

CHAPTER XV

THE FINAL ADVANCE, 12 OCTOBER-11 NOVEMBER (See Maps 14 and 15 and Sketches 52 and 53)

The Enemy Faces Defeat

THE ALLIED VICTORIES of September and early October had badly shaken the enemy. Attempts to hide these serious defeats had met with little success. To the war-weary German people the revelation of weak and useless allies, depleted manpower reserves, and now a series of reverses on the Western Front, came as a sharp contrast to what their General Staff had promised them.

It was impossible for the German High Command to cheer itself by pointing to success in other theatres. On 29 September, the same day that the British Fourth Army smashed through the centre of the Hindenburg Line, came the news that Bulgaria, its army in Macedonia beaten by a Franco-Serbian offensive launched by General d'Esperey two weeks earlier, had signed an armistice with the Allied powers. As a result, Turkey was left to stand alone, beset by enemies advancing on all sides. While Allenby's cavalry pursued the routed Turks through Syria to Aleppo, the Salonika force threatened from Macedonia. On 30 October a new Turkish government accepted armistice terms. Germany's strongest and closest ally, Austria-Hungary, was showing disturbing symptoms of collapse. On 16 October the Hungarian Diet demanded the recall of "our Hungarian Army" from the Italian front—a demand which the Italian success at Vittoria Veneto on 24 October rendered superfluous.

Within and without Germany a series of crises became a chain of disasters. At a Council of War held at Spa on 29 September Ludendorff and von Hindenburg demanded an immediate armistice.¹ Further bad news from the Western Front in the next two days precipitated action, and on 2 October the High Command's liaison officer with the Reichstag told party leaders, "we cannot win the war".² German and Austrian notes were sent to President Wilson on 4 October requesting an armistice. Both Ludendorff and von Hindenburg were emphatic that Wilson's fourteen points "were to serve as the basis for the discussion of peace terms, but were not to be regarded as conditions imposed on us by the enemy".³ It was a vain hope. It soon became clear that the Allied terms in effect amounted to unconditional surrender. This Ludendorff would not accept.

Meanwhile, on 13 October, the British C.-in-C. had been warned by the C.I.G.S., General Sir Henry Wilson, that President Wilson's fourteen points in no sense represented the terms of an armistice; and that until these had been laid down "and agreed to by the enemy, the operations now going on should be continued with all the vigour you consider safe and possible".⁴ Thus while negotiations proceeded the Allies maintained their powerful offensive on the Western Front. But if one side was determined to keep up the pressure, no less was the other anxious to avoid any appearance of lessening its resistance. The German Groups of Armies were warned by Hindenburg on 12 October that the degree to which they might expect favourable armistice terms would depend on their success "in holding the forces together, in retaining possession of conquered territory and in inflicting damage on the enemy".⁵

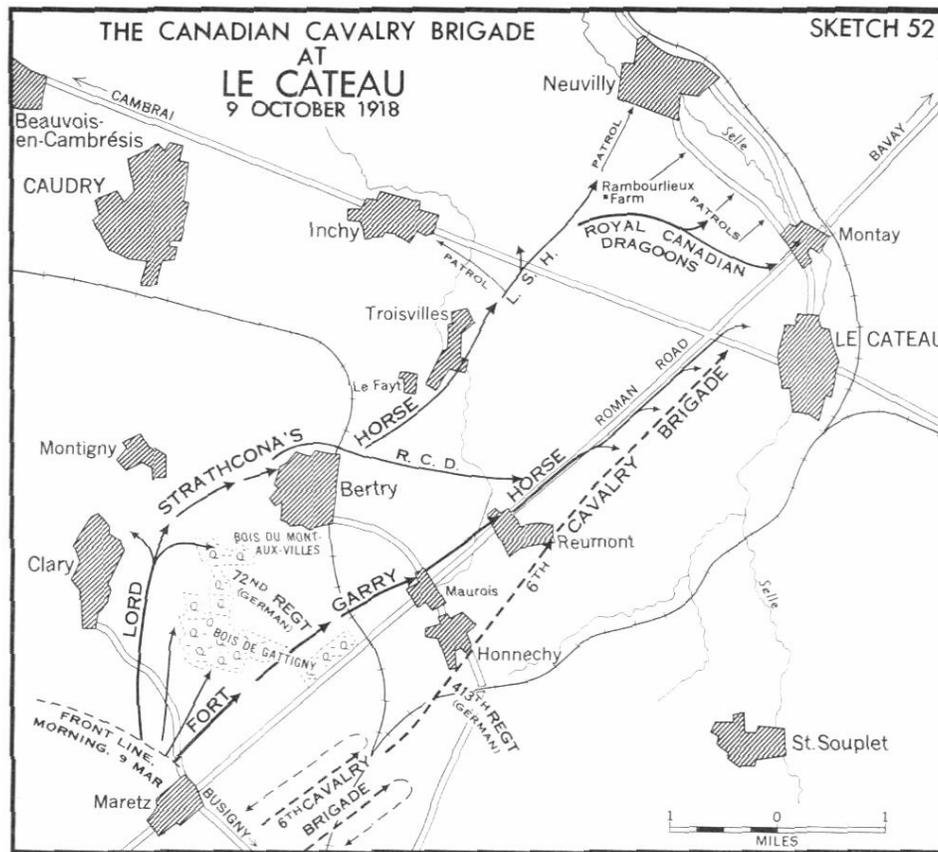
The Last Cavalry Action

Before accompanying the Canadian Corps in its final operations of the war, we must turn back briefly to view the last action in which Canadian cavalry were engaged. This was the employment of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade with General Rawlinson's Fourth Army in the advance to the Selle River. The fighting took place south-west of Le Cateau on 9 October, the day on which the Canadian Corps captured Cambrai.

As already noted, increasing Allied pressure had forced the Germans to withdraw to the Hermann Position, which in the sector opposite the Third and Fourth Armies ran south from Valenciennes to Le Cateau. In falling back the enemy left a series of rearguards in a line approximately three miles east of his former positions. When British infantry encountered these early on the 9th they found a series of strong little centres of resistance which effectively slowed the advance, and allowed the German retirement to proceed without serious hindrance.⁶

On the afternoon of 8 October General Rawlinson had alerted the Cavalry Corps to "be prepared to take advantage of any break in the enemy's defence".⁷ The Canadian Cavalry Brigade, which had seen no fighting since the Battle of Amiens, was concentrated with the rest of the 3rd Cavalry Division about seven miles north of St. Quentin, on the left flank of the Fourth Army. On the morning of the 9th the 66th Division, operating next to the boundary between the Fourth and Third Armies, had as successive objectives the village of Marez, two miles away, and the road joining Bertry and Maurois, some three miles farther on and about the same distance short of the Selle. Advancing through heavy fog, the infantry encountered no enemy until they reached the eastern edge of Marez. Here they came under machine-gun fire from German rearguards in the Bois de Gattigny and in Clary, which lay in Third Army territory. The defenders were members of the 72nd Regiment (8th Division) and the 413th Regiment (204th Division).⁸

It was decided to make an organized attack, in which the 3rd Cavalry Division was called on to participate. Its G.O.C., Major-General A.E.W. Harman, planned to move forward astride the old Roman road which ran straight as an



arrow north-eastward from Marez to Bavai. He placed the 6th Cavalry Brigade on the right of the road and the Canadian Brigade on the left. The Fort Garry Horse, with four machine-guns and a battery of the R.C.H.A. attached, led the Canadian advance. Lord Strathcona's Horse was given the task of protecting the left flank and reconnoitring out to the line Montigny-Inchy-Neuvilly.⁹

