manpower for labour. The front, support and reserve trenches had been converted to a German-pattern "forward zone", in which troops were placed in outpost groups and supporting posts sited to sweep intervening ground with rifle and machine-gun fire. Behind this forward zone, which was designed to delay the enemy's advance and to compel him to deploy, lay a "battle zone", consisting of a series of centres of resistance rather than continuous trench lines. It was here that the main defence would be made. What was to have been a "rear zone" had not materialized as more than a planned line, designated in some cases only by the removal of the turf to indicate its intended position.[16]

The British scheme of defence was based on the report of a committee of major generals charged with investigating German methods described in captured training manuals. Unfortunately the committee misinterpreted the enemy's pattern of defence. Whereas the Germans ensured mobility for their forward battalions by assigning only one-third of their battalions to man the strongpoints, leaving two-thirds in dug-outs available for immediate counter-attack where needed, the British tied up two-thirds or more of their strength in the defended localities. The result was that they were short of protective infantry to cover the intervening gaps or strike counter-blows. This produced a defence as rigid as the former system of holding continuous trench lines - and an almost complete absence of an effective counter-attack force.[17]

Limited as he was in manpower, Sir Douglas Haig apportioned his forces in keeping with the relative strategic importance of the sectors for which he was responsible. On the Second Army's front in the north, where loss of ground would compel the B.E.F. to fall back to the Channel coast, each division (excluding reserves) held an average of 3555 yards of front. The length of this frontage increased progressively southward, until in the Fifth Army, where

German gains could be considered least harmful, a division had 6555 yards to defend.[18]

On 10 March the Germans heavily bombarded the French defences in Champagne and mounted feint attacks on Verdun and Reims. On the same date British air observers reported large-scale troop movements by road and rail to the sector opposite the Fifth and Third Armies, and Intelligence at G.H.Q. noted that deserters' statements and the construction of large ammunition dumps confirmed the imminence of an offensive in the Arras-St. Quentin area. By the 19th it was evident that the enemy's preparations were practically complete, and the commander of the Fifth Army wrote home that the attack would probably be made on the 21st.[19]

On the expected day the enemy struck at dawn. At 4:40 a.m., in a dense fog, German high-explosive and gas shells began to fall all along the Fifth and Third Army fronts. While part of the First Army front also was bombarded as a deception, in general the Lens-Méricourt sector held by the Canadians escaped attention. The enemy did, however, launch an unusually strong raid on Hill 70, leaving behind a score of German dead and wounded. The main bombardment lasted a gruelling six hours, and played havoc with the British defended localities, as well as with formation headquarters and communications. When the assault came, strong battle groups penetrated deep through the thinly covered gaps, and fanning outward surrounded such strongpoints as still resisted. "Elastic defence" proved as foreign to the British nature as to the German a year earlier. At some points, parties of riflemen and machine-gunners valiantly attempting to hold their ground were overpowered; at others, small groups of Germans precipitated large-scale withdrawals. The end of the first day found the enemy in possession of the entire forward zone and part of the battle zone, having advanced to an average depth of three miles between the Oise and the Sensée. South of St. Quentin he had even broken right through the battle zone.[20]

Ludendorff's orders had been to exploit tactical success. As he told Crown Prince Rupprecht, "We chop a hole. The rest follows. We did it that way in Russia."[21] In the first three days the Eighteenth Army, on the German left, confronted by the weakest part of the British front, not only reached the Somme and the Crozat Canal (which linked the Somme to the Oise south-west of St. Quentin) but pushed beyond these objectives. The other two armies, however, had made slower progress and were in no position to roll up the British flank. Rather than follow up success where it occurred, accepting failure elsewhere, Ludendorff made the mistake of using up many of his reserves to redeem failures in the centre and on the right. He then introduced a new, dual aim - to split the British and French forces, and drive the British into the sea.

Encouraged by the Eighteenth Army's success and by mistaken reports of favourable developments near Bapaume, on 23 March Ludendorff began to change the pattern of the entire operation. In the south the Eighteenth Army, hitherto mainly required to cover the flank of Rupprecht's two attacking armies, was now given its head and directed on the Chaulnes-Noyon area. In the north the Seventeenth Army would press towards St. Pol and Doullens; in the centre

the Second Army, with emphasis on its left, would continue advancing towards Amiens so as to separate the British and the French.[23]

For the next three days the German advance made rapid progress on almost the entire front of attack. Haig's southern wing seemed beaten; separation of the British from the French appeared imminent. Accordingly orders from the High Command late on 26 March signified a further widening of the operational aims. Increased importance was attached to the offensive against the French, where the Second and Eighteenth Armies would wheel to the left in a south-westerly direction. At the other end of the expanding operation the Seventeenth Army was to fan out north of the Somme, and while the Sixth Army readied itself to attack, the Fourth Army was to marshal its forces against the Belgians.[24] Could the Allies halt these impending drives?

## Unity of Command for the Allies

Heavily outnumbered by the German strength arrayed against them, the Allied commanders searched desperately for reinforcements. In response to repeated requests by Sir Douglas Haig for French aid, Pétain ordered nine divisions to the British front between the second and fourth days of the offensive. Haig had asked for a concentration of 20 French divisions about Amiens, but on the evening of 24 March Pétain told him that no more could be spared. From north-west of Crépy, near Laon, the Germans had begun bombarding the French capital with a monster siege gun having a range of 75 miles, bringing the war unpleasantly close to the Parisians.[25] Convinced that the main blow was yet to come (in Champagne), and ordered by his government to "cover Paris at all costs", the French C.-in-C. was prepared to accept a gap between his own forces and the British. But Haig was convinced that the maintenance of a continuous front was and must remain a basic principle of Franco-British strategy. The Supreme War Council was powerless to resolve the deadlock, for neither French nor British would hand over to it the reserves which it demanded. In this crisis Haig asked the C.I.G.S. and the Secretary of State for War (now Lord Milner) to come to France.[26]

Privately to Sir Henry Wilson, and openly at a conference of French and British political and military leaders at Doullens on the 26th, Haig let it be known that he now favoured the appointment of General Foch as supreme commander in France. The French Premier, Georges Clemenceau, then proposed that Foch be charged with "the co-ordination of the action of the British and French Armies in front of Amiens"[27] Haig however realized the need of giving Foch complete authority over all operations in the West, and with the concurrence of Pétain the relevant terms were changed to read "Allied Armies on the Western Front".*

* On the eve of the conference the United States commander, General John Pershing, had offered Pétain four American divisions "equivalent in strength to eight French or British divisions" as a reserve. When Pétain objected that American troops were not yet experienced enough to form an American corps, two divisions (the 26th and the 42nd) relieved French divisions in quiet sectors of the line.[28]

Eight days later an Inter-Allied Conference, called to define Foch's powers further, entrusted him with "the strategic direction of military operations"; each C.-in-C. would remain "in full control of the tactical action" of his own armies. Thus unity of command was at last achieved, at least in the main theatre. Shortly afterwards Foch assumed the title of "Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies".[29]

