

1918

1917 ended badly for the Allied Powers; on the Western Front catastrophic French defeats in the spring prompted a crisis in confidence which eroded her offensive capacity and spirit. The burden of responsibility for active operations against occupying German forces passed to the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) but its major campaigns of the year disappointingly failed to achieve their ambitious strategic goals and resulted in unacceptably high levels of casualties. In October Italy was rocked by disastrous defeat at Caporetto and on the Eastern Front the activities of the Russian armies, undermined by internal political upheavals from March onwards, progressively dwindled and operations against the Central Powers effectively ceased completely by December.

In consequence of these major setbacks the fourth winter of the war saw the strategic initiative pass to Germany as large numbers of her troops, now freed from their commitments in the East, became available for transfer to the Western Front. The German High Command calculated that if it could assemble a superiority of force on the Western Front in the period before the arrival of American troops in overwhelming numbers tipped the scales back in favour of the Allies, a decisive German blow could be struck that might finish the war.

Between November 1917 and January 1918 German military experts debated the location for their great offensive in the west: attacks in Flanders, around Arras, Verdun and on either side of St Quentin were all considered and detailed schemes for their implementation prepared. In late January the decision was made to launch the offensive north and south of St Quentin; here, east of the old Somme battlefields, British-held positions stood on ground favourable for attacking infantry; defences were weak and defenders spread thin. The date of the battle was fixed for 21 March 1918.

Forced to adopt a defensive posture on the Western Front during the winter of 1917-1918 the British Army confronted serious manpower shortages and the pressing necessity of strengthening many sectors of its established entrenched positions in anticipation of the large scale German offensive expected in the early part of 1918.

Since 1916 the BEF had concentrated, repeatedly and unsuccessfully, on 'attack' on the Western Front. The change to the defensive necessitated a large-scale labour-intensive construction programme to upgrade field fortifications and communications. At the same time all levels of command had to come to terms with the latest doctrines of 'defence in depth'. New tactics had to be rapidly absorbed and effective training schedules implemented.

A French request in December for an extension of the British front southward only increased the pressure on the Army's resources; relief of French Divisions, which began on 10 January, stretched the BEF's right flank a further 28 miles from St Quentin to Barisis, where significantly, it took over seriously ill-maintained positions. Two crucial political decisions made in early 1918 imposed further constraints on British forces; the War Cabinet's decision not to provide the level of reinforcements earlier requested by Sir Douglas Haig compromised the BEF's operational effectiveness which was further handicapped by the Cabinet's order for the reorganization of Divisions on a reduced establishment: 115 infantry battalions were disbanded as the fighting strength of each Division was reduced from twelve battalions to nine. This complex task, with all its potentially adverse implications for unit morale and tactical and administrative efficiency was completed by 4 March 1918. Throughout the same period British Army intelligence reported on the continued build-up of German military forces facing them and concluded that a large attack was imminent.

By the early hours of Thursday 21 March 1918 a thick mist had settled over much of the 50-mile front occupied by British Fifth and Third Armies. Facing the British, across an eerily calm no man's land, lay the assault divisions of three German Armies, crowded in their jumping-off positions, poised to strike.

Around 4.40am the shrouded morning quietness was shattered by the cataclysmic roar of a vast artillery bombardment as thousands of German guns suddenly opened fire. For five hours high-explosive and gas-shells wreaked havoc on vital British command, communication centres and heavy gun positions far behind the front

before the deluge switched to the beleaguered garrisons of the British outpost lines and forward defences. Even after sunrise, mist, smoke and thick swathes of fog cloaked many sectors of the battlefield and obstructed the defenders' observation and obscured their SOS signals.

At 9.40am, following a further short intense barrage of the British forward lines the great mass of German infantry, led by elite storm troops raced forward. Hidden from British machine-guns by fog and smoke they quickly overran the shocked troops of the outpost lines and pressed on, picking their way round centres of resistance, seeking always to move forward. By late morning progress slowed as the attackers encountered stiffer fire of the British 'redoubts' and fortified positions of the 'Battle Zone'. But the overwhelming numbers could not be held and from the south of Fifth Army's front came alarming reports of serious German breakthroughs. The southern position worsened in the afternoon as it became clear that here the Fifth Army's Divisions (who were bearing the brunt of the attack) had suffered severe losses. By evening General Gough fearing the worst decided on a limited withdrawal during the night and issued orders to this effect just before 10pm.