The Cavalry Brigade, commanded by Brig.-Gen. R.W. Paterson, moved forward at 9:30 a.m. Soon after crossing the lateral Clary-Marez road both regiments met machine-gun fire from the same German positions that had stopped the infantry.¹⁰ A spirited charge over 1500 yards of open ground by Lord Strathcona's Horse cleared out the enemy rearguard near Clary. Then, in the face of scattered shelling and machine-gun fire from Montigny on their left, the Strathcona's worked their way around the edge of the Bois du Mont-aux-Villes- a northern extension of the Bois de Gattigny.¹¹

Meanwhile the Fort Garry Horse, supported by the attached R.C.H.A. battery, had attacked the Gattigny Wood. While one troop of the regiment successfully charged the machine-guns in the southern half of the wood - though losing more than half its men in this attempt - a squadron galloped through a gap between the northern and southern halves of the wood to take the same objective

in flank. With the assistance of infantry of the South African Brigade (of the 66th Division) in mopping up, the Bois de Gattigny was cleared shortly after 11:00 a.m. The encounter had yielded approximately 200 prisoners, a 5.9-inch howitzer and about 40 machine-guns.¹²

Success at the Bois de Gattigny and the Bois du Mont-aux-Villes prompted General Harman to make his next objectives Maurois on the Roman road and the neighbouring village of Honnechy a thousand yards to the south. He planned to encircle the latter place with a flanking move by the 6th Cavalry Brigade, while the Canadian Brigade came in on Maurois from the north. But when Brig.-Gen. Paterson went forward to relay these orders to the Fort Garry Horse he found that they had already taken Maurois. On the Canadian left the Strathcona's had worked their way into Bertry.¹³

At 1:00 p.m. the 6th Cavalry Brigade reported that it had not been able to advance beyond the Busigny-Maretz road. At the same time the Fort Garrys were being held up on the Maurois-Bertry lateral. The next village on the Roman road was Reumont, only three miles from Le Cateau and the Selle. Paterson now ordered a squadron of the Royal Canadian Dragoons to swing wide to the left around Bertry to take the high ground north of Reumont. The reserve squadron of the Fort Garrys would make a smaller swing to enter Reumont from the north-west. Again the Strathcona's were to provide flank protection by pushing north-east from Bertry to Troisvilles. All the guns of the R.C.H A. Brigade, including an attached battery of 4.5-inch howitzers, were grouped in a valley 1000 yards west of Maurois to give the cavalry covering fire.

The neatly planned little operation was entirely successful. While dismounted Fort Garry troopers forced their way into Reumont, the Dragoons reached their objective in time to cut off a detachment of the retiring enemy. On the left the Strathconas were beyond Troisvilles shortly after 4:00 p.m. During the afternoon enemy guns and transport had been seen moving along the Cambrai-Le Cateau road, which crossed the path of the Canadians about a mile beyond Troisvilles. While the Fort Garry Horse retired into reserve the Dragoons and the Strathconas were ordered to cut this line of retirement as soon as possible.¹⁴

As night fell the Dragoons pushed forward to Montay, less than a mile from Le Cateau, and during the hours of darkness R.C.D. troopers patrolled the Montay-Neuvilly road along the west bank of the Selle.¹⁵ On the left the Strathconas sent patrols into Inchy on the Cambrai road. Other patrols found the Germans still strongly holding Neuvilly, east of the river. In the meantime the relief of the 6th Cavalry Brigade by a cyclist battalion had left the Canadian right flank open from Reumont to Le Cateau until two squadrons of the Fort Garry Horse were brought forward to fill the gap. Enemy shelling during the night caused several casualties to both the Fort Garrys and the Strathconas, but daylight brought an end to the Canadians' operation. They were relieved by the 7th Cavalry Brigade and withdrew west of Troisvilles.¹⁶

In advancing approximately eight miles on a front over three miles wide, the Canadians had captured more than 400 prisoners and many weapons, and by

disrupting enemy attempts at demolition they had materially aided the infantry's progress. The Brigade reported a total of 168 men and 171 horses killed, wounded and missing.¹⁷

It was gratifying that this last action by Canadian cavalry was successful. Mounted troops had too frequently met with frustration during the war. The introduction of machine-guns and tanks meant the end of their arm as a useful offensive weapon. This was particularly true on the Western Front, where the concentration of machine-guns and rifles was far greater than in other theatres. Nevertheless many Allied commanders either failed to recognize this trend or refused to believe it. Time and again cavalry was massed for a break-through which never occurred. On the comparatively few occasions when active employment came it was often misdirected. Horses were impeded and horribly injured by barbed wire, and their riders' sabres proved futile against enemy bullets. In assessing the work of the cavalry it must be recognized that the greatest contribution was that made by those squadrons which served dismounted in the trenches.

The Pursuit from the Sensée

When the Canadian Corps exchanged places with the fresher 22nd Corps during the second week of October, it found itself in the centre of General Horne's First Army, with the 7th Corps on its left, north of the Scarpe. Opposite was the German Seventeenth Army, which with the Second Army on its left formed the left wing of Prince Rupprecht's Group of Armies. The progressive shortening of the front had made the Army Group Headquarters Boehn redundant.¹⁸ On 9 September the Ninth Army had reverted to the command of Army Group Wilhelm¹⁹ and von Boehn's Army Group was dissolved on 8 October. Next day command of the Second Army returned to Army Group Rupprecht.²⁰

The 1st Canadian Division had come temporarily under the 22nd Corps in this sector on 7 October, taking up positions behind the Trinquis Brook (which ran from Biache-St. Vaast to the Sensée below Etaing) and behind the Sensée for three miles east of Etaing. By the 11th the division had made its way across both waterways. It formed the left of the holding which General Currie took over on that date. The whole Corps front extended in a south-easterly direction from the Scarpe River, just east of Vitry-en-Artois, to Palluel. From there it followed the southern bank of the Sensée Canal to the junction with the Canal de l'Escaut, turning south to a point on the Escaut north-west of Iwuy. In the centre, lying for the most part before the obstacle of the Sensée, the 56th and 11th British Divisions had remained relatively quiet while the 1st Division moved forward. On the right the 2nd Canadian Division had continued the attacks begun on 9 October, but on a somewhat shortened front.²¹

There had been several attempts by units of the 1st Division to push across the Trinquis and the Sensée while the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions were still engaged about Cambrai. An existing bridgehead over the Trinquis near

Sailly-en-Ostrevent was enlarged by a “Chinese Attack”^{*} on 8 October, a false attack designed to determine the enemy’s probable reaction to a genuine assault. Early on 10 October patrols of the 3rd Brigade, which held the left of the line, explored the possibility of piercing the positions still occupied by the enemy north of the Sensée. Members of the 13th Battalion crossed the Trinquis and penetrated well north of Sailly before being forced to withdraw with some 60 casualties.²³ South-east of Etaing patrols of the 2nd Brigade were less successful. When next day an attack by the 8th Corps on the Canadian left found the enemy in retreat, both brigades at once tried again to advance over the two rivers. Crossing on footbridges they moved steadily ahead, meeting only slight resistance from isolated machine-gun posts. Vitry-en-Artois was passed, and by dusk the new line ran from a point on the Scarpe about 1000 yards west of Brébières, south to Noyelle, Estrées and Hamel. On the 12th the advance continued unopposed, and by evening the 1st Division had pivoted on its right flank until the whole front faced the Canal de la Sensée. The two-day gain along the south bank of the Scarpe had been more than five miles.²⁴

As noted in the previous chapter, the evening of 11 October found the 2nd Canadian Division forming General Currie’s right flank about Iwuy (above, p. 459). The Germans shelled the village heavily that night as arrangements were completed for the 51st Division to relieve the Canadians as far west as the Iwuy-Denain Railway. Next morning the 5th Canadian Brigade joined in the British division’s attack, and by mid-afternoon the 24th Battalion had pushed beyond Hordain, while patrols were advancing on Bouchain. During the evening of the 12th General Burstall extended his frontage westward almost to Aubencheul-au-Bac, taking over the area previously held by the 11th British Division.²⁵ This left the Corps front held by the 1st Canadian, the 56th British and the 2nd Canadian Divisions.