On 25 March, as an immediate precaution against a breach between the British and French forces, Haig placed the Fifth Army, which was south of the Somme, under French command. To force a gap had been the German intention since 23 March, though the impending change of direction was not immediately noticeable. More apparent were the effects of the normal "diminishing force of the offensive". In six days the enemy had made a bulge 25 miles deep and 50 miles wide at the base; in the next ten days this increased by only thirteen miles on an ever-narrowing front. But astride the Scarpe a resolute and skilfully directed defence by the Third and First British Armies on 28 March had fought the Germans to a standstill. Ludendorff failed completely in his attempt to smash through the British line at Arras and regain the Vimy Ridge, though he attacked with 29 divisions against eight. (The comparative front line strengths were 13 German to six British divisions.) German authorities tend to attribute the final failure of their offensive to the use of poorly trained and under-disciplined troops. Ludendorff has been censured by some writers for not adhering to his original scheme nor consistently applying his doctrine of infiltration. According to von Kuhl, however, neither the individual army headquarters nor, on the whole, the troops were to be blamed for the failure. The real causes seem to be the developments which forced a diversion from the original plan and a shift of gravity towards the west and south-west. Since the objectives for the right wing (which required long advances towards the north-west) remained unchanged, the attack began diverging in three different directions with resultant dissipation of force.[3o] However close the Germans came to reaching their goal, it must be concluded that their original plan was too ambitious and took too little account of their enemy's defensive capabilities.[31]

The operations in Picardy, variously called the March Offensive or the First Battles of the Somme, 1918, consisted of a number of large battles, the last of which ended on 5 April. By that time the Germans had swept forward from the line La Fère-St. Quentin to a new line which ran in a south-westerly direction from Lens to a point 40 miles west of La Fère. Péronne, Bapaume, Albert, Montdidier and Noyon had all been overrun, and the surge forward to the outskirts of Villers-Bretonneux, south of the Somme, meant that the important communications centre of Amiens, formerly nearly 40 miles inside British territory, was now less than ten miles behind the front. The fighting had cost the British 163,500 casualties, the French 77,000,[32] and the Germans 239,000.[*] The British figure includes Canadian casualties -618 in the three cavalry regiments, 144 in the 1st Motor Machine Gun Brigade, and 34 railway troops.

[*] The German calculation covers the period 21 March to 10 April, and includes the casualties of the five quiet days following the termination of the battle.[33]

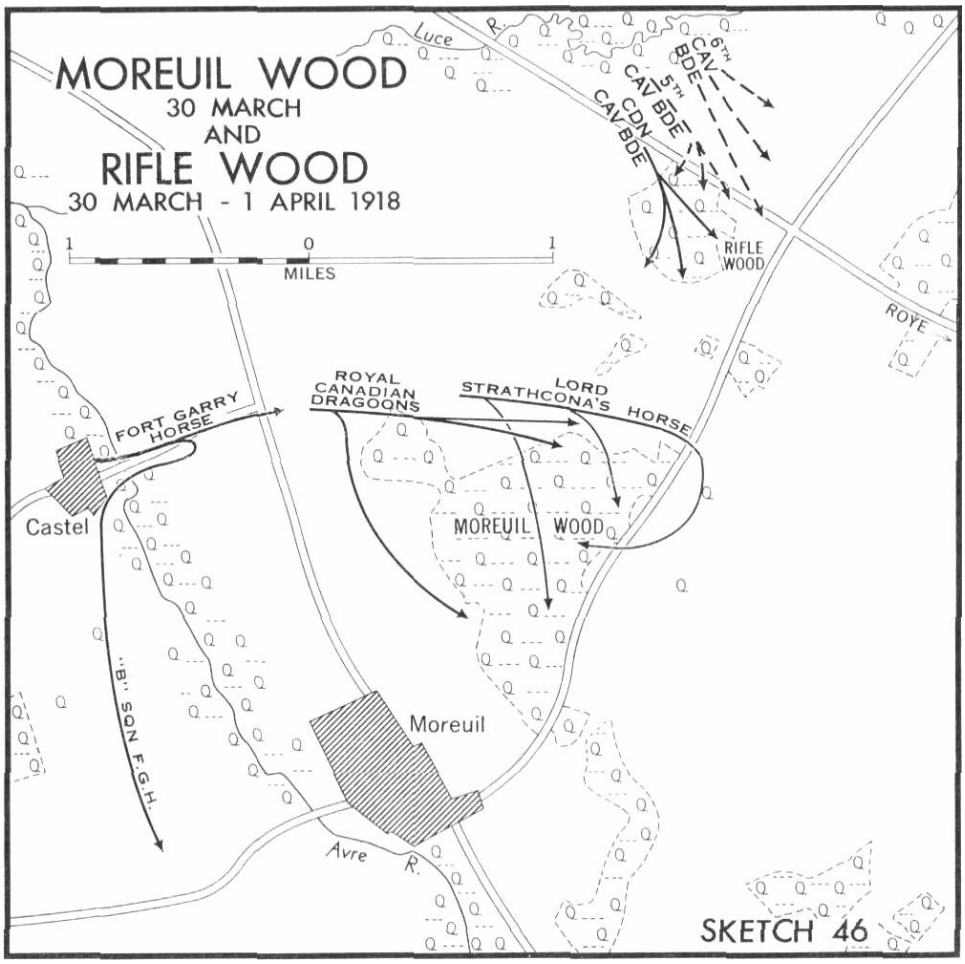
## Canadian Delaying Actions

As we have noted, the First Army's sector, in which the Canadian Corps was stationed, lay outside the area of the German attack. Canadian cavalry and machine-gunners, however, saw action. On the second day of the offensive, when the Fifth Army was under severe pressure, the British cavalry divisions had improvised dismounted units to reinforce General Gough's infantry; the Canadian Cavalry Brigade provided a dismounted brigade of 800 men.[34] The Canadians were employed in the area of the Crozat Canal, between the Somme and the Oise, where, on 23 March, they helped cover the retirement of the British 18th Division across the canal.[35] Falling back towards Noyon, the Dismounted Brigade came briefly in support of the French 6th Corps west of Chauny.

As the Allies continued to fall back there was still the greatest need for mounted troops to cover the retirement and fill important gaps in the line. Accordingly on 23 March a mounted detachment some 500 strong was formed from what was left of the 3rd Cavalry Division. The two British brigades provided 150 men each; the Canadian contribution was General Seely's brigade staff and 200 cavalrymen of his brigade. During the next four days the three squadrons operated in the northern half of the triangle formed by the Crozat Canal, the Oise and the Canal du Nord, helping to re-establish infantry lines that had broken and delivering small-scale counter-attacks on advanced German positions.[36]

On the evening of 27 March the Canadian brigade reassembled at Arsy, west of Compiègne, and was assigned to the 2nd Cavalry Division. Next day the Anglo-Canadian cavalry passed under command of the French First Army, which had just made successful local counter-attacks that enabled it to link up with the British right flank. In a further drive French troops, advancing with unexpected ease on Fontaine, a village eighteen miles south-east of Amiens, near Montdidier, took a number of "prisoners dressed like Canadians". One of the "captives" turned out to be Lieut. Harvey, V.C. (above, p. 242,*n.*), of the Strathcona's! Sent forward some time beforehand on a mounted reconnaissance, Harvey and ten men had entered the village and driven out a greatly superior force of Germans.[37]