The Battle of St Quentin, 21-23 March 1918

The colossal German offensive launched on 21 March, following the largest bombardment ever seen on the Western Front, resulted in spectacular successes but failed to achieve the outright breakthrough sought by Ludendorff. Slowed by the innumerable defiant actions of outnumbered garrisons in isolated British redoubts, the end of the day, contrary to German expectations, saw the greatest gains achieved against Gough's Fifth Army on the front from St Quentin to the Oise. The night of 21/22 March witnessed a frenzy of activity as near-reeling British Divisions readjusted to the incursions into their defensive zones and German forces were reinforced to inflict further damage.

Dense mist again prevailed on the morning of the 22 March; a day of intense and continual fighting. Third Army continued to hold ferocious German assaults in its Battle Zone until mid-afternoon when its centre was forced back producing scenes of disarray on the Bapaume-Cambrai road. More seriously Fifth Army, under incessant pressure began to show worrying signs of collapse. No longer holding a continuous front, extensive enemy infiltration between its units destroyed any semblance of co-ordinated defence; in the bewildering turmoil of exhausting and never-ending small retirements British casualties were heavy.

The Germans were through the Reserve Line by evening. Facing an unprecedented disaster all available troops were hastily thrown into action on 23 March to bolster the failing Fifth Army but were unable to stop German infantry swarming over the Somme; Péronne was evacuated. A near forty-mile wide breach was made in the British line; Fifth and Third Armies became perilously separated. Haig ordered in his depleted reserves, desperately sought further aid from the French and in high anxiety for the safety of the entire BEF ordered the construction of new rear defence lines on which to hold the expected continued German onslaught.

The First Battle of Bapaume, 24-25 March 1918

German successes up to 23 March convinced Ludendorff that a mortal blow had been struck against the British; his modified plans were based on this assumption as he now sought in subsequent attacks to separate French and British forces.

The sodden mist-shrouded dawn of 24 March, Palm Sunday, prefaced a day of grave political and military crisis as more ground was lost by British Fifth and Third Armies; the exhausted and disorganised remnants of the former effectively disintegrated as XVIII and III Corps were forced further back. By nightfall the British had lost the line of the Somme (except between the Omignon and the Tortille). In heavy fighting north of the river (and in the face of unceasing pressure by the German Second Army) the right of Third Army repeatedly gave-up ground as it sought vainly to keep contact with Fifth Army's endless retirements. That evening, after enduring unceasing shelling, Bapaume was evacuated.

During the night elements of the right of Third Army completed a long and confused retirement across the 'devastated zone' and occupied a new line but renewed German onslaughts ensured chaotic rearward moves continued throughout the next day, though Royal Flying Corps forays and resourceful rearguard actions by Byng's cavalry slowed the German advanced guard. By 6pm Byng ordered a further retirement beyond the Ancre to a new front on which to make a stand. Throughout the night of 25 March the greater portions of Third Army attained their designated positions but in the process 'gaps' appeared in the defensive lines - the largest of over four miles between V and VI Corps. With Haig increasingly fearful for the safety of Amiens, and uncertain of continued French support, the prospect of continued retreat loomed Rosières

The Battle of Rosières: 26 – 27 March 1918

Political and military crises again beset the Allies on 26 March. As repeated German attacks were made on almost the entire length of the battlefield, British and French leaders sought to resolve the complex problems of effective co-ordinated action (principally the fate of the threatened British armies) at a hastily arranged conference at Doullens.

North of the Somme, despite alarming rumours of breakthrough and incessant fierce fighting (especially around Colincamps) Byng's Third Army formations generally held firm. But intense German pressure on his southern flank and communication misunderstandings resulted in the unfortunate and premature retirement of units from Bray and subsequent abandonment of the Somme crossings westwards. 26 March was also a bad day for French forces on the extreme right (south) of the line as Fayolle's troops fell back in the face of protracted fighting and serious gaps appeared between the retreating groups.

