

## Battles of the Western Front 1914-1918

### The Western Front

During The First World War of 1914-1918 the Allied Forces of Belgium, France, Great Britain, the Dominion Forces of the British Empire (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Newfoundland and South Africa), Portugal and the United States (from April 1918) made a stand against the Imperial German Army's advance and occupation of Belgium from 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914 and north-eastern France from 6<sup>th</sup> August 1914.

This page provides an overview of the major battles which took place in Belgium and France from the autumn of 1914 to the 11<sup>th</sup> November Armistice of 1918. The outcome of the battles resulted in the formation of a battle front, which saw three years of attrition warfare in 1915, 1916 and 1917, with only a few months of mobile warfare at the start and at the end of four years of fighting.

This battle front was known to the Germans as “die Westfront”, as Imperial Germany's “western front” for those Imperial German Armies engaged in hostilities against France. The Imperial German Armies engaged against Russia were in action on Germany's “eastern front”.

To the French Army the battle front, which stretched for several hundred miles within the northern, north-eastern and eastern borders of the French nation, was translated into French. The French word for “western” is “occidental”, and so the literal translation for this battle front in France became “Le Front Occidental”.

The British Expeditionary Force, fighting on the battlefields in Belgium and France for four years, also translated the German name of “die Westfront” into English, and named this battle front in France as “The Western Front”.

### The Battles and their Locations

The grey shaded areas on the map illustrate the main areas on the Western Front where the 1914-1918 battles took place. The battlefields ranged from the northern end of this battle front on the Belgian coast to the village of Pforterhouse on the Swiss frontier at its southern end. The map shows the Franco-German border as it was in 1914 when the war broke out. An overview of the major battles that shaped the formation of the Western Front is given below the map.

### 1914 First Encounters and Battles of the Frontiers



## **4- 25 August 1914**

Battlefield locations:

Liège

Alsace Plain, Alsace

### **Battle and Siege of Liège**

The Battle and Siege of Liège (4<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> August 1914) was the first battle action on the Western Front, fought between the German Imperial Army and the Belgian Army. The historic Belgian city was located on high ground on the banks of the River Meuse. The city was surrounded by fortresses, built as defences to protect it because it was located on an important route into Belgium along the Meuse river valley between the Dutch border and the Ardennes forests. Twelve main forts encircled the city, being built below ground on a radius of approximately 4-6 miles from the city and with approximately 3 miles distance between each fort.

Six brigades from the German Second Army were sent to Liège capture the forts on 4<sup>th</sup> August. One German brigade succeeded in breaking through the line of forts. The Germans occupied the city on 7<sup>th</sup> August after attacks on it by a Zeppelin airship and artillery fire. From 12<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> August the shells from 11 huge howitzers, these being two German "Dicke Bertha" (Big Bertha) guns made by Krupp and 9 Austrian "Schlanke Emma" (Skinny Emma) guns made by Skoda, smashed the forts to pieces. Following the capitulation of the city the German Imperial troops marched south-westwards along the river Meuse valley to the fortified city of Namur.

### **French Attempts to Liberate Alsace**

Within the first few days of the outbreak of hostilities between Germany and France, on 7<sup>th</sup> August the French crossed the border into German-occupied Alsace at the southern end of the Vosges mountains near Thann. Fighting took place on the Rhine plain of Alsace as the French attempted to capture Mulhouse and liberate the province of Alsace from its German occupation since 1871. In the Battle of Mulhouse (8<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> August 1914) this important industrial city on the Rhine river was entered and occupied two times by the French during August, but both times the German Seventh Army retook it.

### **Battles of the Frontiers**

Battlefield locations:

Lorraine

Ardennes

Namur

Charleroi

Mons, Belgium

Maubeuge-Le Cateau-St. Quentin

The Battles of the Frontiers (14<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> August 1914) took place on the French-German border in Alsace-Lorraine and the French-Belgian border in north-eastern France. As the seven Imperial German Armies advanced westwards, according to a carefully timetabled, meticulously programmed German plan for an invasion of France by the name of The Schlieffen Plan, they came up against defiant Belgian and French troops intent on defending every inch of their national soil.

In the event of an attack from Imperial Germany the directive of the French military plan for the defence of France, Plan XVII, was that the French armies would mount an offensive operation on the eastern border with Germany (this being the border with the German occupied provinces of Alsace and Lorraine) and the north-eastern Franco-Belgian border in the Ardennes region. On the declaration of war between Germany and France, the French Army was mobilized and advanced eastwards and north-eastwards to meet the German threat. The Battles of the Frontiers comprised four major battles:

Battle of Lorraine (14<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> August 1914)

Battle of the Ardennes (21<sup>st</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> August 1914)

Battle of Charleroi (21<sup>st</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1914)

Battle of Mons (23<sup>rd</sup> August 1914)

### **Battles of the Frontiers: Lorraine**

On 14<sup>th</sup> August the French First and Second Armies crossed the Franco-German border into Lorraine and fought the Germans in the Battles of Morhange and Sarrebourg (14<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> August) and the Battle of Mortagne (14<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> August). As with Alsace, the province of Lorraine had been under German occupation since 1871 and the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. It was a matter of national pride to liberate this province, rich in coal and iron deposits and a hub of rail and road networks at the fortified city of Metz. Allowing the French to make some progress in their advance, and with the intent of drawing the French troop strength away from the German Armies successfully advancing through Belgium, the Germans then counter-attacked in Lorraine causing thousands of French casualties.

### **Battles of the Frontiers: Ardennes**

From 21<sup>st</sup> August the French encountered the numerically superior German forces of the Fourth and Fifth Armies in the forests of the Ardennes region. The Germans had selected good defensive positions in the woods in their field grey uniforms. The Germans were armed with heavy artillery pieces and machine guns. The attacking French soldiers were not as well-equipped nor were they as well trained in the tactics of defence as the Germans. Added to this the French soldiers were dressed in dark blue jackets and red pantalon trousers, which served to highlight their positions both in wooded terrain and open countryside. The French attacks were cut down with heavy casualties. The French Fourth Army held up the Germans at the Battle of the Meuse (26<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> August). Although the French attacks had held up the German advance for a few days, by 28<sup>th</sup> August the French had been outnumbered and were compelled to withdraw to the towns of Verdun, Stenay and Sedan.

### **Germans Capture Namur**

The situation in the Belgian area of the Sambre-Meuse rivers became critical in the third week of August as the German Second and Third Armies pushed on to the south-west along the Meuse river following the capture of Liège. The Belgian city of Namur lay at the junction of the Sambre and the Meuse rivers. It was also fortified with a ring of forts around it, but it could not hold out against the might of the huge German and Austrian siege howitzers. With support from only one regiment of French troops being able to reach the city, the Belgian forces defending Namur were compelled to leave. By 25<sup>th</sup> August Namur was occupied by German troops. With the withdrawal of the French Armies from the Ardennes region further south, the right flank of the Allied troops still in the Sambre-Meuse area was becoming dangerously exposed.

### **Battles of the Frontiers: Charleroi**

The Battle of Charleroi (21<sup>st</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1914) was fought at the town of Charleroi between the French Fifth Army and the German Second and Third Armies. The French were moving north to the Sambre river and the Germans were continuing their advance to the south-west after the fall of Namur. The French Fifth Army could not hold on and a general withdrawal was ordered.