As German pressure in the direction of Amiens continued, the 2nd Cavalry Division again came under British command on 29 March in the sector adjoining the French left. When early next morning battalions of the 243rd German Division began occupying Moreuil Wood, a commanding position on the right bank of the River Avre only twelve miles south-east of Amiens, the 3rd and the Canadian Cavalry Brigades were at once sent to recapture it. French troops had already fallen back across the Avre. A mile and a quarter long from south to north and flaring to a width of nearly a mile at the northern end, the wood consisted mainly of ash trees. These were not yet in leaf, but close-growing saplings and heavy undergrowth made riding exceedingly difficult.[38] The Canadian brigade was first on the scene, and the assault was carried out in converging thrusts by three mounted squadrons of the Royal Canadian Dragoons,




followed up by attacks-mounted and dismounted - by Lord Strathcona's Horse.* The German infantry resisted stoutly, but by 11:00 a.m., after a considerable amount of hand-to-hand fighting, the northern part of the wood was in Canadian hands. While one squadron of the Fort Garry Horse rode back across the Avre to bring the enemy under enfilade fire, a second joined in a dismounted advance through the remainder of the wood. By midday the wood was clear of Germans.[40]

The enemy soon counter-attacked. Reinforced by dismounted units of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade and a company of British infantry, the Canadians strove to maintain their position; though portions of the wood changed ownership more than once, and some lost ground was not recovered. That night the cavalry, having suffered many casualties, were relieved by three improvised battalions of the British 8th Division. On the 31st the enemy resumed his attacks, recapturing

* Lieut. G. M. Flowerdew, mortally wounded while commanding a mounted squadron of the Strathconas in a gallant charge, was posthumously awarded the V.C.[39]

most of Moreuil Wood and occupying the smaller Rifle Wood, which lay a mile to the north beside the Amiens-Roye road. During the afternoon this was retaken, but only temporarily. A further attack that evening, the artillery support for which included two batteries of the R.C.H.A., partially restored the situation, but left Rifle Wood and all but the north-west corner of Moreuil Wood still in German hands. On the morning of 1 April dismounted units of the 2nd Cavalry Division attacked Rifle Wood in three waves. It was the third wave, consisting of 488 all ranks of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, which entered and cleared the wood.[41]

Other Canadian forces to be actively involved in this first German offensive were the machine-gunners and some railway troops. The 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade had been ordered from its positions at Vimy Ridge to the Fifth Army area on the second day of the initial battle. It moved without delay to Villers-Bretonneux (ten miles east of Amiens), whence its five batteries (above, p. 171 ,n.) were divided among three British Corps to aid in checking the enemy's advance and to fill dangerous gaps on the Army front.[42] The Fifth Army was virtually without support or reserves, and a large proportion of its artillery and machine-guns had been put out of action or captured. In these circumstances the arrival of the Canadian batteries with their 40 machine-guns was most timely aid, particularly as the mobility provided by their eight armoured cars greatly increased the effectiveness of their fire-power.[43]

An action typical of what the machine-gun units accomplished was that of "C" (Borden) and "B" Batteries, employed with the 7th Corps behind the Canal du Nord, north-west of Péronne. Early on the 24th the two batteries went into action about Cléry, on the north bank of the Somme, and for eight hours played a major role in holding up the German advance along the Péronne-Albert road. When they fell back that evening, covering an infantry withdrawal, the two batteries had only two guns left in action - manned by an officer and a small handful of men. Their casualties for the day numbered 47 all ranks.[44]

On the night of 25-26 March, when the threat to Amiens was becoming increasingly serious, General Gough ordered the disused Amiens Defence Line,* east of Villers-Bretonneux, to be put in order and manned by all available troops. To that end a force of some 3000 was raised. Composed mainly of British engineers, it included also 500 American railway troops, 400 officers and men of the 2nd Battalion Canadian Railway Troops, and a ten-gun battery organized from newly arrived reinforcements for the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade. "Carey's Force", so called from the name of the divisional commander who took over command on the 24th, made a valuable contribution in establishing and holding its line of resistance until the night of 30-31 March, when Australian troops relieved it. By that time the number of machine-guns manned by the Canadians had risen to 32 - their commander having "scraped up another sixteen from among stragglers and the infantry".[46] Although the Amiens

* This position, extending south from the Somme to the River Luce, consisted of two lines about eight miles long, constructed by the French in 1915. The inner line was 11 miles and the outer (to which the name usually referred) 15 miles in front of Amiens. During 1917, to permit cultivation of the ground the wire had been removed and some of the trenches filled in.[45]

Defence Line was never attacked in strength, the Railway Troops saw some minor action and were subjected to considerable shellfire.[47]

The whole of the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade was eventually involved in the operations south of the Somme. On 26 March "A" and "B" Batteries moved up to Villers-Bretonneux, where their armoured cars, each mounting two Vickers guns, did valuable work patrolling the highways and side roads. Their role was specific - "to get in touch with the enemy, kill as many as possible and delay his advance".[48] On the 29th "C" Battery and the Eaton and Yukon batteries ("D" and "E"), had replaced the original Canadian machine-gun detachment in Carey's Force. On 6 April the newcomers supported Australian forces in a successful attack south-east of Villers-Bretonneux which resulted in regaining some ground and the capture of 200 Germans.[49] This ended the Canadian commitment with the Fifth Army. The assistance given by the Motor Machine Gun Brigade to General Gough's exhausted and disorganized divisions had been far out of proportion to the size of such a comparatively small unit. Its officers and men had been trained to fight on their own initiative - training which bore good results when orders could not reach them and headquarters of divisions and infantry brigades, continually on the move, could not be found.[50]

## The Fighting in Flanders, 9-29 April

By the evening of 5 April Ludendorff "was forced to abandon the attack on Amiens for good".[51] Yet it was not immediately apparent to the Allies that Amiens was no longer threatened or where the next blow would fall. It was suspected that increased traffic northward, noticeable even before 21 March, might have been only a feint. By the second week of April, however, the Germans appeared to be in a position to strike anywhere north of the Scarpe. In fact Ludendorff intended to attack with his Sixth Army in the plain of the Lys between Armentières and La Bassée, and so draw the British reserves southward from Flanders, and then to deliver a blow with the Fourth Army against the weakened northern sector. The demands of the March battles farther south had already depleted the First and Second British Armies, who were holding the line with few reserves. Haig urgently requested French help, but Foch refused to send any reinforcements northward until the battle had started and the Germans had shown their hand.[52]

On 9 April the Germans struck. Fourteen divisions attacked on a twelve-mile front between Armentières and the La Bassée Canal. It was the first anniversary of the battle of Vimy Ridge, and early reports made Ludendorff's birthday more pleasant than the previous year's. The enemy advanced some three and a half miles, further penetration being stopped by his difficulty in keeping his supporting artillery within range, and by what Crown Prince Rupprecht called the "obstinate resistance" at Givenchy of a "particularly good" British division (the 55th).[53] But next to the 55th Division a Portuguese contingent, whose four timed brigades were long overdue for relief, fell back before the onslaught of four German divisions. The Fourth Army's attack that went in next day extended the

battle front northward to the Ypres-Comines Canal. By the following morning both Armentières and Messines had fallen. Foch now ordered a French relief force of four infantry and three cavalry divisions (to be called the Tenth Army) to assemble behind Amiens; but he still refused to take over any British front or to move French formations northward. Recalling earlier British stands in front of Ypres he told Haig - who found him "most selfish and obstinate" - that the British could and must "hold on where they stood".[54] Events were to justify the Generalissimo's unwillingness to be argued into involving reserves in a running fight.