Across the entire front extended a water barrier, much of it swampy and impassable. General Horne’s orders were to keep close touch with the enemy and cross the obstacle if means could be found to do so. Until then all corps were to “concentrate effort on reorganization of formations, and on restoring communications; and improving arrangements for supply”. Fighting was to be limited to patrolling, raiding and firing test barrages.²⁶

During the night of 12-13 October the 56th Division constructed a floating bridge across the Sensée Canal at Aubencheul and early on the 13th attacked Aubigny-au-Bac on the north bank.[†] The British troops captured the village and with it more than 200 prisoners from the 234th Infantry Division. The threat of strong enemy counter-attacks from the direction of Arleux, three miles to the west, indicated that further advance would not be profitable, and at dusk the bridgehead was abandoned, though the bridge itself remained in position, covered by our fire.²⁸ On the 14th patrols of the 1st Division pushed across the canal near Ferin, but once again the enemy’s retaliation was too strong for a

* This consisted of making conspicuous preparations for an attack, culminating in a rolling barrage moving from in front of the outpost line toward the enemy’s positions.²²

† The crossing reversed the direction of the famous passage of the Sensée marshes by the Duke of Marlborough on 5 August 1711, when he led an army over a narrow causeway from Aubigny to Aubencheul to pierce the French “Ne Plus Ultra” lines.²⁷

permanent bridgehead.²⁹

Prisoners' statements indicated that the Germans were preparing for a large-scale withdrawal. The Allied advance in Flanders had forced the German Fourth Army back across the Lys on 15 October, and next day the High Command ordered the Sixth and Seventeenth Armies to conform by retiring into the Hermann Line.³⁰ In the meantime on 16 October the 4th Canadian Division relieved the 56th British Division, whose continuous operations had left its troops too weak to carry out a vigorous pursuit of the enemy. Three Canadian divisions thus had the responsibility for twenty miles of front, and General Currie's scheme of having "two Divisions in and two out" was interrupted.³¹ Next day the Germans began their retreat.

It had been the practice for the 1st Division to fire an artillery barrage along its front each morning as a test for the presence of the enemy. On 17 October there was no sign of the usual retaliation. Even as patrols were preparing to investigate, word came from the Fifth Army to the north that the Germans were retiring all along the front. The 1st and 2nd Brigades immediately crossed the Sensée Canal and pushed rapidly north-eastward. By dusk the 1st Division was established well beyond the Douai-Cambrai road, with patrols in the Douai suburb of Sin-le-Noble and in the villages of Dechy and Roucourt. Douai was found abandoned by the enemy.³² To the south and east, where the German withdrawal was to be much more deliberate, the 4th and 2nd Divisions were opposed at the water barrier by heavy machine-gun fire. Not until the former's 87th Battalion had crossed the canal in the 1st Division's sector and cleared eastward along the far bank could troops of the 4th Division gain a footing at Aubigny-au-Bac from which the advance could proceed.³³ The enemy's artillery was subjecting the 2nd Division's front to more than normal harassing fire, but after dark patrols of the 6th Brigade crossed the Sensée at Pont Rade (in the bend of the canal north of Paillencourt). Shortly after midnight the engineers had bridges over the canal at Pont Rade and Hem Lenglet, and by daybreak on the 18th the 2nd Division held a firm bridgehead covering these.³⁴

To increase the speed of the pursuit the 1st and 4th Divisions each received a squadron of the Canadian Light Horse, a company of the Canadian Cyclist Battalion, two medium machine-gun batteries and two armoured cars.³⁵ It was most important that the advance should be rapid enough to maintain contact with the retreating Germans, yet it proved almost as difficult to keep up with the enemy as to fight him. In the days that followed supply became a major problem. As the Germans withdrew, their engineers systematically demolished bridges and with their mines cratered roads and railways, thereby increasing tremendously the difficulty of maintaining the ever-lengthening supply lines. The problem was intensified by the large numbers of liberated but hungry civilians to be fed. On the 20th General Currie was to note in his diary, "Our Higher Authorities do not seem well enough organized to push their railheads forward fast enough." Yet it was hardly to be expected that after three years of siege warfare staffs would be fully prepared to handle a war of movement. Long marches and wet chilly weather added to the fatigue of troops who could take little rest.

The advance continued. In contrast to the shattered communities of the war-torn areas, the towns and villages abandoned by the Germans were relatively undamaged. The Canadians now found themselves in a new role—that of liberators. When on 18 October troops of the 1st Division entered Pecquencourt, six miles east of Douai, they were greeted by 2000 civilians whom the retiring enemy had left without food; before they departed the Germans had combed the countryside bare of cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry. It was the beginning of a series of liberations which before Valenciennes was reached was to bring to 70,000 the number of people released from the German yoke.³⁶ Against the administrative problems thus created must be set the warmth of the welcome the Canadians received. French tricolours, long hidden, appeared as if by magic along the route of the marching troops, who were greeted with embraces, cheers and shouts of “Vive la France!” As one regimental historian put it: “It was the first time they had ever really felt like ‘heroes’ and ‘saviours of democracy’, as flowery pens of the day were wont to describe hard and cynical fighting men.”³⁷

Pecquencourt was only one of a dozen places occupied by the Canadians on 18 October, and on the 19th they took nearly forty more communities, including the large industrial town of Denain, on the north bank of the Canal de l’Escaut.³⁸ The day’s advance of 12,000 yards was the longest made by Canadians on any single day during the war. The Corps front was narrowing, for the boundary with the 22nd Corps ran almost due north toward Bouchain before turning north-east; and during the night of 19-20 October the 4th Canadian and 51st British Divisions came together just west of Denain, pinching out the 2nd Division, which went into corps reserve.³⁹

There were still occasions when stiff resistance was encountered, On the 20th the 1st Division occupied Wallers, the last town of any size before reaching the large Forêt de Vicoigne. To one battalion at least German machine-gun and artillery fire brought its last fatal casualties of the war.⁴⁰ Before night fell the division had gained a line running along the western edge of the Forêt de Vicoigne, which the 1st and 3rd Brigades cleared next day. By the morning of 21 October General Macdonell’s troops, who had been engaged in continuous operations since the battle of the Canal du Nord, had reached the St. Amand-Valenciennes road. The 3rd Division now came forward from reserve in the Quéant area, where on 15 October, in the presence of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, the G.O.C. First Army, Sir Arthur Currie, and other senior officers, it had sadly buried its former commander, Major-General L.J. Lipsett (above, p. 441). Relief was completed on 22 October and the 1st Division left the line for the last time in the war.⁴¹

On the right the 4th Division had kept pace. There were occasional troublesome rearguards to dislodge, and these became more numerous as the Canadians neared the turn of the Escaut Canal, where their passage to Valenciennes was blocked. At the waterway the Corps came to a halt. To the north lay the Forêt de Raismes, an expanse some four miles square thinly covered with hardwood trees and some conifers. The 3rd Division’s first task was to clear this area of enemy. Most of this was done on 22 October thanks to the good work

of the 7th and 9th Brigades, which in fifteen hours made their way through the woods a maximum distance of some 7000 yards.⁴² By evening on 23 October the Canadian front line stretched for eight miles along the Canal de l'Escaut from the Corps southern boundary to Fresnes, whence it slanted back toward the German held village of Odomez, where the right wing of the British 8th Corps was closing to the Canal du Jard.⁴³

A Pause at the Escaut

The Canadian line was now to remain stabilized for several days while preparations were made for capturing Valenciennes. Both flanking formations of the First Army-the 8th Corps to the north and the 22nd on the south-were well behind the Canadians. The former had been delayed by difficulties of supply and by German demolitions, while the 22nd Corps was held up by resistance along the Ecallion River, which entered the Escaut four miles south-west of Valenciennes.⁴⁴