### **Battles of the Frontiers: Mons**

The Battle of Mons (23<sup>rd</sup> August 1914) was one of the major battles in the Battles of the Frontiers and was the first encounter between British and German forces on the Western Front. The British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) comprised four infantry divisions and one cavalry division of the British First Army, which had landed at the French coast from 16<sup>th</sup> August. The B.E.F. had advanced through northern France and Belgium to move in on

the French Fifth Army's left flank on the Sambre river. Having reached the area of Mons on 22<sup>nd</sup> August the B.E.F. encountered German patrols at Soignies, which were advancing ahead of the German First Army. The next day, 23<sup>rd</sup> August, the German First Army launched an attack at a strength of over two to one against four British divisions with a cavalry division in reserve. The British managed to hold up the Germans, commanded by General von Kluck, inflicting heavy casualties by the superior rifle fire from the highly trained British soldiers. With the realization that the small British force was up against a much greater force in terms of German manpower and artillery, the British ordered a retreat from Mons. With orders to maintain contact with the French forces also retreating on their right flank, the British found themselves fighting a rearguard action during their withdrawal and fought the Battle of Le Cateau (26<sup>th</sup> August 1914).

### **French Counter-Attack at Guise**

Following the fall of Charleroi and the British withdrawal from Mons, the French Fifth Army was also retreating south to the Oise river. The French made a counter-attack at the Battle of Guise (29<sup>th</sup> August 1914) in the area of St. Quentin and Guise to hold a line there north of the Oise river on 29<sup>th</sup> August. The position at Guise was, however, precarious and the order was given to withdraw. The French Fifth Army continued its retreat south across the river Oise, destroying the bridges behind it.

By the end of August the French and the German Armies had sustained some 300,000 casualties, including wounded or killed, on both sides. The German advance had successfully penetrated the French border in several places and was pressing on with its advance following on the heels of the French and British forces withdrawing in a south-easterly direction.

### **German Advance Blocked at Nancy**

The Battle of Grand Couronné (4<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> September 1914) took place in the Meuse-Meurthe area of Lorraine between the French Second Army and the German Sixth Army. Following on from the failure of the French to hold the German advance at the Battle of Lorraine the French Second Army occupied an arc of high ground on a series of hills near Nancy. The German Sixth Army was aiming to capture the city, a prize which would be worthy of a grand entrance by Kaiser Wilhelm II himself. Indeed, he arrived in his Royal Train to observe the German attack and to attend a victory parade in the captured city. The Germans caused damage to villages and to Nancy by artillery bombardments, but did not succeed in capturing the city. Pont-à-Mousson and Lunéville were reoccupied by the French and Nancy was securely held in French territory for the duration of the war.

### **German Advance Blocked at the Marne**

#### **5 - 9 September, 1914**

Battlefield location:

Marne

The advance towards Paris of five of the German Armies stretching along a line from Verdun to Amiens was set to continue at the end of August 1914. The German First Army was within 30 miles of the French capital. By 3<sup>rd</sup> September the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) had crossed the Marne river in a retreat to the south and was in a position east of Paris between the French Sixth and French Fifth Armies. However, the commander of the German First Army made a fateful change to the original directive of The Schlieffen Plan, making an assumption that the Allies were not in a position to hold out against an attack on Paris from the east. The original Schlieffen Plan directive had been for German forces to attack Paris from the north in an encircling manoeuvre. Launching an attack east of Paris on 4<sup>th</sup> September the German First Army made progress in a southerly direction. However, the change to the Schlieffen Plan now exposed the right flank of the German attacking force. From 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> September the French Armies and British First Army carried out counter-

attacks against the German advance on a line of approximately 100 miles from Compiègne east of Paris to Verdun. The Battle of the Ourcq River (5<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> September 1914) was carried out by the French Sixth Army against the German First Army of General von Kluck. On 9<sup>th</sup> September the German First Army began to pull back as the British First Army moved in on its left flank. With no option but to make a fighting withdrawal, all the German forces in the Marne river region retreated in a northerly direction, crossing the Aisne to the high ground of the Chemin des Dames ridge.

The First Battle of the Marne was a strategic victory for the Allied Forces. It marked a decisive turn of events for the Allies in the early weeks of the war and Germany's Schlieffen Plan was stopped in its tracks. One of the famous events in the crucial defence of Paris is that 600 Parisian taxis were sent from the city carrying French reinforcement troops to the fighting front.

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### **The Germans Entrench their Positions on the Aisne**

#### **12 - 21 September, 1914**

Battlefield location:

Aisne

From 12<sup>th</sup> September 1914 the German Army began to "dig in" on the high ground of the Chemin des Dames ridge on the north bank of the river Aisne. The Germans dug defensive trenches with the intention of securing the position and preventing any further possibility of withdrawal. This battlefield area witnessed the beginnings of entrenched positions and the change from a mobile war to a static deadlock between the opposing forces. From this date the entrenchments would gradually spread along the whole length of the Western Front, would become deeper and more impregnable and would characterize the siege warfare fighting of the Western Front for the following three and a half years.

During the First Battle of the Aisne (12<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> September 1914) the German right wing could not be dislodged by the Allied forces of the French Sixth Army, the British Expeditionary Force and the French Fifth Army. The consequence of the Germans establishing entrenched positions on the Chemin des Dames ridge was that the Allied armies were unsuccessful in making a frontal assault on it. They were, therefore, compelled to look for open ground on either flank of the German position. A French assault on the German First Army's exposed right flank (i.e. the northern flank) caused the Germans to move their Seventh Army from Alsace to protect this exposed right/northern flank.

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### **Siege of Antwerp**

#### **27 September - 10 October 1914**

Battlefield location:

Antwerp

After the fall of Liège on 16<sup>th</sup> August the Belgian King, Albert I, had ordered his 65,000 Belgian troops in the field to withdraw to Antwerp, where they joined with the 80,000 strong garrison holding the fortified city. During the late August battles in southern Belgium and northern France, as the French and the British Expeditionary Force were being pushed towards the Marne by the Imperial German armies, the Belgian troops in Antwerp had posed a threat to the German First Army of General von Kluck by attacking his rear columns. The Germans decided to take Antwerp to dispel this threat. On 28<sup>th</sup> September the German heavy siege guns shelled Antwerp's outlying ring of forts, which fell. Three brigades of British Royal Naval troops were sent to support the defence of the port and city on 6<sup>th</sup> October. However, on the day they arrived the Belgian government had already left the city. The order to evacuate the city was given for the next day, 7<sup>th</sup> October. Most of the British and Belgian troops in the city left in a south-westerly direction and the Belgian coast at Ostend. The German Army moved in to occupy Antwerp two days later.

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## Outflanking the Enemy

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### 22 September to end November, 1914

Battlefield locations (south to north):

Somme

Artois

French Flanders

Ypres

Yser

Belgian Coast

Over the next few weeks from late September to the end of November 1914 the Allied and German Armies attempted to outflank one another, responding to each other manoeuvring their armies to make a stand or cover their exposed northern flank. Operationally it was not an intentional race to reach the French or Belgian coast before the other. However, the fight to capture the unoccupied ground on each other's northern flank, the German attempt to capture more French ground and reach Paris, against the French determination to hold up their enemy's advance resulted in the movement of the armies in a north-westerly direction towards the coast. Battles took place as the armies sidestepped one another towards the French-Belgian coast and the Channel ports of Calais, Dunkirk, Ostend and Zeebrugge. This period of fighting has become known as "The Race to the Sea".