The German advance continued unevenly - the Fourth Army's attack gained impetus, while that of the Sixth Army lost momentum. On the 11th, a strong thrust put forward troops within five miles of Hazebrouck; and that evening Haig issued his famous Order of the Day: "With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause each one of us must fight on to the end...." On 12 April the Germans contented themselves with local attacks, seeking to extend their gains in width rather than in depth, and from now on the offensive definitely lagged. With Ypres threatened General Plumer began to organize a main line of resistance on the more defensible western slope of the long Passchendaele ridge. By the 17th the eastern face of the ridge and much of the forward slope towards Ypres, all of which had been earlier bought with so much blood, had been abandoned to the enemy.[55] That day was marked by a costly repulse of German forces attempting to capture Mount Kemmel (five miles south of Ypres), the most easterly of the string of commanding heights reaching back to Cassel. North of Ypres an attack by General Sixt von Armim's Fourth Army had been stopped cold by the Belgians, fighting their first major battle since 1914.[56]

After the German setback there was a brief lull in the fighting on the ground, though not in the air. It was in this period that Captain von Richthofen scored his seventy-ninth and eightieth victories and fought his last battle.[57] He was shot down and killed in circumstances that still remain a subject of controversy.

On 19 April French troops of a newly-organized *Détachement d'Armée du Nord* began to relieve a British corps in the Mount Kemmel sector. Five days later Ludendorff temporarily turned his attention to the Somme. An assault by six divisions of the Second Army against the forces covering Amiens resulted in the capture of Villers-Bretonneux from the British and Moreuil from the French. In the former operation the Germans employed thirteen tanks to good effect-their first use of armour, apart from a few tanks in a mopping-up role on 21 March. Subsequently British tanks engaged them, and in the war's only armoured combat of any size knocked out one German tank and turned two others away.[58] Villers-Bretonneux was recovered next day in a counter-attack by British and Australian troops.

The last week of April saw the Germans return to the Flanders offensive (sometimes known as the Battles of the Lys), where they concentrated their efforts against the line of heights south of Ypres. On the 25th they stormed Mount Kemmel behind a particularly heavy bombardment and quickly overcame

French resistance there. The final effort came four days later, when seven divisions of the Fourth Army attacked on a ten-mile front from Ypres to the River Douve. Foch had brought the strength of the French-held sector up to seven divisions as well as providing strong artillery reserves. This time except for two small penetrations the Allied line held. With his Fourth and Sixth Armies so exhausted as to be extremely vulnerable to counter-attack, Ludendorff broke off the offensive. Once more a German advance had been halted in front of Ypres. Again the Channel ports were saved.

Much blood had been shed. The German losses in Picardy and Flanders (figures for both offensives were not divulged separately) totalled 348,300. Allied casualties for the same period totalled 330,000, the northern campaign having produced 76,300 British and 35,000 French casualties. The brunt of the battle had been borne by Haig's hard-pressed troops, and as a result of the continuous fighting, of the 61 British divisions in France (two had recently arrived from Palestine) only 48 were fit for battle. Eight had been reduced to mere skeletons, and in some cases would never be fully reconstituted.[59] General Pétain's forces were in better condition. As May began the French still had 103 divisions, all reinforced to full strength - 63 in the line, including four in Flanders, and forty in reserve. Also under Pétain's command were two Italian divisions (received in the latter part of April) and three American divisions. The number of German divisions on the Western Front had been brought to 204 by further arrivals from Russia,[60] though Ludendorff was greatly worried about the lack of drafts to replace his losses. He angrily complained about the Government's failure to release exempted men and take "energetic action against deserters and shirkers".[61]

The initiative remained with the enemy. Now the great bulge of the German gains formed a right angle facing westward against the British and southward against the French, so that Ludendorff could strike equally well in two directions. The Germans were still hopeful of final victory; the Entente were still in danger of losing the war.

## The German Advance to the Marne, 27 May - 6 June

Before the fighting in Flanders and Picardy slowed to a halt Ludendorff had already set in motion plans for what he later styled "the second great German attack in France".[62] Before resuming operations in the north he determined on dealing a major diversionary blow across the Aisne towards the end of May, in order to compel the return of French reinforcements from Flanders. This would be followed about mid-June by a renewed attack against the British armies in the north, by that time denuded of their French reserves; while on the heels of the diversion in Champagne the Austro-Hungarian Army would launch an offensive on the Italian front.[63]

Secretly during May the German Seventh Army, which faced the French Sixth Army along the historic Chemin des Dames, increased its strength by 30 divisions with some 4000 guns, which had been placed at its disposal by the High Command. On the morning of 27 May 1918 the extreme left wing of the German

Eighteenth Army, all of the Seventh Army and the right wing of the First Army - 38 divisions with 5263 guns of all calibres -stood deployed in three echelons on a 60-mile front reaching from south-east of Noyon to south-east of Reims.[64] Along the dozen miles of the Chemin des Dames, between Pinon and Craonne, the Germans had concentrated ten divisions. Holding the front line opposite them were one depleted British and two French divisions. The major tactical weakness of the French Sixth Army's position, partly dictated by the prestige value attached to the Chemin des Dames, was the placing of nearly half the available defending forces well forward on the ridge, with the unfordable rivers of the Aisne and the Vesle behind them. On his whole front the French Army Commander had only four of his sixteen divisions (eleven French and five British) in reserve.[65]

The attack was launched in the early hours of 27 May after a bombardment which, employing more than 40 batteries per mile of front, far surpassed in intensity any previous German effort that year. Ill-served by its intelligence services the French Army was taken completely by surprise. As the ten German divisions stormed the Chemin des Dames, five of them poured into the centre of the line and destroyed one French and the British division at a single blow. Nothing could stop the German onrush, which by nightfall had carried the centre of the Seventh Army to the Vesle on a nine-mile front. This advance of ten miles in a single day was without precedent in trench warfare.[66] By the end of the second day Soissons had fallen and the Germans held a pocket fifteen miles deep on a base of forty miles. Within a week they had reached the Marne at Château Thierry, though on the German left Reims remained untaken. Ludendorff had indeed exploited tactical success, though he was afterwards to admit that the attack had not been broken off early enough at all points.[67] The advance which was to have stopped at the Vesle had travelled forward to form a bulging salient thirty miles deep and on the average as many miles wide. Yet strategically the diversion had failed. Eventually accepting Haig's view that the real danger was still in the north, General Foch had not weakened his strategic reserve in Flanders in response to the German challenge in the south. In all, twenty-five French and two American divisions had been drawn into the battle between 28 May and 3 June, but all from Pétain's reserve. Both at the Somme and in Flanders the Allies had conserved and even increased their strength.[68]