By morning of 27 March the retirement of the right flank of Third Army from Bray placed Byng's forces at Sailly-le-Sec, six miles behind the left of XIX Corps, whose now dangerously exposed nine-mile front ran southwards roughly abreast of Bray. The opportunity was quickly exploited: strong German forces pushed through this transverse gap, across the meandering Somme, and infiltrated the Rosières-Bray line. A confused series of vicious actions followed involving six British Divisions who were attacked from the front, flank and rear by eleven German Divisions. Ordered 'to hold the line at all costs', bitter fighting saw trapped British units driven to attempt difficult retirements through German-held positions but Rosières, temporarily, held firm. Though some observers later detected a lessening in intensity of German offensive operations this was not enough to save Gough, who was given notice of dismissal from Fifth Army command that evening.

The First Battle of Arras, 1918: 28 March

In the days following 21 March a great mass of German heavy artillery was transferred northwards to the Arras front. There, as part of the long-planned 'Mars' offensive, the task of the 'battering train' would be to blast a path through well-established British defences either side the river Scarpe and rekindle the forward momentum of the German 17th and 2nd Armies.

Twenty-nine German divisions were eventually assembled on a 33-mile front from the Somme to Arleux for a general attack on British Third Army positions; but with Arras as the principal objective, the major breakthrough assault was planned against British forces defending the city on a 10-mile front between Authuille and Oppy. Aware of an imminent attack all possible defensive preparations had made been made.

At 3am on Thursday 28 March the early morning stillness was shattered by the chaotic din of a terrific German bombardment. Shortly after 7am German infantry attacked. Unaided by fog and, in places, going forward in mass formations, they met with devastating fire from British artillery and well-sited machine guns.

South of the Scarpe German infiltrations via communication trenches forced 3rd and 15th Divisions back from their front lines by 8.30am; gradual withdrawals were made to the rear of the Battle Zone; despite great pressure no

effective breakthroughs were made. The greatest German efforts were made north of the Scarpe: attacking across difficult ground enemy infantry successfully progressed up the valley between 4th and 56th Division positions forcing British fighting withdrawals to the Battle Zone; despite repeated attacks the line held.

The Battle of the Avre, 4 April 1918:

On the evening of 28 March the costly German assaults on Arras were abandoned. Frustrated by obstinate British defence Ludendorff now fixed his attention on preparations for a major attack in Flanders whilst still hoping to snatch some notable strategic prize from the failing 'Michael' operations. Amiens became his immediate goal and the ensuing battle of the Avre marked the beginning of the end for his March Offensive.

Preliminary moves (29-30 March) across the southern battlefields by German 2nd Army proved so slow and difficult that offensive operations were suspended between 1-3 April to allow German forces to recover. By 4 April, 17 German divisions were disposed along a 15-mile front south of the Somme threatening units of the French First Army and British forces covering Amiens.

Just after 5am on 4 April, in drenching rain, an intense German bombardment pounded allied positions. In dank mist German infantry attacked across sodden ground at 6.30am. In the British sector, 18th and 14th Divisions, with 9th Australian Brigade, repelled three serious German assaults, but around 10am an enemy break-in on 14th Division's front, forced anxious withdrawals to positions barely a mile east of Villers-Bretonneux. North of the Roman road the British defence held all day, but serious problems unfolded to the south during the afternoon. In the wake of a strong attack around 4pm against 18th Division the enemy penetrated Lancer Wood pressing defenders back; a gap was punched in the line and the way to Villers-Bretonneux lay open. Crucially, at 5.45pm, a determined counter-attack by 36th Australian Battalion stopped the German onrush; the line north of the railway was consolidated and the defensive perimeter east of Villers-Bretonneux re-established. The German drive towards Amiens had been stopped far short of its objectives; attacks would be renewed the following day.