Battles in the autumn of 1914 during this period of mobile fighting were:

the First Battle of Picardy (22<sup>nd</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> September 1914)

the First Battle of Albert (22<sup>nd</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> September 1914)

the First Battle of Artois, (27<sup>th</sup> September - 10<sup>th</sup> October 1914)

the Battle of La Bassée (10<sup>th</sup> October - 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1914)

the First Battle of Arras (1<sup>st</sup> October - 4<sup>th</sup> October 1914)

the First Battle of Messines (12<sup>th</sup> October - 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1914)

the Battle of Armentières (13<sup>th</sup> October - 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1914)

the Battle of the Yser (16<sup>th</sup> October - 10<sup>th</sup> November)

the First Battle of Ypres (19<sup>th</sup> October - 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1914)

the Battle of Langemarck (21<sup>st</sup> October - 24<sup>th</sup> October 1914)

the Battle of Gheluvelt (29<sup>th</sup> October - 31<sup>st</sup> October 1914)

the Battle of Nonneboschen (11<sup>th</sup> November - 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1914)

## Trench Warfare

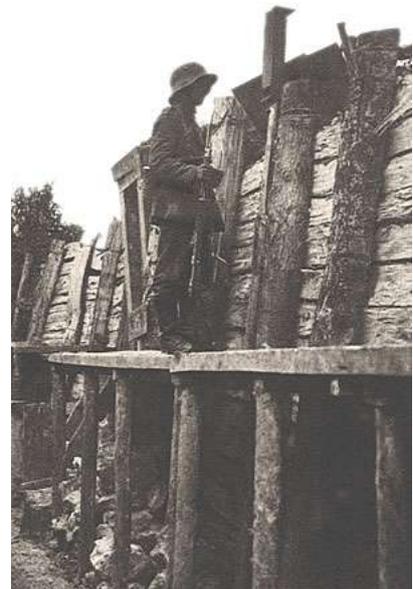
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### December 1914 - August 1918

*German soldier on sentry duty in a well-constructed trench on the Somme battlefield, 1916.*

By the end of 1914 the battles of movement in the first weeks of the war had been brought to a halt. The fierce defence of strategic landmarks by the Allied forces resulted in a situation which became one of deadlock. Carefully selecting the most favourable high ground the Imperial German Army began the construction of a strong defensive line from early in 1915.

The consolidation of the Front Lines consisted of trenches, wire defences, mined dugouts and deep bunkers, reinforced concrete emplacements and selected strongpoints, usually a reinforced farm, in an Intermediate, Second and Third defensive line. Gradually the building and digging was carried on on both sides of the wire along a distance of approximately 450 miles, creating a more or less continuous line of trenches separating the warring belligerents along the length of The Western Front.



In 1915, 1916 and 1917 both sides made attempts to break the deadlock with major battle offensives. The characteristics of siege warfare which developed on the Western Front in these three years created conditions never witnessed before. Instead of expecting to achieve objectives at a considerable distance from the start of an offensive, the type of trench warfare fighting created a situation where attacks were carried out in phases with short distance objectives and usually following a bombardment of enemy trench lines beforehand. This strategy led to prolonged periods of fighting with success counted in gains hundreds of yards rather than miles. The human cost of casualties and dead in such a grinding type of siege warfare would be recorded in the thousands in the space of a single day. Over a period of these three years both sides suffered heavy losses in human casualties and animals, expenditure in ammunition and equipment. In spite of this the Front Lines stretching from the Swiss border to the Belgian coast remained more or less in the same location with little ground gained by either side.

## **1915 Battles for a Breakthrough**

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### **1915**

Battlefield locations:

Ypres

French Flanders

Artois

Aisne

Champagne

Vosges

### **Allied Spring Offensive in Champagne**

From 10<sup>th</sup> December 1914 the French launched their first offensive against the entrenched defences of the German Front in the Champagne region, the First Champagne Offensive (10<sup>th</sup> December 1914 - 17<sup>th</sup> March 1915). The fighting went on for four months, with Allied attacks also carried out against the German Front from the Yser sector in the Belgian coastal region to the Woeuvre heights south of Verdun. The gain in ground for the Allies was very little, being up against a well-entrenched enemy and Allied casualties from the campaign were in the region of 90,000.

### **British Break the German Line in Artois**

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle (10<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> March 1915) was launched with the aim of capturing the high ground of the Aubers Ridge and in so doing, to create a threat to the German Army in occupation of the city of Lille. Although the British broke through the German Front Line and captured the village of Neuve Chapelle, the German Sixth Army carried out counter-attacks and the British attack was halted from advancing any further.

### **First British Mining Operation on the Western Front**

The Battle of Hill 60 (17<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1915) was launched with the explosion of mines underneath the German positions on the relatively high ground of Hill 60, south-east of Ypres. This was the first operation carried out by the British Army to lay large mines underneath the enemy position in order to blow him out of his defences. The fighting was fierce but the British successfully captured the hill. During the Second Battle of Ypres in the days following the close of the Battle of Hill 60 the ground was recaptured by the Germans on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1915.

### **German Gas Cloud Trial Leads to a Breakthrough**

The Second Battle of Ypres (22<sup>nd</sup> April - 25<sup>th</sup> May 1915) started on a warm spring afternoon with the trial of a new weapon of war in the Ypres sector: a cloud of poisonous gas. After two attempts to release the gas earlier in the month, this was a cloud of chlorine gas

released by the German Fourth Army, followed by an infantry attack. The gas cloud was blown on a gentle breeze across two French divisions in the north part of the Ypres Salient. The German infantry advance behind the cloud was rapid, the Allied Front Line was broken and the way to Ypres was open by the end of the day. The battle for the defence of Ypres and the recapture of lost ground included more German gas cloud attacks against the Allied troops.

The Second Battle of Ypres consisted of four battles starting with the surprise gas attack by the Germans:

the Battle of Gravenstafel Ridge.

The following three battles were counter-attacks by the allied troops to try to regain the ground lost to the Germans. The three battles were:

the Battle of St Julien

the Battle of Frezenburg Ridge

the Battle of Bellewarde Ridge.

### **Allied Offensive in Artois**

In May 1915 the Allies carried out an offensive north of Arras towards Lille. This was the Second Battle of Artois (9<sup>th</sup> May - 18<sup>th</sup> June 1915) with the aim to push the Germans off the dominating high ground of the Loretto and Vimy Ridges north of Arras. British attacks on the German line took place a little further north on the flat Flanders plain at Aubers Ridge and Festubert. By the end of the offensive there were approximately 100,000 French casualties, 26,000 British casualties and 90,000 German casualties.

### **French Offensive in the Vosges Mountains**

In July 1915 the French carried out an offensive almost 3,000 feet above sea level on the rounded peaks of the Vosges mountains of Alsace. The offensive followed battles between the French and the Germans for possession of the peaks in deep snow and storms in the early part of 1915. Following a limited offensive to try to push the Germans out of the Fecht valley on the east side of the mountain range at Munster the French pressed on later in the summer to try to take the peaks and mountain road routes around Le Linge. The Battle of Le Linge (20<sup>th</sup> July - 15<sup>th</sup> October 1915) was fought for almost three months. Since the fighting there earlier in the year the Germans had reinforced their lightly-held positions by constructing an impregnable fortress of tunnels, trenches and bunkers hewn either out of the rock or supplemented by reinforced concrete. The German line could not be broken and after the close of the battle the Front Lines on this peak remained static, and only a few yards apart in places, for the rest of the war.