Ludendorff's next effort was a westward extension of the Champagne diversion - an attack by the Eighteenth Army between Montdidier and Noyon. After two postponements due to the unexpected progress of the main diversion the operation was launched on 9 June, with eleven German divisions attacking west of the Oise and across its tributary, the Matz. On the first day the Germans broke through to a depth of six miles, but thereafter they were held to minor gains by the French Third Army, which with nine divisions forward, all well prepared for a German onslaught, was at less of a disadvantage than had been the case at the Chemin des Dames. General Foch promptly replied to Pétain's demand for reserves, and on the 11th a force of three French and two American

divisions, strongly supported by tanks and aircraft, struck the German right flank. The counter-attack gained little ground, but it effectively stopped the enemy's advance. On the evening of the 12th Ludendorff called off the Eighteenth Army's attack, giving similar orders to the German Seventh Army, which had made little progress in a supporting effort launched that morning south-west of Soissons.[69]

## The Last German Offensive, 15 July - 6 August

"Again and again our thoughts returned to the idea of an offensive in Flanders", Ludendorff was to write of the summer of 1918.[70] How like Haig's sentiments of late 1916 and early 1917! But the German High Command had no illusions about the Allied strength in that sector, and in the hope of drawing off some of the reserves from the British front it ordered an attack on either side of Reims to be made in mid-July. This part of the front, from Château Thierry eastward to Verdun, had been left comparatively lightly held when Pétain, under public pressure to guard Paris, packed the bulk of his reserves along the forward arc of the German salient. The initial objective would be a crossing of the Marne. With this gained, the "battering train" of heavy artillery and trench mortars would be immediately transferred northward for a Flanders offensive (Operation "Hagen"), to begin in early August[71] Any thought of going over to the defensive was ruled out by Ludendorff; for to adopt such a policy would make it easier for the Allies to concentrate their superior resources in war material on a single battlefield.[72]

But General Foch was also planning offensive operations. During June Allied attacks delivered on a scale of one or two divisions had revealed signs of feebleness in the enemy's resistance. The epidemic of influenza which was sweeping the world had reached the Western Front. Continuing through July and recurring in October, it was to cost the British forces nearly 16 per cent in casualties. The Germans, with their resistance lowered by inadequate diet, were greater sufferers. A toll of from 1000 to 2000 cases per division was reported, and the epidemic threatened postponement of the Flanders operations.[73] Encouraged by their preliminary successes, the French began preparing for a strong counter-offensive to be launched on 18 July against both sides of the German salient.[74]

By mid-July fifty divisions* of the German Crown Prince's Group of Armies, with the support of 6353 guns, stood ready to attack along the 75-mile front from the Argonne to Château Thierry, while some nine or ten depleted divisions under the Ninth Army Headquarters (which was brought in from Rumania) faced westward between the Oise and the Marne. Holding the line against this strong force, or preparing to launch converging counter-attacks from west and south-east, were close to 70 divisions in four French Armies (the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Tenth), including seven American, four British and two

* Twelve divisions were in the first line west of Reims, fifteen east of Reims. Two more were held at Reims waiting to join the attack at a later moment, and 21 divisions were ready as second and third echelons.[75]

Italian divisions.[76] As in their previous offensives, the Germans held vast superiority in artillery -1047 field batteries and 609 heavy guns to the Allied 360 field batteries and 408 heavy pieces.

In September 1914 the First Battle of the Marne had spoiled German hopes of quickly ending the war. Now, nearly four years later, the same river was again to mark the high tide of the enemy's progress towards Paris, and the battle waged along its banks was to be the last in which German forces would enjoy the initiative.

The Second Battle of the Marne began on the morning of 15 July with the usual heavy bombardment, which lost much of its effectiveness because the French, forewarned by captured Germans, had thinned out their front position, and were able to catch the opposing batteries with early fire. East of Reims the attackers suffered a staggering defeat at the hands of the French Fourth Army. It was a grave moment for the higher German commanders, who realized the far-reaching implications of the setback. Farther west, however, the German Seventh Army put six divisions across the Marne between Château Thierry and Epernay, capturing a bridgehead eight miles wide and four miles deep.[77] Fierce fighting followed, and General Pétain ordered preparations for the counter-offensive suspended in order that he might draw reserves from the assembling troops to reinforce his threatened front. But he was overruled by General Foch, who was confident that the German bridgehead, which was under constant heavy aerial bombing and artillery shelling, could be liquidated.[78]

In the early hours of 18 July the French Sixth and Tenth Armies struck with twenty-four divisions massed between Château Thierry and the Aisne, catching the enemy completely by surprise. By mid-afternoon these forces, which included four full-strength American divisions, had pushed the west face of the salient back four miles, and the Crown Prince had ordered the evacuation of the Marne bridgehead. First word of the French attack reached Ludendorff at the headquarters of Army Group Rupprecht, where the Chiefs of Staff of the Fourth and Sixth Armies were reporting to him on the preparations for the Flanders Offensive.

When subsequent messages indicated a grave deterioration of the situation, Ludendorff returned to his headquarters at Avesnes and in the evening requested General von Lossberg, the Fourth Army's Chief of Staff, to join him there. Next morning Lossberg examined the information on hand and advised Ludendorff that the Armies which had carried out the spring offensive should be withdrawn gradually to their starting positions. According to Lossberg the Field Marshal agreed in principle, but contended that for political reasons such a withdrawal was impossible.[79] It will be seen that a second great shock was required to make Ludendorff admit to himself the true nature of the situation and its serious implications (below, p. 407).

By 20 July the French Fifth and Ninth Armies had begun attacking west of Reims. Ludendorff's diversionary offensive had suddenly become for the Germans a grim defensive battle. The transfer of their heavy guns northward had started on the 18th. But these would not now be needed for Crown Prince

Rupprecht's Flanders offensive. Ludendorff, with no idea as to "how, if at all, we should be able to recover the initiative", had ordered Operation "Hagen" to be cancelled.[80] The Second Battle of the Marne dragged bloodily on for nearly three weeks, as both sides reinforced steadily. The Germans, fighting doggedly, were slowly driven back. By 7 August, when the battle ended, they had been forced behind the Vesle, where they were temporarily safe from French pressure. They had lost 29,000 prisoners and their overall casualties were estimated at 168,000.[81]

The great gamble of Ludendorff's offensives had failed. The million casualties suffered by the Germans since 21 March - casualties for which no adequate replacements were forthcoming - had enfeebled their armies at a time when they were soon to face their greatest test. Of the 201 German infantry divisions (or equivalent) on the Western Front at the beginning of August, 106 were unfit for battle - and ten were shortly to be broken up.[82] On the other hand the Entente not only slightly surpassed this strength numerically (130 front-line and 76 reserve infantry divisions), but more than matched their opponents in the quality of their formations. The British sector was considerably better off with its 53 divisions, most of them well rested during the summer, than it had been for many months. Thirty-six of these were in the front line. Haig's reserve included the Portuguese and four United States divisions. On the French front there were 84 divisions in the line (of which seven were American and three British), and 39 in reserve (including seven U.S., one British and two Italian divisions).[83]