On 21 October General Horne had ordered that bridgeheads over the Escaut would be secured wherever possible but that no attempt should be made to cross the canal in strength.⁴⁵ The resulting period of rest was not unwelcome. The rapid change from static trench fighting to the open warfare of September and October had sorely taxed human resources and material. Long forced marches and many hours of lost sleep had taken their toil of physical energy. Getting supplies forward continued to be a major problem despite the sustained efforts of the engineers, aided by squads of already weary infantry toiling to repair roads and bridges.⁴⁶ A considerable amount of transport was tied up in distributing army rations to the hungry population. Particularly hard pressed during this last phase of the war were the medical services who, in addition to the unaccustomed problems created by open warfare, now had to care for large numbers of civilian sick and wounded. Canadian hospitals for these unfortunates were established in Auberchicourt, Somain and Denain, while in smaller centres special dressing stations were reserved for civilians.⁴⁷

During this period the 4th Division made several attempts to send patrols across the Escaut by boat, footbridges and over the debris of destroyed bridges. Orders that Valenciennes itself was not to be bombarded because of the large numbers of French civilians in the city made it extremely difficult to clear enemy machine-guns and snipers from the houses overlooking the canal.⁴⁸ From what probing the patrols could accomplish and from the statements of prisoners it was clear that the enemy was preparing to make a determined stand at Valenciennes. In selecting the city as a key-point in the Hermann Line the Germans had chosen well. The Escaut Canal provided an effective water barrier against attack from the west and the north. The enemy had heavily wired both banks of the canal and fortified the east bank with a well-planned trench system. In addition he had loop-holed the walls of the city's houses and factories and armed them with machine-gun posts. By cutting gaps in the canal dykes and opening sluice gates

the Germans had inundated the country on both sides of the Escaut. West and south-west of Valenciennes the flooded area was several hundred yards wide, and to the north, in the wide angle between the Escaut and the Condé-Mons Canals, the water spread over many square miles.⁴⁹

Nature had further favoured the Germans in defending them against any attempt to capture Valenciennes from the south. The prominent wooded height of Mont Houy, east of the bend in the Escaut, rose to a height of 150 feet above the canal and completely dominated the southern approaches to the city. Behind it a long ridge overlooking the valley of the Rhonelle stream reached northward to Valenciennes, and along this the enemy had constructed a line of wire and trenches to add artificial strength to an already difficult natural position. Beyond this a second line of trenches, on which less work had been done, ran in a south-easterly direction from Aulnoy, a village 2500 yards south of Valenciennes, to Preseau and along the high ground east of the Rhonelle.⁵⁰

Fully alert to the opportunities which Valenciennes offered for checking the Allied advance, the German Seventeenth Army was holding this section of the Hermann position with five divisions-though all were considerably reduced in numbers. On 1 November the flooded front opposite the Canadian left was being defended by the 234th Division between Condé and Bruary; the 220th Division (the 25th Division was in process of relieving it) held most of Valenciennes and northward to Bruary. The enemy had packed the bulk of his strength in the Mont Houy area, where three infantry divisions - the 6th, 35th and 214th - stood guard between the southern outskirts of the city and Aulnoy.⁵²

Mont Houy Captured-Valenciennes Liberated

Resistance south of the Escaut continued as the 22nd Corps fought to come abreast of the Canadians. By the evening of 26 October the 51st Division, having forced a crossing of the Ecailion, had reached a line along the outskirts of Famars, where the Highlanders could look down into the deep valley of the Rhonelle. But attempts to advance farther were thwarted by very heavy fire from Mount Houy and from German batteries about Saultain, on the high plateau south-east of Valenciennes.⁵²

On 27 October General Horne called Sir Arthur Currie and the commander of the 22nd Corps to his advanced headquarters at Auberchicourt, and discussed means by which Valenciennes might be taken. With a frontal attack or an enveloping movement from the north out of the question, Mont Houy was obviously the key to the city. Operations were planned to take place in three stages. On the far side of the Escaut Canal the 51st Division of the 22nd Corps would attack north-eastward on 28 October and capture Mount Houy, advancing as far as the sunken road (forming part of the "Red" line objective) which joined Le Poirier Station (at the canal) and Aulnoy. The 4th Canadian Division would then move through the 51st and continue the attack between the Escaut and the Rhonelle with the object of gaining the "Blue" line, which ran from Preseau to

the southern outskirts of Valenciennes. Finally, on 1 November, the 4th Division would capture the high ground east of Valenciennes so as to outflank the city and enable the remainder of the Canadian Corps to cross the Escaut from the west. The objective in this phase was the "Green" line, which from the north-east corner of Valenciennes curved in a southerly direction behind the Saultain ridge.⁵³

At 5:15 a.m. on the 28th a battalion of the 51st Division attacked Mont Houy with the support of nine British brigades of field artillery, five 6-inch howitzer and nine 60-pounder batteries.⁵⁴ Despite strong opposition the Highlanders gained the hill, but could not hold it. The Germans were determined to retain possession of so favourable a position for observation, and in the early afternoon they launched a counter-attack which drove the British battalion back over the top of Mont Houy. Nightfall found the 154th Brigade of the 51st Division holding most of the southern slope of the hill, and on either flank Le Poirier Station and the village of Famars.⁵⁵ This was considerably short of the Red line, where the 10th Canadian Brigade was to have relieved the British Brigade on the night of 28-29 October.⁵⁶

During the night the 3rd Canadian Division took over some of the 4th Division's front, but General Currie recommended that the relief of the 51st Division be delayed 24 hours, though General Watson, G.O.C. 4th Division, was willing to make the change-over. At 5:00 p.m. on the 28th, however, General Horne issued instructions that the Canadian Corps would carry out the relief as ordered, provided that the 51st Division held Mont Houy. it was to be left to the "commanders of the troops on the spot" to make the decision.⁵⁷ When night fell on the 28th it was clear that most of the hill was still in German hands, and so the relief was postponed.* Throughout 29 October the tired Highlanders fought off repeated counter-attacks. That night the right of the 51st Division was relieved by the 49th Division, and the left, from Famars to Poirier Station, by the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

The plan for taking Mont Houy and Valenciennes had been revised. Orders from G.H.Q. called for the Fourth, Third and First Armies, in conjunction with the First French Army, to be prepared to resume the main offensive on 3 November, and it was urgent that Valenciennes should be captured in order to secure the left flank of this large-scale operation.⁶⁰ The capture of the Blue and

* Afterwards the M.G.G.S. of the First Army criticized General Horne's insistence that the 51st Division should not be relieved until it had reached the objective which the Army's plan had rigidly imposed. He also questioned the Canadian Corps' rather inflexible interpretation of these orders, suggesting that the tired British division should have been relieved before the attack took place at all, in order that such an assault might have the support of Canadian artillery west of the Escaut. Had the British and the Canadian command adapted themselves more readily to the changing situation, suggests the M.G.G.S., "24 hours would have been saved".⁵⁸

The flexibility of action suggested by this critic may well have been just what this phase of the war demanded, but his view was challenged several years later by the former G.O.C. Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery. General McNaughton defended the Canadian refusal to make a premature relief, comparing the situation on 28 October with that which had existed in June 1916 at the St. Eloi Craters (when the Canadian Corps disastrously took over from the 5th Corps in the middle of a battle). Postponement of the assault on Mont Houy, he said, gave the Canadian Heavy Artillery a "full and proper opportunity to do our work free from the hysteria of a suddenly improvised attack."⁵⁹

subsequent exploitation to the Green line was now to be carried out as a single operation with massive artillery support, the 10th Canadian Brigade cooperating with the 49th Division on the right. While the 10th Brigade (commanded since 28 October by Brig.-Gen. J.M. Ross) assaulted Valenciennes from the south and moved around the east side, the 12th was to establish bridgeheads over the Escaut from the west and mop up the city. Farther to the north the 3rd Division prepared to cross the canal at the same time. The new plan was geared for an assault early on 1 November.⁶¹