### **Allied Autumn Offensives in Artois and Champagne**

In the autumn of 1915 the French and British Armies carried out a second large-scale, two-pronged offensive against the German positions, which were by this time well-consolidated and proving increasingly more difficult to break into. The Second Champagne Offensive (25<sup>th</sup> September - 6<sup>th</sup> November 1915), had the objective of forcing the German Third and Fifth Armies in the Argonne sector to withdraw along the Meuse river towards Belgium. A simultaneous attack by French and British forces from Vimy Ridge to La Bassée, called the Artois-Loos Offensive or the Third Battle of Artois (25<sup>th</sup> September - 15<sup>th</sup> October 1915), aimed to break through the German Front in Artois. This would compel the German Second and Seventh Armies caught between the two attacks to pull back to the Belgian border in order to protect their road and rail routes in their Lines of Communication on the Douai plain.

The Champagne offensive gained a few miles of ground and captured some 25,000 German prisoners, but with German reinforcements brought into the sector from the Eastern Front, the French could not withstand repeated German counter-attacks. French losses were over 145,000 casualties by the time the Champagne offensive drew to a close.

The Artois offensive witnessed the first use of a gas cloud weapon by the British Army on the Western Front at the Battle of Loos (25<sup>th</sup> September - 8<sup>th</sup> October 1915). The French managed to get onto the Vimy Ridge but did not succeed in pushing the Germans off this dominating ridge. The British attack achieved some success north of Loos and by the end of the first day they had passed through Loos village and reached the outskirts of the industrial, built-up town of Lens. Crucial time lost by the delayed arrival of the reserve divisions added to problems of command and control of the troops on the ground east of Loos, who had inadvertently headed south instead of east in the confusion of battle and the confusion created by similar pit-head landscape features in this mining area. The pause in the attack gave the German Fourth Army time to bring in reserves to the area overnight who reinforced a new German Second Position located on higher ground with good views across the British attack area. The British did not succeed in making any headway against this Second Position and suffered heavy casualties on 26<sup>th</sup> September. A second British advance against the German Second Position failed with heavy casualties in early October as bad weather closed in.

The lessons learned by the German defenders in these 1915 autumn battles was the value of "Defence in Depth". This is the term for a tactic whereby the defenders man the Front Line lightly, the attacker is initially allowed to gain some ground beyond his own artillery cover in the opening phase of an attack, and then he is counter-attacked by groups of well-placed defenders in second and third positions constructed behind the Front Line.

## **1916 Grinding Battles of Attrition: Verdun and the Somme**

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### **1916**

Battlefield locations:

Verdun

Somme

The year 1916 witnessed two of the most notorious battles of attrition in the Great War, resulting in thousands of casualties for both the Allied and German Armies on the Western Front.

### **German Attempt to Break the French Army**

The Battle of Verdun (21<sup>st</sup> February - 18<sup>th</sup> December 1916) was the longest battle in the First World War, lasting for almost a year. The battle took place in the sector of the fortified town of Verdun on the river Meuse. Lying in the middle of a salient Verdun had a citadel fort at its heart and was surrounded by a ring of forts on the high ground of the northern and eastern banks of the Meuse. The town had been saved from German occupation in the Battles of the Frontiers in autumn 1914. The German Chief of Staff, General von Falkenhayn, decided to attack Verdun, which had become a symbol of defiance and national pride to the French people. Falkenhayn's intention was to launch a long drawn-out, large-scale offensive against the sector in order to draw the French to defend it at all costs, and which would ultimately bleed the French Army of all of its strength.

The opening bombardment began on 21<sup>st</sup> February and lasted for 21 hours. The infantry offensive was launched by the German Fifth Army with one million men against a French force of about 200,000 men. Within three days the Germans had advanced almost four miles, had captured Fort Douaumont and the French-held Woeuvre plain to the east of the Verdun salient. The French Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre, decided to hold Verdun at all costs, placed General Pétain in charge of the sector to reorganize the defences and save the situation. The stand made by the French over the following months into the autumn and winter of 1916 became legendary. The battlefield became known as "the mincing machine" to the French troops, but they continued to hold out and Verdun was never captured. The road from Verdun to Bar le Duc was the only road from the Verdun sector into the French rear areas. Every day this road was filled with lorries passing each other every few seconds taking supplies up to the battlefield and taking wounded out of it. It became known as "la

Voie Sacrée" (the "Sacred Way") and, like the whole of the battlefield sector at Verdun, the role this road played in the battle is treated with reverence by the French nation. Casualties at the close of the battle amounted to over 400,000 German casualties and over 540,000 French casualties, many thousands of whom were killed.

### **Franco-British Offensive on the Somme Front**

The 1916 Battle of the Somme (1<sup>st</sup> July - 18<sup>th</sup> November 1916) was an Allied offensive carried out jointly by the British Army and the French Army in the sector of the Western Front north and south of the river Somme. The length of German Front Line under attack stretched between the village of Gommecourt and the town of Péronne. A proposal for the joint offensive was put forward by the French Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre, on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1915. An agreement between General Joffre and the new British Commander-in-Chief, General Haig, for the offensive to take place in July 1916 was made on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1916. Just one week later the German Army had attacked at Verdun. In spite of the German Army's huge commitments at Verdun the Commander-in-Chief, General Falkenhayn, was approached by some of his Army commanders to make attacks on the Allied sectors at Ypres, Arras, the Somme and the Aisne. By late May 1916 the Second German Army commander in the Somme sector was given agreement to prepare for a two-phased offensive against the British Front Line north of the Somme river. Following a breakthrough on the Eastern Front at Lutsk German reinforcements were sent from the Western Front to the Eastern Front and the German Second Army's attack was shelved. Initially the French Army was to carry the main force of the attack, but as the Battle of Verdun continued and began to claim heavy French casualties, the Battle of the Somme became mainly a British offensive to take German-held ground and also to draw off German reserves from Verdun.

The battle began in the early morning of 1<sup>st</sup> July after an artillery bombardment lasting several days, and such as had never been witnessed on the Western Front or any other battlefield before. The first day of the battle claimed over 58,000 British casualties of whom more than 19,000 were killed. This was the largest loss on a single day in the history of the British Army. 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 was a day of tragedy for many thousands of families in Britain. Over a period of four and a half months the battle continued in several phases, with the British Army making limited advances by capturing key villages and ridges, but advancing only a few miles by the close of the battle and the wintry weather in November. The Battle of the Somme in 1916 witnessed the first use of tanks in combat at the Battle of Flers-Courcelette (15<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1916).

The Battle of the Somme 1916 comprised several phases as:

the Battle of Albert (1<sup>st</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> July 1916)

the Gommecourt Salient subsidiary attack (1<sup>st</sup> July 1916)

the Battle of Bazentin (14<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> July 1916)

the Attacks at High Wood (20<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> July 1916)

the Battle of Delville Wood (15<sup>th</sup> July - 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1916)

the Battle of Pozières (23<sup>rd</sup> July - 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1916)

the Battle of Guillemont (3<sup>rd</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> September 1916)

the Battle of Ginchy (9<sup>th</sup> September 1916)

the Battle of Flers-Courcelette (15<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1916)

the Battle of Morval (25<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> September 1916)

the Battle of Thiepval (26<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> September 1916)

the Battle of Le Transloy (1<sup>st</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> October 1916)

the Battle of the Ancre Heights (1<sup>st</sup> October - 11<sup>th</sup> November 1916)

the Battle of the Ancre 1916 (13<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> November 1916)

### **Allied Diversion at Fromelles in July**

The Battle of Fromelles (19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> July 1916) was a combined action by British and Australian troops intended not only to divert German attention away from the Battles of the Somme taking place just to the south, but was also an operation to retake the ground just north of Fromelles.