## The Canadian Corps on Defence and in Reserve, 21 March - 30 July

Apart from the larger, and in the main, untried American and Belgian divisions, the strongest divisions in the entire theatre during the summer of 1918 were those of the Canadian Corps. Holding a seven-mile sector centred on Lens, at the right of the First Army's line, the Canadians had not been involved in the heavy fighting of March and April. At the time of the first German offensive the Corps had three divisions in the line - from north to south the 1st Division opposite Hill 70, the 4th in front of Lens, and the 3rd Division in the Avion-Méricourt sector. The 2nd Division was in the Corps training area at Auchel, eight miles west of Bethune.[84]

It was important ground that the Canadians were holding, for behind Lens and Vimy Ridge lay the only collieries that remained accessible in northern France and many key centres of communication that must be denied to the enemy. Accordingly the early months of 1918 saw much work done on the defences. Unusually fine weather assisted the completion of extensive works behind the main front-line system - 250 miles of trench, 300 miles of wire entanglements, and 200 tunnelled machine-gun emplacements. Great care was taken in siting the artillery - on Vimy Ridge alone 72 new battery positions were built and ammunition stacked beside them. This pleased the French, who having good reason for attaching much importance to that particular sector sent a former Minister of War to inspect its defences.[85]

Scarcely had the Germans struck when demands reached General Currie to make Canadian formations available as reserves to hard-pressed British corps. On 23 March the 2nd Canadian Division was ordered into G.H.Q. reserve in the Mont St. Eloi area, and the 1st Division taken out of the line and placed in First Army reserve. As the 4th Division extended its left to cover Hill 70, at the other end of the Corps front the 3rd Division was called on to relieve a British division by taking over an additional 3000 yards in the Acheville-Arleux sector. By 25 March, the Corps was holding a 17,000-yard front with only two divisions. Next day, following a conference at Doullens between Earl Haig and his Army Commanders, orders came from General Horne that would detach the remaining Canadian divisions from General Currie's command and send his Corps Headquarters into reserve. Haig was imbued with the necessity of holding his ground in order to gain time for the French to come and support him. He hoped that his centre could resist enemy pressure which would cause his line to bulge, "thus extending our front as to risk its breaking. I therefore ordered Horne", he wrote in his diary, "to get three divisions of Canadians out and place them somewhere opposite the centre of Byng's line."[86] The Canadian sector was to be taken over by the two adjacent British Corps.

On the right the 13th Corps (the First Army's right-hand corps) assumed command of the 3rd Canadian Division at noon on the 27th; while north of the Souchez River the 46th Division of the 1st Corps was ordered to relieve the 4th Canadian Division, which would then pass into G.H.Q. reserve.[87] At the same time the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions were placed in General Byng's Third Army south of Arras - the former with the 17th Corps, astride the Arras-Cambrai road, and the latter on its immediate right in the Neuville-Vitasse sector of the 6th Corps' front.[88]

In the emergency of the German offensive Sir Arthur had agreed to the employment of Canadian divisions under British command "as required",[89] but he protested the orders which would remove all four divisions from his control. "I . . . offered suggestions", he states, "which to my mind would reconcile my claims (from the standpoint of Canadian policy) with the tactical and administrative requirements of the moment."[90] (Below, p. 381.) The effect of Currie's arguments was to leave his headquarters less than twenty-four hours without a front-line command. It was 10:15 a.m. on the 29th when the 1st Corps took over the remaining part of the Canadian Corps' front. But word had already come from the Army Commander that the 56th Division, which had been seriously weakened in the heavy fighting of 28 April, should be relieved in the Oppy-Gavrelle sector by the 4th Canadian Division, which would then, together with the 3rd Canadian Division on its left, return to Currie's command-the 13th Corps being pulled out of the line.[91] These reliefs were carried out expeditiously, and at 6:45 a.m. on the 30th the Canadian Corps resumed command of two of its divisions.[92]

Among Sir Arthur's suggestions to the First Army was one that the 1st Division (since 27 March with the Third Army) should relieve the 4th British Division astride the Scarpe, the inter-army boundary to be shifted southward

accordingly. This adjustment was completed on 8 April, leaving the Canadian Corps holding a front of approximately 16,000 yards with three divisions. Currie also proposed that the 2nd Canadian Division, then holding some 6000 yards of the Third Army's line, should revert to his command as a reserve. But the additional burden suddenly imposed on the British forces by the second German offensive caused this move to be cancelled - indeed the 2nd Division was not to rejoin the Corps until 1 July. As the Battle of the Lys continued General Currie, with only three divisions at his disposal, was required to extend his front northward to free the 46th Division in the Lens-Hill 70 sector. Thus by mid-April the Canadian Corps was holding a front of more than 29,000 yards.[93]

Currie's protest created an unfortunate impression that long persisted-four strong divisions denied a share in the great defensive battles of March and April through his insistence that they fight only as a corps. The situation was not improved by the Canadian Commander's criticism of the performance of some of the British formations. On 14 April, he noted in his diary, "Army Commander called in afternoon, [and] resented any reflections on fighting ability of British Divisions."* Indeed General Horne (as recorded in the C.-in-C.'s diary) went so far as to suggest to Sir Douglas Haig that Currie was "suffering from a swollen head".[96] Haig's entry of 18 April draws an invidious comparison between Australian policy and that set forth by Currie:

> He wishes to fight only as a "Canadian Corps" and get his Canadian representative in London to write and urge me to arrange it! As a result, the Canadians are together holding a wide front near Arras, but they have not yet been in the battle! The Australians on the other hand have been used by Divisions and are now spread out from Albert to Amiens and one is in front of Hazebrouck.[97]

Three months later Haig was to remind Canada's Minister of Defence (Major-General S. C. Mewburn) that "the British Army alone and unaided by Canadian troops withstood the first terrific blow made by 80 German Divisions on March 21st until May 27th", and that he had been "on the point of employing Canadian Divisions in the battle" but had put them back into the line on receipt of "a wire. . . from the War office emphasizing the Canadian Government's desire to fight together".[98]

So much has been made of the incident that it may be useful to review from the relevant documents the sequence of events as they occurred. On 27 March 1918, following receipt of General Horne's orders, Currie made his formal representations to G.H.Q. in a letter to Lieut.-General Sir H. A. Lawrence,

* Curries strictures had evidently not been confined to the pages of his diary, where for instance he had noted on 11 April, "Many British troops are not fighting well." General Pershing, who visited the Canadian Corps Headquarters on 20 April, has recorded that on that occasion "General Currie deplored the fact that the British had so easily given up Passchendaele Ridge, which the year before he had been told must be taken at all cost, and for which the Canadians made the tremendous sacrifice of 16,000 casualties."[94]

When he expressed these criticisms Currie could not have weighed carefully all the factors affecting the British performance during the initial German offensive. These have been well presented in a critical analysis of the situation by the British Official Historian. They include the overwhelming German superiority opposite the British Fifth Army, the recent reduction of British divisions to a nine-battalion structure, the weakening caused by a compelled extension to take over more front from the French, and the absence of a General Reserve."[95]