Arrangements for the attack were complicated by the many civilians remaining in Valenciennes. As far as possible the city was spared from heavy artillery fire, and only such defended positions as the industrial centre of Marly and its steel works, which were known to be full of enemy troops, came under bombardment. Because its left wing, on the west side of the Escaut Canal, had advanced so far forward, the Canadian Corps was able to arrange a rather unique artillery barrage on the Mont Houy position. Eight field and six heavy artillery brigades supported the 10th Infantry Brigade in its attack. Three field brigades sited south of the Escaut, near Maing, supplied the frontal creeping barrage; one gave oblique fire from the left bank near Trith St. Leger; the other two were near La Sentinelle, west of the Cambrai-Valenciennes road, furnishing enfilade fire. Unable through lack of suitable bridges to cross the Escaut, the heavy artillery remained on the left bank in a position to bring oblique, enfilade and even reverse fire (deliberately arranged for moral effect) on the area of the attack. Some three and a half brigades were employed on counter-battery work, the remainder bringing down fire on houses which were suspected of containing machine-gun nests.⁶² Three batteries of 4.5-inch howitzers fired an intense smoke-screen to cover the attack, and the normal artillery barrage was supplemented by the fire of twelve batteries of the 1st and 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalions firing in close support or in enfilade from north of the canal.⁶³ On no other occasion in the whole war was a single infantry brigade to be supported with such a weight of gunfire.

The weather, which seemed constantly to be in opposition to Canadian plans, held true to form. Throughout the preceding night and the day of attack, frequent showers caused the soldiers much discomfort. There was no preliminary bombardment on the morning of 1 November, and promptly at 5:15 a.m. the infantry of the 10th Brigade began to advance behind a deluge of shrapnel, machine-gun bullets and high explosive shell that swept down on the enemy from front and flank and rear. The German artillery was prompt to retaliate, but its fire rapidly dwindled under the accurate counter-bombardment of the Canadian guns.

The 44th Battalion pushed over Mont Houy without difficulty, and on the left the 47th took Le Poirier Station. The Red objective was achieved on schedule and by 6:30 the right battalion was passing Aulnoy. German soldiers of the 35th and 214th Divisions, stupefied by the overpowering barrage, surrendered in large numbers. On the Brigade right the 46th Battalion leapfrogged the 44th Battalion as planned and with the 47th it reported the Blue line reached at 10:20. As the infantry moved into the outskirts of Valenciennes, considerable opposition developed on the right flank and along the front of the 146th Brigade (49th

Division). Heavy machine-gun fire came from the southern edge of the city, and the garrison of the steel works near Marly, veterans of the German 6th Division, fought back vigorously. In the course of the afternoon the brigade commander, Brig.-Gen. J.M. Ross, brought up the 50th Battalion to reinforce the 46th Battalion and to hold the brigade's right flank. Six batteries of machine-guns from the 4th Battalion C.M.G.C. were disposed facing east, but the fire from Marly continued to be strong.⁶⁴

The last V.C. of the war awarded to a Canadian was won by Sergeant Hugh Cairns, D.C.M., of the 46th Battalion, for his conspicuous bravery during the day's action. When an enemy machine-gun suddenly opened fire on his platoon, Cairns seized a Lewis gun and ignoring the German bullets rushed the post single-handed, killing the crew of five, and capturing the gun. Later he repeated this daring act, accounting for 30 more of the enemy and two machine-guns. On a third occasion, though wounded, he led a small party to outflank and capture German machine guns and field guns which were holding up the advance. His achievements ended during the mopping up of Marly, when he was severely wounded while disarming a party of Germans that his patrol had forced to surrender. Throughout the entire operation he showed the highest degree of valour and bold leadership. He died next day from his wounds.⁶⁵

Encirclement of Valenciennes and penetration into the city continued. During the morning of 1 November the 12th Brigade and the 3rd Division had both established bridgeheads over the Escaut, the infantry crossing by means of collapsible boats and cork float bridges. By noon the 12th Brigade, on the immediate left of the 10th, had the greater part of the 38th and 72nd Battalions east of the canal and patrols had pushed well into the heart of the city.⁶⁶ The 3rd Division's initial crossing was made by a party of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles from the industrial area of Denain-Anzin, immediately north of Valenciennes. A long stretch of the canal was under enemy observation from a high mine dump outside Thiers, so that the battalion had to wait until darkness to secure crossings east of Bruay and opposite Thiers.⁶⁷

On 2 November General Currie recorded in his diary: "The operation yesterday was one of the most successful the Corps has yet performed." The capture of the Mont Houy position and the advance on Valenciennes had been skilfully planned and well executed. Though the enemy still clung to the city and held firm his strong position near Marly, the day for him was one of disaster. The Canadians had taken nearly 1800 prisoners, and more than 800 enemy dead were counted in the battle area. Canadian losses numbered 80 killed and some 300 wounded. Careful coordination in employing a tremendous weight of artillery* in very close support of minimum numbers of infantry had achieved victory at a very low cost.

The majority of the enemy's casualties had come from the barrage. As for the remainder, it is probable that in different circumstances the proportion of enemy captured to those killed might have been larger. Regimental histories and

* The G.O.C. Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery later contrasted the weight of 2149 tons of shells expended from noon on 31 October to noon on 2 November with the 2800 tons fired by both sides in the whole South African War.⁶⁸

various official and semi-official sources reveal that the Canadians' hostility towards the Germans was intensified during the closing stage of the war when they saw the conditions of oppression under which the civilians whom they liberated had existed. One battalion noted, of its prisoners, that "it was impossible to avoid taking so many as they surrendered in batches of from 20 to 50".⁶⁹ That some of the Canadian troops should apparently have indulged in unnecessary killing in the heat of action was regrettable but to a certain extent understandable. General Currie, when told that "the ground was simply littered with German dead", wrote in his diary: "I know that it was not the intention of our fellows to take many German prisoners as, since they have lived amongst and talked to the French people here, they have become more bitter than even against the Boche."⁷⁰

During the night of 1-2 November the 11th Brigade relieved the 10th. The 54th Battalion attacked Marly before dawn, only to find that most of the Germans had withdrawn from the village.⁷¹ During the night the two battalions of the 12th Brigade, which had met strenuous opposition during the afternoon, were able to push through Valenciennes with no great difficulty as the Germans evacuated the city. Both units reported themselves on the eastern outskirts by 8:30 a.m. By nightfall on the 2nd the Brigade had secured St. Saulvé, a mile up the Mons road.⁷² On the Canadians' right a determined German garrison in the steel works held up the 49th Division until mid-afternoon of the 2nd, when a battalion of the 148th Brigade successfully rushed the position. Heavy fire from the direction of Saultain halted the British advance at the Preseau-Marly road.⁷³

Meanwhile the 3rd Division was with difficulty working its way across the flooded area north of Valenciennes. Often the only line of advance lay along a railway embankment on some sodden ridge which was swept by fire from German machine-guns and snipers. Despite these handicaps, the 8th Brigade managed by nightfall on 2 November to draw level with the 12th on its right. Because of the length of the front which General Loomis was holding in such adverse conditions, he was glad during the night of 2 November to hand over to the 52nd British Division the portion of his line north of Fresnes.⁷⁴

Sir Douglas Haig had postponed by one day the set-piece attack by the four Allied Armies ordered for 3 November. On the morning of the 3rd, however, when it was clear that the enemy had retired from the Escaut leaving only weak rearguards, he cancelled the offensive. He ordered a general advance, telling divisions to act vigorously on their own initiative so as to keep the Germans from establishing a firm line. The 22nd Corps was given an initial objective ten miles away, and the Canadian Corps ordered to cover the British left. By nightfall on the 3rd, Canadian patrols of the 4th Division had pushed forward to the Estreux-Onnaing road, three miles east of Valenciennes, without making contact with the enemy.⁷⁵

The Advance to Mons

The battle for Valenciennes was the last major prearranged attack in which the Canadian Corps was engaged. The week of campaigning that remained

was to see no large action, as the enemy was kept continually on the move. Only twice was the daily advance less than a mile.