### **1917 Allied Offensives — Aisne, Artois, Champagne, Flanders, Cambrai**

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#### **1917**

Battlefield locations:

Flanders

Artois

Aisne

Champagne

Cambrai

### **German Withdrawal to The Hindenburg Line**

At the end of August 1916 General von Falkenhayn was replaced as Commander-in-Chief of the German forces by the dual command of Field Marshal von Hindenburg and General Ludendorff. After they took over German Supreme Command they made a decision to construct a heavily fortified line of defence behind the current German Front Line on the central and northern Western Front, to which they would make a planned withdrawal. Some of the sectors already had fortifications and the plan was to build on them. Other sectors were still being constructed as late as 1918.

This German line of defence was called The Hindenburg Line, after Field Marshal von Hindenburg. It was named in several sections or positions:

The Wotan Stellung (position) stretched from the Belgian coast to Cambrai;

the Siegfried Stellung stretched from Cambrai to St Quentin;

the Alberich Stellung stretched from St. Quentin to Laon;

the Brunhilde Stellung stretched from Laon across the Champagne Front;

the Kriemhilde Stellung stretched from the Argonne Forest to Metz.

From 21<sup>st</sup> February 1917 the German Army began a planned withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line from Artois (Arras) to the Aisne (Soissons), a manoeuvre which was named Operation Alberich and which took about five weeks to complete. During the withdrawal the Germans deliberately destroyed buildings, damaged wells and watercourses, roads and railway tracks to prevent the pursuing Allies from taking over the abandoned ground in a good state.

### **Allied 1917 Spring Offensive in Artois and Champagne**

In December 1916 General Nivelle replaced General Joffre as Commander-in-Chief of French forces. Nivelle proposed a major Allied offensive in Artois and Champagne for the spring of 1917. It was to be similar to the two-pronged offensive carried out by General Joffre two years before. This time he would employ more French troops, about one million, on the Aisne-Champagne Front between Roye and Reims. The French offensive was called the Second Battle of the Aisne or the Nivelle Offensive (16<sup>th</sup> April - 9<sup>th</sup> May 1917). The Battle of the Hills or the Third Battle of Champagne (17<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> April 1917) was a diversionary battle carried out during the Second Battle of the Aisne.

The British Expeditionary Force was to carry out diversionary attacks as part of an Artois offensive at Arras. Some disruption to the battle planning was caused by the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line between Arras and Soissons, but also reservations were expressed by the French government about Nivelle's optimistic forecast of a surprise attack and a victory for the offensive. A vote of confidence in Nivelle's plan resulted in the collapse of the French government.

## British Battles at Arras

**9 April - 4 May 1917**

The British attacks began a week before the French offensive, with the Battle of Arras (9<sup>th</sup> April - 4<sup>th</sup> May 1917) comprising 8 battle phases:

the First Battle of the Scarpe (9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> April 1917)

the Battle of Vimy Ridge (9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> April 1917)

the First Battle of Bullecourt (10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> April 1917)

the Battle of Lagnicourt (15<sup>th</sup> April 1917)

the Second Battle of the Scarpe (23<sup>rd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> April 1917)

the Battle of Arleux (28<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> April 1917)

the Third Battle of the Scarpe (3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> May 1917)

the Battle of Bullecourt (3<sup>rd</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> May 1917)

The British attacks achieved some limited success, but the French offensive further south was a failure with 187,000 casualties. Mutiny in the French units became widespread and morale was very low. Once again General Pétain was requested to take control of the situation and he was appointed as Commander-in-Chief of French Forces on 15<sup>th</sup> May.

## British Flanders Offensive

**7 June - 10 November 1917**

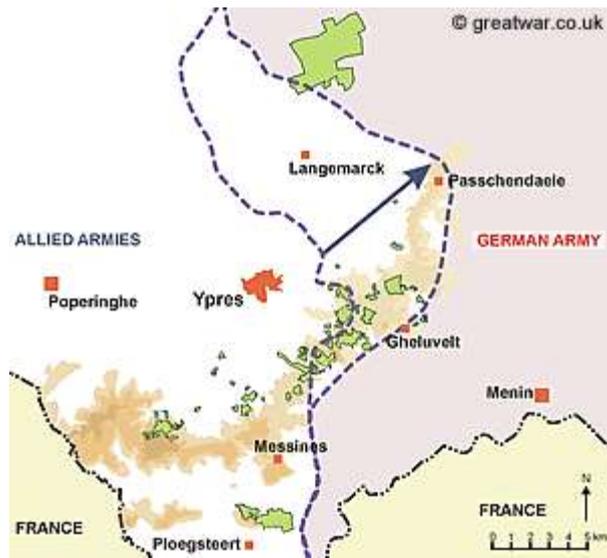
Battlefield area:

Ypres Salient (West-Flanders)

On 7<sup>th</sup> June 1917 the British Commander-in-Chief, General Haig, launched the first phase of an offensive which had the objective to break out of the Ypres Salient and also to relieve the pressure on the weakened French Army after the Nivelle Offensive. This was the Battle of Messines (7<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> June 1917). The launch of the infantry assault was preceded by the explosion of 19 huge mines under the German Front Line along the ridge of high ground, the Wyteschaete Ridge, south of Ypres. Preparations for an attack on the ridge had been carried out since early in

1916. German senior commanders did not heed warnings by some commanders in the field that the British might be carrying out significant mining operations, and, fortunately for the British, the German Front Line was not withdrawn to the eastern part of the ridge. The attack was successful in pushing the German Front Line off the Wyteschaete Ridge.





The next phase of the British Flanders offensive was the launch of the Third Battle of Ypres (31<sup>st</sup> July - 6<sup>th</sup> November 1917). Bouyed up by the success of the Battle of Messines, the British Commander-in-Chief, General Haig, was of the belief that the German Army was weak and would not withstand an attempted breakthrough in the north-east of the Ypres Salient. Once a breakthrough of the German Front Line had been achieved, the British would be able to possess the dominant views of the high ground of the Passchendaele Ridge. They would then be in a good position to continue to the German-held ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge on the Belgian

coast. Not only were both ports being used by the Germans for light shipping traffic, but Zeebrugge was the location of pens for German submarines, which were attacking Allied shipping.