Haig's Chief of the General Staff. While not wishing "for a moment to make a single Suggestion that would embarrass the Chief [Haig] in the slightest degree", Currie set forth clearly and reasonably the desire of the units of the Canadian Corps to fight side by side - a wish shared by the people of Canada. He argued that with one of its divisions "thrown in here and another there" the Corps had no chance to do its best. The letter concluded:

> From the very nature and constitution of the organization it is impossible for the same liaison to exist in a British Corps as exists in the Canadian Corps. My Staff and myself cannot do as well with a British Corps in this battle as we can with the Canadian Corps, nor can any other Corps Staff do as well with the Canadian Divisions as my own.
>
> I know that necessity knows no law and that the Chief will do what he thinks best, yet for the sake of the victory we must win, get us together as soon as you can.[99]

Currie sent a copy of this letter to Sir Edward Kemp, who replied on 30 March: "I note what you say about the Corps being divided. On Good Friday [29 March], however, I took the liberty of visiting Lord Derby and handing him a letter, copy of which I attach for your personal and confidential information."[100] In the communication to the Secretary of State for War Kemp, "without in any way presuming to interfere with the conduct of operations in France", pointed out that the efficiency of the Canadian Corps and its high morale were "undoubtedly due to the fact that it has been kept together as a unit under Lieut.-General Sir Arthur Currie, in whom the troops have unbounded confidence". If it were possible to continue this policy, it was felt that better results would be obtained than by breaking up the Corps to be used in smaller units at different points under new leadership. Kemp asked Lord Derby to convey this view to Haig as soon as possible.[101] This Lord Derby did in the War Office wire already referred to.

To keep Ottawa informed, on 2 April Kemp sent Sir Robert Borden a copy of his letter to Derby, together with a copy of Currie's letter to General Lawrence.[102] No reply came for a month, when on 3 May a cable from Borden rather abruptly warned Kemp that "any proposal to break up the Canadian Army Corps would be strongly resented in Canada and would have the most unfortunate effect upon public opinion." The cable was apparently inspired by a question asked in Parliament by Sir Sam Hughes concerning a rumour of such a proposal.[103] Sir Edward Kemp, who was about to leave for the front, at once cabled a reply to set Borden's mind at rest, stating that he had not heard of any intention to break up the Corps.[104]

In France Kemp found the Canadian Corps "in good condition". The 2nd Division was expected soon to rejoin the Corps. He lunched with Haig, who recorded in his diary that from some remarks which inadvertently fell from the Overseas Minister, "I could not help feeling that some people in Canada regard themselves rather as 'allies' than fellow citizens in the Empire".[105]

Final assurance was given in a letter to Kemp from Lord Milner. He had received a copy of Sir Robert Borden's cable, and he reiterated that There was no intention of breaking up the Canadian Corps. The result of continuously keeping the Corps together had proved so satisfactory that "even on purely military

grounds - and apart entirely from the considerations of national sentiment", it would be the greatest possible mistake to pursue any other course. He pledged that if for any military reason the Corps became separated, it would be reunited again as soon as the emergency was over.[106]

Once during the period there had been prospects of offensive action for the Canadians. Late in April the Commander of the First Army had considered them for employment in a local counter-attack designed to forestall a renewal of the enemy's offensive on the Bailleul-Ypres front. The proposed operation, to be launched on a ten-mile front between Festubert and Robecq, was a northward thrust against the left of the enemy's Lys salient, with Merville and Estaires as the final objectives.[107] Planning for the scheme, which was given the code name "Delta", was already well advanced when on 3 May General Foch proposed that the Canadian Corps might be used in the very way that General Horne was intending. But the uncertain situation on either side of the First Army's sector made it impossible to provide relieving troops to free the Canadian Corps for "Delta", and on 8 May preparations for the operation were suspended.[108] Although "Delta" was subsequently cancelled, getting ready for the projected attack had been a useful exercise for all the Canadian arms and services, exerting, as reported by General Currie, "a most vivifying influence on the training of the Canadian Corps".[109]

The part played by the Canadian Corps during these critical weeks should not be minimized. "We are holding a 10 mile front with two divisions", noted Currie on the last day of March, "altogether too much, but owing to lack of men in British Army it cannot be helped. I am told we have 430,000 men in Mesopotamia. What a splendid place for a reserve!"[110] Extended almost to the breaking point and under the continued threat of an overwhelming attack, the Corps resolutely prepared to meet a German assault. As the Battle of the Lys progressed the Canadians found themselves in a dangerously deepening salient. To deceive the enemy regarding the frugality of their dispositions they "adopted a very aggressive attitude".[111] The artillery maintained a vigorous programme of harassing fire, supplemented by gas shells, while the infantry carried out numerous raids and patrols.* To meet the crying need for more infantry two provisional infantry brigades, with a total strength of about 8900 all ranks, were formed from personnel of the four Divisional Wings of the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp, the 1st Tunnelling Company, the field companies of the 5th Division, and certain other Canadian and attached British engineer units.[113]

General Currie was extremely concerned about his shortage of machine-guns, his resources in these weapons being quite inadequate to provide him with the defence in depth necessary to withstand an assault. He formed temporary Lewis and Hotchkiss gun detachments from personnel of the Canadian Light Horse and the Canadian Corps Cyclist Battalion. The arrival in France of the

* In a large raid on the night of 27-28 April near Gavrelle in the 1st Division's sector, Lieut. G. B. McKean of the 14th Battalion personally accounted for eight Germans while capturing two trench blocks and destroying an enemy dug-out. McKean was awarded the V.C., and in the following September he won the Military Cross.[112]

three machine-gun companies originally slated for the 5th Canadian Division and their allotment at the end of March to positions on Vimy Ridge helped the situation somewhat.[114] March had seen a reorganization of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps which grouped the machine-gun companies which had existed since November 1915 (four with each division) into four 2-company battalions, one with each infantry division. In April the Corps Commander added to each machine-gun battalion a third company of four batteries, manning these with fifty of the "best and brainiest men" from each infantry battalion. This fifty-percent addition to its strength in men and guns gave Canadian machine-gun battalions the organization with which they ended the war. The new establishment of 96 Vickers guns meant that the ratio of machine-guns to rifles within a Canadian division would once more match that of the British divisions, in which the relative gun power had been increased by the recent reduction in the number of infantry battalions.*

But the most significant fact about the new machine-gun battalions was the emphasis placed upon their employment as tactical units. A memorandum prepared by Brig.-Gen. Brutinel, Commander of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps, and issued by the Canadian Corps at the end of April, set forth the Corps policy with respect to machine-gun troops. The machine-gun service was to be regarded as a distinctive arm, intermediate between the infantry and the artillery, and with tactics of its own. Though there were occasions when M.G. companies or batteries might be temporarily attached to infantry brigades or battalions for duty, machine-gun battalions were divisional troops, under the command and tactical control of a Divisional Machine Gun Commander, whose position was closely analogous to that of the C.R.A. of a Division with respect to artillery.[116] This policy was far in advance of the existing G.H.Q. policy, which made each machine-gun battalion commander responsible to the G.O.C. of the Division for the discipline, administration and training of his battalion, but as yet gave him no tactical control. It was not until early in November that a G.H.Q. directive to the five British Armies on the Western Front authorized the adoption of the principles of command and tactical handling which had governed the activities of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps during the final six months of the war.[117]