In these last few days of the war the Canadians encountered a new type of fighting. The need to maintain mobility was paramount, but the changing nature of the countryside made this a difficult task. Since the pursuit started in mid-October operations for the most part had been over flat or gently rolling country intersected by many rivers and streams. Now there were as many streams as before, but these flowed more swiftly and their valleys were more deeply cut. Numerous villages and isolated clusters of houses dotted the countryside, the number increasing after the Belgian frontier was crossed. The ground was thickly timbered and dotted with small plantations and hedged enclosures. Altogether it was the type of terrain in which a determined enemy, with time to prepare his defences, might have made a prolonged stand, costly to the attacker. But from Verdun to the sea the Germans were falling back under Allied pressure, and the speed of the Canadian pursuit was to be governed not so much by the strength of the enemy's resistance as by the pursuers' powers of maintenance. Under instructions from the First Army each division was now acting more independently of its corps headquarters, seeking its own opportunities to push towards its general objectives while cooperating with its flanking formations.⁷⁶

Most of the roads were in miserable condition; and those that were paved were wide enough for lorry traffic in only one direction. As the Canadians sought to maintain contact with the enemy it was only with the greatest difficulty that the heavy artillery could maintain its support of the advancing infantry brigades. Reconnaissance patrols from Valenciennes located routes by-passing the maze of cratered road junctions, and on occasion the artillery's own engineers filled in key craters to allow the passage of the heavy guns. By such means the C.C.H.A. kept three brigades forward in continual touch with the attacking infantry.

The problem of maintaining the pursuit, already complicated by German demolitions, ever-lengthening supply lines, and inadequate communications, was intensified by bad weather. Rain fell constantly. There was only one day between 1 and 11 November on which some sector of the Canadian Corps front did not report precipitation.⁷⁷ The muddy roads slowed cyclists and mounted orderlies, and the poor visibility prevented signalling by flag on helio. To add to the difficulties of communications the civilians, fearful of the enemy's mines, appeared to mistake every piece of wire along the road for some sort of demolition fuze, and were continually cutting the Canadian telephone lines.⁷⁸ As the advance continued and town after town was liberated, rumours of the approaching cease fire were traded incessantly. For four long years men had looked forward anxiously to the termination of hostilities, and now it appeared that the end was really in sight. The First Army reported that morale was "never higher".

The enemy's retirement in front of the 4th Division during the night of 3-4 November took him back behind the Aunelle River, where he began digging in immediately east of the stream, which constituted the French-Belgian boundary across the Canadian path. Intelligence reports and aerial photographs of new field works indicated that the Germans intended to make a stand here. Accordingly

Canadian action on the 4th was confined to repeated artillery barrages on the enemy's line, as plans were drawn for the 4th Division to attack next day. In conjunction with the flanking 3rd Canadian and 56th British Divisions it was hoped to secure crossings over both the Aunelle and the Grande Honnelle about 500 yards to the east. The enemy's continued shuffling of his depleted formations had brought the 187th Division in front of the Canadians. In fairly stiff fighting on 5 November the 12th Brigade took the village of Quarouble, with the 78th Battalion, but the 85th was halted by the German 188th Regiment's defence of a large heap of mine refuse (beside Fosse No. 2) west of the Aunelle. On the right the 87th Battalion (11th Brigade) captured Rombies and crossed the river, only to be thrown back by a German counter-attack.⁷⁹

A further attempt to reach the Grande Honnelle succeeded on 6 November. The 85th Battalion captured Fosse No. 2 while Quievrechain fell to a joint attack by the 78th Battalion and the 2nd C.M.Rs. The 102nd Battalion took Marchipont and exploited forward to Baisieux. By nightfall the division controlled both the Petite and Grande Honnelle Rivers along its whole front. This action ended the last tour of front-line service for the 4th Division. During the night of 6-7 November it was relieved by the 2nd Division for what proved to be the beginning of the final Canadian effort.⁸⁰

The 3rd Division to the north had, in the meantime, been threading its way forward through the heavily flooded area north of the Valenciennes-Mons road, led by the 8th Brigade. Vicious fighting took place on 4 November in front of the mining town of Vicq. The enemy was using as an observation post a big mine dump on the western outskirts of the town. Protected on the north by floods and on the west and south by wire and machine-gun posts, this strongpoint proved a difficult nut to crack. Vicq was defended by two battalions of the 115th Regiment of the 25th Division—one of the relatively few German divisions still rated first class in 1918.⁸¹ The 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, assaulting across flat fields devoid of cover, suffered numerous casualties before they gained a footing on the dump—only to be driven off by the Germans' incessant machine-gun and artillery fire. That night Canadian and British gains farther south compelled the enemy to fall back from Vicq, and in the early morning of the 5th the 5th C.M.R. entered the town. On 6 November the 8th Brigade again attacked, capturing Crespin and establishing crossings over the Aunelle and Honnelle Rivers. On the northern flank, however, the enemy was holding Condé and the Condé-Mons Canal in strength. To ensure the security of the Corps left the 3rd Division was ordered to press its attack northward. For this purpose there was a partial relief of the 8th Brigade on 7 November. The 7th Brigade took over the front astride the Mons road, while the 8th continued for a time to operate with two battalions on the northern flank.⁸²

The Canadians were now in Belgian territory. As they crossed the international boundary the troops were impressed by the changed conditions which they encountered. Many of the villages through which they had passed on the French side of the border had been badly battered by war, and four years of enemy occupation had left their grim mark upon the undernourished inhabitants.

By contrast, a short distance away in Belgium, there was evidence that German animosity had been less pronounced. Buildings appeared to be relatively undamaged, the shop windows offered a wide range of commodities, and more able-bodied men were seen in the streets. The welcome given the Canadians by the Belgian civilians was as warm as that which they had received in France. Amid scenes of gaiety and holiday-making they were hailed as liberators and greeted with cheers, handshakes and kisses and offerings of coffee, wine and beer.

The renewal of the advance by the British Fourth, Third and First Armies marked the beginning of a continuous drive towards the German frontier on a wide front. On 4 November the Fourth Army forced the Sambre-Oise Canal east of Le Cateau, while on its left the Third Army captured Le Quesnoy. North of the Canadian Corps' sector the First Army's left wing was making slower progress because of the inundated country about the Mons-Condé Canal. Farther north still there was little motion yet by the Fifth and Second Armies, which were still held up west of the Escaut by the enemy's Hermann Position. The main drive in the south was being made by the United States First Army,* which with assistance from the French Fourth Army on its left was pressing north-eastward along the west bank of the Meuse with a view to outflanking the German positions between the Aisne and the Meuse.⁸³ By 6 November American troops were in sight of Sedan.⁸⁴

The German leaders were in a quandary. Negotiations for an armistice had been going on for sometime, and in order to maintain its bargaining position the High Command was anxious to avoid any large-scale withdrawals. On 24 October when framing an order to the German Army (promulgation of which was, however, stopped by the government) von Hindenburg had interpreted Allied demands for unconditional surrender as "a challenge to continue our resistance with all our strength".⁸⁵ But another major defeat in the field would be a greater evil. Accordingly on the afternoon of 4 November the German High Command had reluctantly ordered a general retirement to the Meuse-Antwerp position, which ran from Verdun and Sedan northward through Charleroi to the Dutch border west of Antwerp.⁸⁶