The preliminary bombardment before the battle lasted for 10 days, during which time 3,000 guns fired 4.25 million artillery shells. Along an 11 mile front the infantry attack comprised a corps of the French First Army on the left, the British Fifth Army in the centre and a corps of the British Second Army on the right of the attack. The German Fourth Army held off the attackers in most places. Within hours of the start of the battle rain began to fall and crucially did not stop, carrying on into the following weeks. The constant rain produced conditions completely unsuitable for the continued movement of men, animals and heavy equipment, such as artillery pieces and tanks. The battle, however, continued to grind on in short phases for several weeks throughout the late summer, the autumn and into the winter until the eventual capture of the crest of the Passchendaele Ridge and Passchendaele village on 6<sup>th</sup> November. The final phase of the battle, called The Battle of Passchendaele, was a name which became synonymous to the British nation with the mud, blood, horror and terrible human loss that was the trench warfare of the Great War of 1914-1918. The British Expeditionary Force sustained over 300,000 casualties. The Third Battle of Ypres comprised 8 phases:

- Battle of Pilckem Ridge (31<sup>st</sup> July - 2 August 1917)
- Battle of Langemarck, 1917 (16<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> August 1917)
- Battle of the Menin Road Ridge (20<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> September 1917)
- Battle of Polygon Wood (26<sup>th</sup> September - 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1917)
- Battle of Broodseinde (4<sup>th</sup> October 1917)
- Battle of Poelcapelle (9<sup>th</sup> October 1917)
- First Battle of Passchendaele (12<sup>th</sup> October 1917)
- Second Battle of Passchendaele (26<sup>th</sup> October - 10<sup>th</sup> November 1917)

### **First Allied Mass Tank Attack**

#### **20 November - 7 December 1917**

Battlefield area:

Cambrai (Nord-Pas-de-Calais)

The first use of the new tank weapon in a large-scale attack was launched at the Battle of Cambrai (20<sup>th</sup> November - 7<sup>th</sup> December 1917) with over 450 tanks against the German Front Line at the Cambrai salient. There was no preliminary bombardment before the attack and the assault on the German lines was a surprise. According to Field Marshal Prince Rupprecht, it was the only time the Allies achieved a complete surprise attack. The Germans lost ground on the first day of the battle. Fighting continued over the next few days and on

30<sup>th</sup> November a German counter-attack of 20 divisions began to push the British back across the ground they had captured. By 7<sup>th</sup> December the battle had ended and the British had lost almost all the ground taken in the first few days of the attack.

## **1918 German Offensives to Break the Deadlock**

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### **21 March - 5 August 1918**

Battlefield areas:

Yser

Ypres Salient

French Flanders & Artois

Somme

Aisne

Marne

In the spring and summer of 1918 the German Supreme Command committed thousands of troops, tons of equipment and hundreds of guns as part of a plan to make a series of large-scale surprise offensives and diversions against the Allied lines held by French, British, Belgian and Portuguese troops. This was an attempt to break the deadlock on the Western Front before the U.S. Army was ready to take to the French battlefields in full force. The Germans hoped to punch through the Allied defensive line, cut off the British forces from the French, push the British forces to the French and Belgian coast and trap them there.

Planning and secret preparations were carried out between January and 21<sup>st</sup> March 1918 for attacks to take place in a given sequence on almost every sector of the Allied Front Line. After initial successes and some significant ground gained the German offensives ran into difficulties one by one, not only where the Allied forces were able to put up a stubborn defence, but as a result of problems incurred by overstretching the limits of the German ability to resupply their troops with sufficient food, equipment, fresh horsepower and reinforcements.

The five main sequential phases of the German 1918 spring offensive comprised:

Kaiserschlacht: Michael Offensive, or Second Battle of the Somme (21<sup>st</sup> March - 5<sup>th</sup> April 1918)

Lys: Battle of the Lys (9<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> April 1918)

Aisne: Third Battle of the Aisne (27<sup>th</sup> May - 6<sup>th</sup> June 1918)

Noyon: Noyon-Montdidier Offensive (9<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> June 1918)

Marne: Marne Offensive or Second Battle of the Marne (15<sup>th</sup> July - 5<sup>th</sup> August 1918)

### **Phase 1: Kaiserschlacht - the German Michael Offensive**

This first phase of the spring offensive was known to the German Army commanders as the "Kaiserschlacht" (Kaiser's Battle). Under the codename of "Operation Michael" the first German offensive of 1918 was launched against the British Front Line on the foggy morning of 21<sup>st</sup> March between Cambrai, St. Quentin and La Fère on the Somme battlefield. The aim of this offensive was to push the British westwards and drive a wedge along the boundary of the British and French Armies at La Fère. In the original plan the French forces were to be held and kept busy with their own defence so they would be less likely to move reinforcements to support the British further north.

A massive artillery bombardment preceded the surprise attack on 21<sup>st</sup> March. The German assault was made against the British-held Front Line for a distance of 50 miles. The defenders of the British Third and Fifth Armies were up against a superiority in troop numbers of three to one; 26 British divisions were up against 62 German divisions, with an accompanying strength of 6,600 German artillery pieces compared to 2,600 British guns. The attack divisions were trained in the techniques of aggressive assault as storm troopers and there had been training in the co-ordination of command between the infantry and artillery.

The German advance made significant gains on the first day in the British Fifth Army sector. The French Marshal Ferdinand Foch was appointed to co-ordinate and command the Allied French and British defence. North of the Somme river the British Third Army blocked the German advance on 26<sup>th</sup> April.

Under the codename "Operation Mars" the Germans attacked the southern Arras sector but it was not successful. South of the Somme river the German advance did continue to within 10 miles of the Allied rail centre of Amiens. The Allies halted the Germans in a stand at the village of Villers-Bretonneux, called the Actions of Villers-Bretonneux on 24<sup>th</sup> April.

Despite the large amount of Allied ground captured in the first few days of the offensive, the German advance faltered because the troops became exhausted, there was difficulty keeping the troops at the front of the advance supplied with food and equipment by having to cover long distances over destroyed ground. Some of the destruction of the roads, railway lines and villages had, ironically, been carried out deliberately by the Germans during their withdrawal in Operation Alberich (February-March 1917) to the Hindenburg Line exactly one year before.

Phases of the Allied defence of the line during the German Kaiserschlacht: Operation Michael comprised:

the Battle of St. Quentin (21<sup>st</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1918)

the First Battle of Bapaume (24<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> March 1918)

the First Battle of Noyon (25<sup>th</sup> March 1918)

the Battle of Rosières (26<sup>th</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup> March 1918)

the First Battle of Arras (28<sup>th</sup> March 1918)

the Battle of the Avre (4<sup>th</sup> April 1918)

the Battle of the Ancre (5<sup>th</sup> April 1918)

## **Phase 2: The German Lys Offensive**

As the weather conditions began to improve after the winter, a second phase of the offensive, codenamed "Operation Georgette" in the German plan was the start of the Battle of the Lys (9<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> April 1918). The offensive was launched against the Allied line in the low-lying, British-held sector on both sides of the Lys river in French Flanders. The German objective was the important Allied rail centre of Hazebrouck. If the town could be captured there would be an opportunity to push the German advance further west to reach the French coast and, in so doing, cut off the British, French and Belgian forces holding the Ypres Salient in Belgium.

On the first day the German Sixth Army attack was launched against two divisions of the Portuguese Army, holding the Allied Front Line between La Bassée and Armentières. The Portuguese could not withstand the force of the attack and the Germans captured almost four miles of ground. On the following day, 10<sup>th</sup> April, the German Fourth Army made an attack a little further to the north against the British Second Army holding the Front Line in Belgian Flanders. The British were pushed back beyond the villages of Messines and Wyteschaete, which they had captured in the successful Battle of Messines (7<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> June 1917) almost exactly one year before. The situation for the British was very serious by 12<sup>th</sup> April, which compelled them, under the leadership of General Plumer, to make tortuous decisions about making tactical withdrawals to positions which could be more easily defended. Passchendaele, the village on the crest of the ridge which had eventually been captured after weeks of terrible fighting in the summer and autumn of 1917, was one of the areas of ground reluctantly given up to the tactical withdrawal.