During the first week of May the Canadian Corps (1st, 3rd and 4th Divisions) was relieved by five divisions of the 17th and 18th British Corps. The subsequent period in reserve gave General Currie the opportunity to carry out a reorganization of the Canadian Engineers, authority for which had been received on the day the Germans launched their March offensive. Under the existing system in the field the infantry had provided most of the labour for the small body of engineer "specialist" - giving rise to the motto, "engineers responsible for quality and infantry for quantity".[118] Unfortunately for both the quality and quantity of the work, the engineers had little control over the working parties provided by the infantry, and were themselves subject to dual control. Though in theory the commander of a field company was responsible to the C.R.E. for the task assigned in a given brigade sector, in practice he was more under the orders

* In a British division of nine battalions (9000 rifles) and 64 Vickers guns the proportion was one gun to 141 rifles. A Canadian division of twelve enlarged battalions (above, p. 232) would now have 96 Vickers to 13,200 rifles - a ratio of one to 138.[115]

of successive infantry brigadiers, each with his own idea of what work was required. The results were "confusion, lack of efficiency and waste of labour and material."[119]

To correct this situation Sir Arthur Currie expanded the three field companies then with each division into one Engineer Brigade, consisting of a Headquarters, three Engineer Battalions of 1000 men each, and a Pontoon Bridging and Transport Unit. He found the additional men required by disbanding the four Canadian Pioneer Battalions, the 1st and 2nd Tunnelling Companies, and the three field companies of the 5th Canadian Division Engineers. By the end of July organization of the new units was substantially completed, and all were ready for action when the big push came.[120] "I am of the opinion", Currie was to write later, "that much of the success of the Canadian Corps in the final 100 days was due to the fact that they had sufficient engineers to do the engineering work and that in those closing battles we did not employ the infantry in that kind of work. We trained the infantry for fighting and used them only for fighting."[121]

The period in reserve gave the Corps an opportunity of further expanding the Canadian machine-gun organization by reorganizing its Motor Branch. Existing motor machine-gun units were absorbed, together with the three machine-gun companies of the 5th Division, to form two motor machine-gun brigades* each of five 8-gun batteries.[122] Added mobility was assured the new brigades by the establishment of a Canadian M.G. Corps Mechanical Transport Company for the administration and maintenance of its transport. The reorganization in May of the Machine Gun Wing of the Canadian Corps School at Aubin-St. Vaast into the Canadian Corps Machine Gun School, and the formation in June of a Machine Gun Wing of the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp, completed the changes in the organization of the Machine Gun Corps. At the end of the war its authorized strength had risen to 8771 all ranks.[123]

Dominion Day brought a welcome break in training. Since their arrival in France the Canadians had always made observance of the day one of the high-lights of the year, and the 1918 celebration of the holiday topped all others. The 2nd Canadian Division had particular cause for rejoicing as it had just been relieved by the 3rd Division after 92 days continuously in the line. Nearly fifty thousand Canadian soldiers of all ranks gathered in perfect weather at Tincques, a village fourteen miles west of Arras, to witness or compete in the Corps' biggest sports day. As bands played and aeroplanes circled defensively overhead, the huge throng of khaki-clad spectators cheered the competitors in a full programme of track and field events. Among General Currie's distinguished guests were H.R.H. The Duke of Connaught, Sir Robert Borden and members of his cabinet, and General John J. Pershing, the American Commander-in-Chief. The 1st Canadian Division won top honours in track and field, and the 44th Battalion took the Corps soccer championship, in the final game beating the

* The new 1st C.M.M.G. Brigade was formed from "A" and "B" Batteries (of the original M.M.G. Brigade), the Borden M.M.G. Battery and the 18th C.M.G. Company (from the 5th Division); the 2nd C.M.M.G. Brigade comprised the Eaton and Yukon M.M.G. Batteries, and the 17th and 19th C.M.G. Companies (5th Division).

Engineers rather convincingly by a score of 75 to 8.[124] The Sappers, however, had the satisfaction of taking the Corps baseball championship, which was won by the 7th Battalion C.E. The memorable day came to a close with performance by the "Volatiles", the 1st Divisional Concert Party, of their latest revue, "Take a Chance".

Next day the Prime Minister inspected units of the 1st and 4th Divisions, and on the following Saturday, 6 July, the 3rd Brigade, which had three Highland battalions (13th, 15th and 16th), acted as hosts to a Highland Gathering at Tincques to the Highland regiments of the British Army. All Highland battalions of the Canadian Corps were represented, as were most of the battalions of the 15th (Scottish), 51st (Highland) and 52nd (Lowland) Divisions. A day of competition in Highland games was climaxed by the playing of "Retreat' by the massed pipe bands of the 3rd Brigade and the visiting units - the marching of 284 pipers and 164 drummers providing a soul-stirring spectacle.[125]

The Canadian Corps' long period of rest and training came to end on 15 July, when it relieved the 17th Corps in the line. On the 18th, the same day that Ludendorff began moving his heavy guns northward from the Marne battle, the 2nd Canadian Division was withdrawn into G.H.Q. reserve in readiness for the attack threatening the Second Army in Flanders. The threat passed with the cancellation of Operation "Hagen", but on 20 July General Currie was advised of a new role that the Commander-in-Chief had in mind for the Canadian Corps. On the 27th the 3rd Division returned under Currie's command and three days later the Canadian Corps once more handed over to the 17th Corps.[126]

Since the beginning of the German offensive in March, the Canadians had suffered upwards of 9000 casualties. Of these 5690 had been sustained up to the time when the Corps withdrew into reserve (7 May), and they included losses by the Cavalry Brigade, the 2nd Division and other troops serving in British formations. There were 3998 casualties between 8 May and 7 August inclusive. To the 2nd Division came the honour of another Victoria Cross, won by Corporal Joseph Kaeble of the 22nd Battalion for repulsing an enemy raid virtually single-handed.*

On 22 July 1918 General Currie held a conference of divisional commanders to complete the plans for a Canadian attack against Orange Hill, east of Arras. Only the Corps Commander and a select few of his staff knew that such an operation would not take place and that the scheme was only a blind for an attack elsewhere. The discussions were conducted with the utmost realism and were highlighted by a particularly convincing and at times heated argument between General Currie and the G.O.C. 1st Division (who was not in the picture) over the allocation to the latter of (purely imaginary) tanks.

A week later Currie personally informed his divisional commanders of forthcoming offensive operations to be undertaken by the Canadian Corps on the Fourth Army front. Next day the Corps began to move with the utmost secrecy to a concentration area west of Amiens.

* On the evening of 8 June, when the enemy launched a strong raid near Neuville-Vitasse, Cpl. Kaeble, who was the sole survivor of a Lewis gun section in the front-line trenches, jumped over the parapet and swept the attackers with his fire. He stopped the advance of some 50 Germans against his post, and though mortally wounded continued firing as they withdrew. [127]