In the centre of the First Army's front the Canadian advance was gaining momentum. On the morning of the 7th the 8th Brigade occupied La Croix and Hensies, north of the main road, the Germans having abandoned both places the previous night. The 52nd British Division took Condé during the night of the 7th-8th, and next day the 2nd and 5th C.M.R. cleared Thivencelle and St. Aybert. That evening the 5th C.M.R. crossed the Canal de Condé under cover of darkness and gained a firm footing on the north bank. They pushed northward, and by mid-afternoon on the 9th were in touch with the 52nd British Division south-east of Bernissart. By this time the P.P.C.L.I., leading the advance between the canal and the Mons road, had forged rapidly ahead, taking in succession the villages of Thulin, Hamin and Boussu. To cover the open left flank the 49th Battalion made a long forced march to cross the canal on the afternoon of the 9th. Swinging

* A Second Army had been formed on 12 October and put into the line right of the First, between the Meuse and the Moselle.

eastward through Tertre, the battalion threw a screen of patrols northward into the Bois de Baudour and as far forward as Ghlin, only two miles north-east of Mons. They established posts which were taken over on 10 November by units of the 52nd Division.⁸⁷

Meanwhile the 7th Brigade was closing in on Mons. By the evening of 9 November the Patricias, “very, very tired” from their continuous marching, had reached the outlying suburb of Jemappes, where they were relieved by The Royal Canadian Regiment, which took over the whole 7th Brigade front. The R.C.R. planned to attack Mons from north, west and south by separate company groups, but heavy mist, poor communications and strong enemy fire on the morning of the 10th made it clear that the regiment would not be able to carry this out unaided.⁸⁸ At 8:30 a.m. Brig.-Gen. Clark ordered the 42nd Battalion to take over the brigade’s right flank south of the Canal de Condé. The day was spent in a series of unsuccessful attempts by two companies of the 42nd to work their way into the city.⁸⁹

We must turn now to what had been happening on the southern part of the Canadian Corps’ front. On the relief of the 4th Division by the 2nd Division, Major-General Burstall put the 5th Brigade into the lead, instructing them “to act with the utmost boldness”. Brig.-Gen. Tremblay’s infantry were supported by two machine-gun companies and by batteries of the 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery and a British brigade of field artillery. To provide flexibility in the pursuit, Burstall organized into a separate force - ready to push through the infantry if opportunity offered - the 2nd C.M.M.G. Brigade, a company of the Canadian Corps Cyclists and two squadrons of the Canadian Light Horse. With good foresight the force also included two sub-sections of engineers of the 6th Battalion C.E., carrying with them in lorries about seven tons of timber for road and bridge repair.⁹⁰ There was delay at the Honnelle River, which the heavy rains had made unfordable, but by nightfall on the 7th the 5th Brigade had advanced three miles to Elouges, which the 25th Battalion occupied in a mixture of street fighting against enemy die-hards and warm welcome from the civilian inhabitants. Next day the 24th Battalion took Dour, but with other units of the brigade ran into difficulties in the maze of mine dumps north-east of the town. Broken bridges and mine craters on the roads kept the independent Force from making any useful headway.⁹¹

The 2nd Division’s path now lay through densely populated mining country, in which one village spread into the next. But the latest German retirement had left these places undefended, and when the 4th Brigade passed through the 5th on the morning of 9 November, its progress as far as Frameries, a town three miles south-west of Mons, was practically a route march. Then machine-gun fire from the front and the right flank forced a deployment. By nightfall, however, the brigade had reached a line which from the village of Bougnies, four miles south of Mons, angled north-westward to the boundary with the 3rd Division on the Frameries-Mons road.⁹²

That night the Canadian Corps issued orders for the capture of Mons on the following day.

The Capture of Mons

The ancient frontier town of Mons, dating back to Roman days, had experienced many sieges during its troubled history. Its latest association with fighting had come in August 1914, when the small British Expeditionary Force encountered and engaged for one day the advancing German right wing on the Condé Canal before falling back towards Paris and the Marne. For four years Mons had remained in German hands. It was a valuable asset to the enemy, for the finest coal in Belgium was to be found in the nearby mines, which unlike those destroyed or flooded by the Germans on the French side of the frontier, had been kept in vigorous production. This time there would be no siege; Mons was as far as possible to be spared damage. General Currie planned to take the city by an encircling manoeuvre. He ordered the 2nd Division, moving around the southern outskirts, to occupy the high ground to the east, while the 3rd Division captured the northern suburb of Nimy and infiltrated into the heart of the city.⁹³

Fighting on 9 November had yielded only scant gains in comparison with the advances of previous days. As the Canadians completed the occupation of one village they would be held up by machine-gun fire from the next. In their retirement on the night of the 6th-7th the Germans had fallen back to a line running north and south through Mons, and attempts by the 2nd Canadian Division on 10 November to push around the southern edge of the city met spirited reminders that the enemy was still there. The main centres of resistance were in the dominant Bois la Haut - a wooded hill some 2000 yards south-east of Mons rising abruptly more than 350 feet above the surrounding country - and the village of Hyon, immediately west of this height.⁹⁴ Here strong rearguards were covering the planned retirement to the Antwerp-Meuse line, which began during the afternoon. Despite prisoners' reports of this intended withdrawal, machine-gun fire was still coming from Mons and the neighbouring villages, and at 10:00 p.m. the Canadian Corps gave instructions that the objectives of 11 November remained the same as for the 10th.⁹⁵

During the night the 19th Battalion occupied Hyon, but the enemy in the Bois la Haut held out until 3:15 a.m. By that time the 3rd Division was well into Mons (below, p. 481) and hostile fire was rapidly dwindling. By 8:00 a.m. the 4th Brigade had crossed the Mons-Givry road and was at the village of St. Symphorien, on the main road from Mons to Charleroi.⁹⁶

The whole of Mons lay within the 3rd Division's sector, and the task of entering the city was assigned to the 7th Brigade. The difficulty facing both the R.C.R. and the 42nd Battalion was to force crossings over the almost continuous water barrier which the Canal du Centre and the Dérivation de la Troullie formed around Mons, those watercourses having once constituted the moats of the ancient fortress. Enemy machine-guns sited in the outlying houses covered all approaches and made an assault virtually impossible during daylight, for orders from Corps Headquarters expressly forbade any shelling of Mons, not excepting German machine-gun posts. Immediately south of the Condé Canal there was a

break in the water barrier, and here the commander of the 42nd Battalion decided to attempt an entry. He planned to work his troops through the city and thus cut off troublesome machine-guns, the majority of which were concentrated on his right flank.⁹⁷

It was about 11:00 p.m. on 10 November when platoons of the 42nd, crossing the railway yards under the covering fire of Lewis guns, entered the city and began clearing eastward. As German machine-gunners on the southern edge of Mons fell back, a second company of the 42nd with an attached R.C.R. company crossed the Derivation Canal on a hastily improvised plank bridge and moved northward into the town. The third entry of the night was made at 2:00 a.m.* by a company of the R.C.R. at the north-west corner of Mons. Farther north on the battalion left another R.C.R. company, having cleared the village of Ghlin and a troublesome nearby mine dump, crossed the Canal du Centre to secure the suburbs of Nimy and Petit Nimy.⁹⁹

What German troops were the last to oppose the Canadians? During the final few days of the campaign the remnants of the German divisions on the whole were retreating towards the Antwerp-Meuse line obliquely to the Canadian axis of advance. This divergence in direction, and the enemy's practice of retiring his divisions through one another, meant that the leading Canadian units were meeting a succession of rearguards from many German formations. At the beginning of the month the enemy picture was still fairly simple; during the period 1-8 November an average of 250 captives from each of seven German divisions were admitted to the Canadian Corps Prisoner of War Cage. But as the hour of the armistice drew closer and fighting dwindled, admissions to the Corps Cage fell to an average of less than seven stragglers from each of fifteen different divisions.¹⁰⁰