The German attacks continued against the British line and also against the Belgian Army holding the line north of Ypres but no ground was gained. French reinforcements arrived to support the British defence on the high ground of Mount Kemmel. The Germans attacked these newly arrived French troops on 25<sup>th</sup> April. By 29<sup>th</sup> April the German offensive had been blocked and no further attacks were made. The Germans had not captured any of their objectives as the Allies had held onto Hazebrouck and the Channel ports.

Phases of the Allied defence during the German Lys Offensive comprised:

the Battle of Éstaires (9<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> April 1918)  
the Battle of Messines (10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> April 1918)  
the Battle of Hazebrouck (12<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> April 1918)  
the Battle of Bailleul (13<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> April 1918)  
the First Battle of Kemmel Ridge or First Battle of Kemmelberg (17<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> April 1918)  
the Battle of Béthune (18<sup>th</sup> April 1918)  
the Second Battle of Kemmel Ridge or Second Battle of the Kemmelberg (25<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> April 1918)  
the Battle of the Scherpenberg (29<sup>th</sup> April 1918)

### **Phase 3: The German Aisne Offensive**

This was the third phase of the German 1918 offensive as an attack on the French forces in the Aisne sector. In the German plan it was code-named "Operation Blücher-Yorck". The aim of this offensive was to focus French attention in this region and thereby stop them from moving reserves further north to support the British defence in the Flanders-Lys battle sector. The Third Battle of the Aisne (27<sup>th</sup> May - 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1918) was launched with an artillery bombardment by over 4,500 guns. 17 infantry divisions attacked the Allied Front Line along a front of nine miles on the Chemin des Dames ridge. The Allied defenders comprised four French divisions and three tired British divisions in the Front Line, with 9 divisions in the rear as support. The bridges over the Aisne river were captured by the Germans and they advanced approximately ten miles by the end of the first day. This was the greatest gain of ground in one day for either side since the end of the battles of 1914 in the "Race to the Sea".

The Germans continued their advance, being only 80 miles from Paris. On 30<sup>th</sup> May the German Army was on the Marne river at Château-Thierry. The American Third Division was brought to the area and it held up the German advance at Château-Thierry. By 2<sup>nd</sup> June the German High Command called the operation to a close as they were not able to maintain the advance any further, finding themselves hemmed in inside a 35 mile deep and 20 mile wide salient. This situation posed a threat for the likelihood of Allied attacks on the exposed flanks and being cut off to the rear.

### **First American Attack**

The first American attack on the Western Front took place during the German Aisne Offensive. The Battle of Cantigny (28<sup>th</sup> May 1918) took place near Montdidier on the second day of the German offensive on the Aisne river. The American First Division captured the village of Cantigny and 200 German prisoners, which was a great boost to Allied morale. Casualties for the Americans were 1,603, of whom 199 were killed.

### **American Counter-Attack at Belleau Wood**

At the of the German Aisne Offensive the fighting lines had reached the west of Château-Thierry at Vaux and Belleau Wood by the end of May 1918. The American Second Division, moved in to replace a French corps in the sector. The German advance was stopped on 4<sup>th</sup> June. Two days later this American division made a counter-attack against four German divisions. This battle, the Battle of Belleau Wood (6<sup>th</sup> June - 1<sup>st</sup> July 1918) was the first major battle by the Americans against the German Army and Vaux and Belleau Wood were successfully recaptured.

### **Phase 4: the German Noyon-Montdidier Offensive**

The Noyon-Montdidier Offensive known in the German plan by its code-name of "Operation Gneisenau" (9<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> June 1918). Also known as the Battle of Matz it was the fourth German offensive launched in 1918. The German plan was to push the German Front Line westwards in the sector between two salients; the northern salient had been formed from the fighting towards Amiens and the southern one at the end of the previous German offensive in the Aisne sector. If the Germans could make progress in the centre sector here, the indented Front Line of the bulge between these two salients could be straightened out. Although the

Germans made progress on the first day, the French organized a counter-attack on 11<sup>th</sup> June. Three French and two American divisions were supported by tanks. Two days later the Germans halted their offensive.

### Australian Success at Le Hamel

The Battle of Le Hamel (4<sup>th</sup> July 1918) was a victory for the Allies, and most specifically for the Australian 4th Division, four companies of US infantry and the supporting troops with 60 Allied tanks and machine gun units. The aim for the attack was to straighten a German-held salient bulging into the Allied line. The carefully planned attack was a complete surprise to the Germans and the salient was won and closed up within about 90 minutes, with casualties on the Allied side of about 1,000. Almost 1,500 Germans surrendered.

### Phase 5: The German Marne Offensive or Second Battle of the Marne

The Marne Offensive (15<sup>th</sup> July - 5<sup>th</sup> August 1918) became the last German offensive of the war. It was intended as a diversionary attack either side of Reims to cross the river Marne and draw the Allied reserves away from Flanders, where Ludendorff was planning to make another offensive to break through the Allied line once and for all.

The German attack east of Reims was blocked by the French defence on the first day. The attack west of Reims did succeed in crossing the Marne river. On 18<sup>th</sup> July an Allied counter-attack, comprising French, British, American and Italian troops, pushed the German forces back. Soissons was re-captured on 2<sup>nd</sup> August and the Germans withdrew to entrenched positions on a line along the Vesle and Aisne rivers. As a result of the defeat of this German offensive the proposed German offensive in Flanders was called off. This retreat and defeat, the last in a series of offensives which each ended in an unsuccessful strategic conclusion, marked the beginning of the gradual retreat of the German forces which was to come over the following months to 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918.

### 1918 Allied Advance to Victory: 100 Days Offensive

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#### **8 August - 11 November 1918**

Battlefield locations:

Belgian coast

Ypres

French Flanders & Artois

Somme

Cambrai-St. Quentin

Meuse-Argonne

St. Mihiel

### Amiens Offensive

From July 1918 the Allies launched offensives against a weakening German defensive line. This push by the Allied Armies on several parts of the Western Front succeeded in once again creating a war of movement. The Allied Amiens Offensive or Third Battle of Picardy (8<sup>th</sup> August - 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1918) was an attack launched in fog against the German positions by the British Fourth Army, comprising an attack in the centre of a 14 mile front by 11 British divisions and the left wing of the French First Army on their right flank. Canadian forces would attack in the centre sector. An attack by 435 Allied tanks went in ahead of the infantry assault. By the end of 8<sup>th</sup> August the British divisions had pushed the Germans about 10 miles east of their position that morning. The swift advance by the British and French divisions caught the Germans by surprise. By the end of the second day of the battle 30,000 German prisoners had been captured and 300 artillery pieces. On 10<sup>th</sup> August the French Third Army launched attacks in the southern sector of the advance. Montdidier was re-captured and the Paris-Amiens railway line was once again in Allied control. On 12<sup>th</sup> August the first phase of the battle drew to a close.