The Battle of the Ancre, 1918: 5 April 1918

Friday 5 April 1918 saw German attacks renewed both north and south of the Somme in desperate attempts to redeem the failures of the previous day. By far the heavier and ferocious assaults took place north of the river, against formations of Byng's Third Army aligned along the River Ancre. These intense though sporadic onslaughts (indicative of the failing strength of the enemy offensive) sought to renew an advance on Amiens (this time from the north-east), and to obtain, a foothold on the Artois plateau.

At 7am, in rain and mist, the German bombardment on Third Army's entire front drenched British gun positions with gas, but the shelling, variable in its intensity, provoked strong British retaliation. Enemy infantry attacks began around 8am.

On VII Corps front (on the extreme right, south and north of the Ancre) a major and prolonged German attack, accompanied by intense day-long shelling was made westwards from Dernancourt against positions held by the 4th Australian Division. Making use of the poor visibility enemy troops worked forward and advanced at 9.30am, mainly north of the village against 12th Australian Brigade, which had lost many men to the shell-fire. Following a German breakthrough confused and desperately bitter fighting ensued; it was not until the late afternoon, after a dramatic Australian counter-attack, that the situation was stabilised. Further north V Corps experienced heavy fighting around Aveluy Wood and further to the left, IV Corps formations were attacked by more than six enemy divisions; heavy fighting took place in Rossignol Wood and the eastern half of the village of Bucquoy was lost.

By evening however it was clear the day's assaults had resulted in very heavy German casualties and only the slightest of territorial gains; in consequence Ludendorff ordered attacks to be stopped: his 'Michael' offensive was over

Operation Michael

Like the Schlieffen Plan of 1914, the March offensive, once unleashed, became a race against time. Using a temporary superiority of force concentrated on an identifiably weak sector of the British-held Western Front, Ludendorff aimed at striking a decisive blow to shatter British military power and provoke a French collapse before American troops arrived in sufficient numbers to tip the strategic balance irretrievably in favour of the Allies. 'Michael' was viewed by its creators as a potentially war-winning campaign.

The attack, launched amidst a stupendous artillery bombardment on 21 March, met with dazzling early successes – particularly to the west and south-west of St Quentin, where the German 18th Army made immense and unexpected progress against formations of the British Fifth Army. Slower progress was made in the centre and in the north where obstinate British resistance threw the main offensive off-course. Pragmatic and opportunistic readjustments to original objectives and the major rebuff dealt the Germans at Arras on 28 March reduced and redirected the offensive towards the secondary goal of Amiens – with a view to splitting of the British and French armies. But crucial allied defensive actions around Villers-Bretonneux denied the Germans even of this prize and the 'Great Battle in France' was called off in favour of new attempts at decisive breakthrough in Flanders.

The 'Michael' offensive was unprecedented in its spectacular scale, in the vast amounts of ground gained; the huge numbers of casualties incurred, prisoners taken, guns lost and stores abandoned; but measured against its bluntly-stated aims (of war-winning breakthrough), the operation may be judged a strategic failure. In 16 days of intense fighting the stricken Allied forces repeatedly rallied and reformed, allowing for the gradual (worryingly slow at times) feeding in of reserves to stem the tide.

Actions of Villers-Bretonneux: 24-25 April 1918

Though committed to major offensive operations in Flanders in late April 1918, the strategic prize of Amiens, in Picardy far away to the south, proved irresistible to Ludendorff who decided to re-launch a serious attack on its outermost eastern defences centred on Villers-Bretonneux. His aim was to secure that town and the surrounding high ground from which artillery bombardments could systematically destroy Amiens and render it useless to the Allies. The subsequent fighting was remarkable on two counts: the use of tanks in support of the German infantry assault, leading to the first tank-versus-tank action of the war; and the effectiveness of a hastily organized Australian and British night-time counter-attack which dramatically re-captured Villers-Bretonneux and halted the German onslaught towards Amiens.

In dense fog early on the morning of 24 April an intense bombardment smashed down on Villers-Bretonneux's defence lines. Masked by mist, smoke and the clamour of artillery, German infantry, supported by tanks, advanced at 6am; British positions were quickly overrun and a wide gap sliced open in the line; with defenders in disarray, Villers-Bretonneux rapidly fell to enemy forces.