From the scanty information about this period available from German sources, and after eliminating a number of divisions known to have left the sector, it appears certain that German resistance south of Mons in the Hyon-Bois La Haut area was furnished by the rearguards of the 206th Infantry Division.¹⁰¹ The parting shots north of Mons were probably fired by elements of either the 28th Reserve Division or the 4th Ersatz Division. Withdrawing directly through the city itself were the 62nd and 63rd Regiments of the 12th Infantry Division. Early on the 10th these forces were thinned out to battalion strength, the 2nd Battalion, 62nd Regiment taking over its regimental sector. At midnight this battalion withdrew also, leaving behind the 8th Company, which remained in the western part of Mons until dawn was approaching on 11 November.¹⁰²

* A spirited controversy later developed between the R.C.R. and the 42nd Battalion over who was first to reach the centre of Mons. In the city's "Golden Book" the signature of Lieut. W.M. King (an officer of the R.C.R. company attached to the 42nd) appears before those of the 42nd Battalion's Lieuts. L.H. Biggar and J.W. Cave. Biggar, however, disputed this evidence, averring that he signed well down on the page so that a suitable inscription could subsequently be inserted above. The weight of testimony by the Burgomaster of Mons and members of his council favours the R.C.R. claimant.⁹⁸

By daybreak troops of both battalions of the 7th Brigade had freed Mons of any remaining Germans. At about seven o'clock the 42nd Battalion's pipe band played its way into the city and, according to the unit's war diary, "created tremendous enthusiasm". By eleven that morning the pursuit had carried forward some five miles to the north-east. In the 3rd Division's sector the 5th Lancers - a regiment which had fought at Mons in 1914 -reached St. Denis, while on the right the infantry of the 2nd Division had entered Havre and cleared the Bois du Rapois.¹⁰³

Along the whole Western Front all the Allied armies were on the march, keeping apace or ahead of the First Army's advance. In the last few days German opposition had generally come from only artillery and machine-guns. A retreating division was namely represented by more than an infantry battalion with perhaps a cavalry squadron and a few cyclists. In the north the Allied forces had shaken themselves loose from their long immobility. By the night of 10 November the Belgian Army had liberated Ghent. The French Sixth Army and the British Second and Fifth had crossed the Scheldt. On General Horne's right the Third Army had captured Maubeuge, with the Fourth keeping level. The Americans had reached the vital railway line at Mézières. In Lorraine two French Armies of 31 divisions were poised for a massive attack to be launched on the 14th.¹⁰⁴ Like an overwhelming tidal wave the Allied forces were surging forward, driving all before them.

At 6:30 a.m. on the 11th a message reached Canadian Corps Headquarters to the effect that hostilities would cease at eleven o'clock that morning.¹⁰⁵ This information was relayed to subordinate formations and units as rapidly as possible, but in some cases it did not reach the front-line troops until 9:00 a.m.¹⁰⁶ The delay in transmission was of little consequence as there was virtually no fighting after Mons had been cleaned.

Considering the resistance put up by the German machine-gunners, the capture of the city had been achieved with very few casualties. The 3rd Division gave its total losses for both 10 and 11 November as 9 officers and 107 other ranks killed, wounded and missing.¹⁰⁷ The 2nd Division's reported total for the period 7 to 11 November inclusive was 22 officers and 343 other ranks.¹⁰⁸ Official post-war calculations of Canadian killed, wounded and missing, including casualties from gas, show a total of 18 officers and 262 other ranks for the final two days of operations. Careful research made at General Currie's request revealed that on 11 November itself there were one fatal and 15 non-fatal casualties.*

* The question of the number of casualties incurred by the Canadian Corps in the taking of Mons received considerable publicity some nine years after the war, when the publication by an Ontario newspaper of an editorial charging "deliberate and useless waste of human life" in the capture of the town led Sir Arthur Currie to initiate an action for libel the publisher. At the trial responsible and informed testimony established that the attack on Mons was necessary, the Corps Commander's task being to press the enemy as hard as he could until ordered to withdraw. Documentary evidence that Mons was completely cleared by six o'clock - some time before the cease was further shown that General Currie had given explicit orders that there should be no large-scale attack and that as far as possible casualties and losses were to be avoided. The court awarded Sir Arthur damages and costs.¹⁰⁹

The Armistice

During the latter part of October and early November the negotiations to bring a suspension of hostilities had been rapidly moving to their climax. On 16 October the Germans learned with dismay that President Wilson would turn over to the Allied military and naval experts the task of setting the conditions of an armistice. On the day before Ludendorff resigned, Marshal Foch asked his commanders-in-chief for their views regarding the terms that should be imposed. Haig was inclined to be moderate, and to grant Germany conditions which she could accept. Surprisingly, the American Pershing demanded the same strict treatment for Germany as did Pétain, whose country had suffered most at German hands. The terms worked out by Foch were stern and different only in small degree from Pershing's.¹¹⁰ To Ludendorff and von Hindenburg it had become clear that what they had fondly hoped might be a "peace of justice" was in fact to be a "peace of violence".¹¹¹ Such an exaggerated view could only have been arrived at by conveniently putting out of mind the pitiless terms meted out to France in 1871 at the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War.

Within Germany meanwhile conditions became steadily more chaotic. On 29 October, two days after the German Government had agreed to President Wilson's latest demands, the German Admiralty in a desperate gesture to avoid humiliation ordered the fleet to put to sea. The sailors mutinied, and at the same time revolution was sweeping quickly through the entire Rhineland. On 9 November the Kaiser abdicated, taking refuge in Holland, and Germany became a Republic.

Foch received the German Armistice Commission on November 8 in a carriage of his special train on a siding in the Forest of Compiègne. The German plenipotentiaries were headed by a civilian, Matthias Erzberger, a Reichstag deputy who had been prominent in the peace negotiations between Germany and Russia. The German General Staff had withdrawn its representative at the last moment in order to demonstrate its dissociation from responsibility for accepting the severe Armistice terms. Foch was attended by his Chief of Staff, General Maxime Weygand, and by the British representative, Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss. Uncompromisingly Weygand read the Allied conditions, startling the German delegation with their strictness. Given 72 hours to accept, the Germans made some ineffectual attempts to lessen the severity of the terms, but gained only a few minor concessions of detail. At 5:00 o'clock on the morning of the 11th the delegates affixed their signatures. Six hours later all hostilities ceased.¹¹²

Germany bound herself to evacuate the territory which she had invaded, as well as the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, taken from France in 1871. She agreed to repatriate citizens of Allied nations and all Allied prisoners of war, without immediate reciprocity, and to hand over vast stocks of war material, including 5000 guns and 25,000 machine-guns. Her navy was to surrender all its submarines, and such surface vessels as the Allies designated would be interned. Finally Germany would evacuate the left bank of the Rhine and bridgeheads

behind it, to be held by Allied occupation forces until the peace terms had been met.¹¹³

Once the excitement of the moment had passed, the Canadian soldiers who had fought so hard and long to end the war accepted the news of the Armistice with the impassive, seemingly unconcerned silence that is the outward sign of deep feeling or emotional exhaustion. Battalion diarists write of utterly unusual quietness settling over the war-ravaged countryside of France and Belgium. Veterans who remembered Ypres, Vimy, and the horrors of Passchendaele found it hard to believe that more was no longer expected. Thoughts of home and civilian life, previously too disturbing to engage in, came back slowly and with difficulty.

Allied forces had returned to Mons. It was the end of the journey.