The second phase of the offensive began on 21<sup>st</sup> August as the Second Battles of the Somme 1918. The French Tenth and Third Armies, and the British Third and First Armies attacked. The ANZACs captured ground north of the Somme river at Péronne and Mont St. Quentin. Canadian forces captured ground near Quéant. By 4<sup>th</sup> September the German forces had withdrawn to the Hindenburg Line, the position from which they had advanced to make the offensives in the earlier part of the year. The two phases of the Allied Amiens Offensive comprised the main battles of:

- the Battle of Amiens (8<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> August 1918)
- the Battle of Montdidier (8<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> August 1918)
- the Battle of Noyon (17<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> August 1918)
- the Battle of Albert 1918 (21<sup>st</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1918)
- the Second Battle of Bapaume (21<sup>st</sup> August - 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1918)
- the Second Battle of Arras (26<sup>th</sup> August to 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1918)
- the Battle of the Scarpe (26<sup>th</sup> August 1918)
- the Battle of Mont-St. Quentin (31<sup>st</sup> August - 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1918)
- the Battle of the Drocourt-Quéant Line (2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1918)

### **Allied Diversionary Offensives and Advances**

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From September a series of Allied offensives on the Western Front were launched in sequence at about the same time as the main Meuse-Argonne Offensive. This was to avoid the situation whereby the Germans might mass their available reserves in one particular place and create a problem for the momentum of the Allied advance along the northern half of the Western Front. The series of Allied attacks took place in part against the heavily defended Hindenburg Line in the following offensives:

- the French and Belgian Flanders Offensive
- the Ypres Offensive
- the Cambrai Offensive
- the St. Quentin Offensive
- the Meuse-Argonne Offensive

### **Advances in Flanders**

Allied advances took place in French and Belgian Flanders between late September into October 1918. The main series of battles were known as The Flanders Advance or the Fifth Battle of Ypres or the Battle of the Peaks of Flanders (28<sup>th</sup> September - 2<sup>th</sup> October 1918) by the British Second and Fifth Armies and the 27<sup>th</sup> American Division. The advance included an action in August called the Action at Outtersteene Ridge (18<sup>th</sup> August 1918).

### **First American Offensive at St. Mihiel Salient**

The Battle of St. Mihiel (12<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> September 1918) was the first large-scale, separate offensive by American forces on the Western Front. By late summer 1918 the strategic importance of the German-held salient south of Verdun had not so prominent as it was in 1917, when the newly arrived American Staff officers arrived on the Western Front. Their desire at that time was to carry out a separate offensive by American forces against the danger posed by this salient. Marshal Foch, commander of the Allied forces on the Western Front in late 1918, had to be convinced it was still relevant to make the attack. He did agree, although he was also wishing to use the American forces for an assault west of Verdun in the Meuse-Argonne sector. The German forces were in the process of evacuating the salient when the American First Army attacked them, supported by French tanks and artillery and 600 Allied aircraft. The offensive successfully cleared the Germans from the salient and 15,000 German prisoners were captured with 250 guns. A few days later the American First Army transferred to the Meuse-Argonne sector in preparation for an attack.

### **The Allied Meuse Argonne Offensive**

The Meuse Argonne Offensive (26<sup>th</sup> September - 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918) was an Allied offensive with the aim of pushing the German Armies further east from their positions at the Hindenburg Line, cutting the Germans off from their important rail routes supplying their front line sectors. The Allied attack comprised a total of 37 French and US divisions opposing 24 German divisions. There were three fortified German lines, two of which were breached by 5<sup>th</sup> October. Another assault was started up again on 14<sup>th</sup> October by the First and Second US Armies but they suffered heavy casualties without making progress. Once again on 1<sup>st</sup> November the Allied offensive started up and the third German defensive line was breached. As the advance progressed northwards the towns of Mézières, Charleville and Sedan were recaptured.

### **Breaking Through the Hindenburg Line**

The Battle of Havrincourt (12<sup>th</sup> September 1918) was launched as a successful attack by the British Third Army with three divisions against four German Army divisions holding the fortified town of Havrincourt.

The Battle of Epéhy (18<sup>th</sup> September 1918) was launched against a 20 mile section of outpost positions for the Hindenburg Line. Following the success at Havrincourt, three corps of the British Fourth Army, one corps of the British Third Army and units of the French First Army. The left and right wings of the advance progressed with difficulty, but the two Australian divisions in the centre of the advance were successful in achieving an advance of three miles. The success of this attack showed to the Allies that the German defence, even on the fortified Hindenburg Line positions, was not impossible to break through.

The Battle of Canal du Nord (27<sup>th</sup> September - 1<sup>st</sup> October 1918) took place against a section of the canal and the outskirts of Cambrai. The British First Army was to cross the canal continuing the advance following on from the Battle of the Drocourt-Quéant Line and advance towards Cambrai.

The Battle of the St. Quentin Canal (29<sup>th</sup> September - 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1918) was an attack launched on 29<sup>th</sup> September by US, French and British forces. A north-south stretch of this canal between St. Quentin and Vendhuile had been incorporated into the German defences of the Hindenburg Line. The German defences on the canal comprised not only barbed wire entanglements and traps, but generally this stretch of canal was in a deep cutting of about 50 to 80 metres. The canal ran through a tunnel at Bellicourt and there was a bridge further south of the tunnel at Bellenglise. The British Fourth Army and the French First Army had reached the canal sector in mid September, and were tasked with crossing the canal at the tunnel section or by the bridge. An attempt by a US regiment to clear the German strongpoints at Bellicourt in advance of the main attack did not succeed, and the attack by US and Australian troops on 29<sup>th</sup> September did not make progress through the Hindenburg Line at Bellicourt. However, an attack by the British IX Corps at Bellenglise did succeed in crossing the bridge with two divisions before the Germans could blow it up. With reinforcements brought down from Bellicourt following across the bridge, the Allied crossing of the canal advanced about 6 miles beyond the canal by the end of the day. Over 5,000 German prisoners were captured.

The Battle of the Beaufort Line (3<sup>rd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> October 1918)

The Second Battle of Cambrai (8<sup>th</sup> October - 10<sup>th</sup> October 1918) was a successful offensive by the British First, Third and Fourth Armies with the support of tanks. The advance crossed three German lines of defence which were lightly manned, took Cambrai within two days and suffered very light casualties.

The Battle of Courtrai, also known as the Battle of Roulers or the Second Battle of Belgium (14<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> October 1918) followed on after a pause of a couple of weeks from the end of the Allied Flanders Advance. By this time the Army Group of Flanders (GAF) comprised a total of 28 divisions from the Belgian, British and French Armies under the command of King Albert I of Belgium. The successful advance recaptured a number of Belgian towns including Menin, Courtrai, Roulers (Flemish name: Roeselare), Ostend,

Bruges, Zeebrugge, and the French towns of Lille and Douai. Units of the advance reached the Dutch border by 19<sup>th</sup> October.

The Battle of the Selle (17<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> October 1918) took place as the Allies continued the advance after the Second Battle of Cambrai, recapturing French villages one by one as the German forces retreated to the north-east.

The Battle of Valenciennes (1<sup>st</sup> November 1918) was an offensive carried out by the British Third Army to advance to the French-Belgian border and the city of Valenciennes. The city was re-captured by Canadian troops on 2<sup>nd</sup> November.

The Battle of the Sambre (4<sup>th</sup> November 1918) was a continuation of the Allied advance by Haig's Army Group (the First, Third and Fourth Armies and the French First Army) coming from the direction of Valenciennes. The Allied troops were to advance from the Condé Canal on a thirty mile front towards Maubeuge-Mons. The offensive included the the Second Battle of Guise (4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> November 1918).

### **1918 Armistice: the Guns Fall Silent on 11<sup>th</sup> November**

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By mid November 1918 the Imperial German Army was defeated and an Armistice on the Western Front was agreed for 11.00 o'clock on 11<sup>th</sup> November. The guns finally fell silent and four years of warfare on the Western Front came to an end.