Alarmed by this serious setback Fourth Army Commander, Rawlinson, insisted on the immediate recovery of the town and promptly disposed his supporting formations for counter-attack. Assaults intended for late morning and afternoon being cancelled, arrangements were made for a night advance. The surprise attack was launched in moonlight at 10pm without preliminary bombardment; spearheading the operation were the 13th and 15th Australian Brigades, supported by the British 54th Brigade. In darkness and confusion Australian infantry, displaying dash and brutal aggression, broke the German lines and, by early morning on 25 April, forced the enemy out of all but the south-eastern corner of the town. German progress towards Amiens, having reached its furthest point westward, had finally been held.

THE LYS

Despite profound achievements 'Operation Michael' failed in its purpose decisively to destroy British Forces on the Western Front; Ludendorff's attention turned to alternative offensive designs foremost amongst which was a scheme to smash British forces in Flanders – detailed planning for which had been in preparation since December 1917. There were compelling arguments for a major German attack in the north where British and Belgian forces were tightly constricted in the cramped zone between Ypres and the coast. Even a short advance here would put important objectives within German reach, threaten British communications with the Channel Ports and enable enemy long-range guns to bombard a wealth of targets in the crowded base areas. Unseasonably good weather, allowing the normally sodden Flanders battlefield to dry, now unexpectedly favoured German operations in early April.

The original plan, codenamed 'George', envisaged a breakthrough thrust near Armentières with a second attack astride Ypres which would cut-off British units in the salient. But strains on German resources by late March 1918, caused by the 'Michael' fighting, necessitated a reduction in scale of these proposals which were reflected in its revised operational codename, 'Georgette'. The new arrangements sanctioned attacks on British formations between Givenchy and Armentières and a thrust across the valley of the River Lys, towards the important railway centre of Hazebrouck, followed by a second attack, further north, in the direction of Messines. Ominously, the German artillery expert Bruchmüller was brought north to co-ordinate bombardment plans; the date of attack was fixed for 9 April.

The initial German onslaught would fall on formations of British First Army; although the state of its defensive positions compared favourably to those of Fifth Army's in March, an ill-fated sector, held by demoralised and over-stretched elements of the Portuguese Corps, was crucially targeted for German bre
The First Day

Operation 'Georgette' the first day, 9 April 1918.

Ludendorff's second major effort to destroy British military power on the Western Front, was launched in dense fog on the morning of Tuesday 9 April against formations of British First Army holding defensive positions between Givenchy and Armentières.

At 4.15am a stupendous artillery bombardment proclaimed the imminent attack and devastated the rear areas of XI and XV Corps before switching to frontline positions. At 8.45am eight German infantry divisions stormed forward on a 12 mile front; the brunt of the onslaught fell on the 2nd Portuguese Division near Neuve Chapelle, whose lines were rapidly overrun. In the ensuing confusion the enemy pressed on through the near-deserted battlefield as British Divisions either side of the break-in desperately sought to readjust and reserves were ordered forward to cover a widening gap. The speed of Portuguese withdrawals forced the 40th Division back and dislocated its defensive arrangements in front of Estaires, but the 55th Division in the south (around Givenchy) held firm against repeated German thrusts towards Béthune throughout the day.

By late morning, the Germans having deeply penetrated the British centre, a thin defensive screen was improvised across the exposed Battle Zone between the bent-back lines of 40th and 55th Divisions. Newly-arrived British reserves occupied a line of fortified villages east of the River Lawe and were fiercely attacked about midday; heavily outnumbered, severe afternoon fighting gradually forced them back to the river. This stubborn defence deflected German moves north-westward towards the hard-pressed 40th Division who were unable to prevent enemy troops infiltrating past them and crossing the undemolished bridge across the Lys at Bac St Maur.

A day of bitter close-action fighting ended with heavy British casualties and massive loss of ground; the crisis would only intensify the following morning with the planned German attack on Second Army north of Armentières.

Battles of the Lys, 9 – 29 April 1918.

Though organised on a smaller scale Ludendorff's Flanders Offensive met with dramatic early success and generated a far greater sense of military and political crisis than the earlier epic 'Michael' attack on the Somme. In twenty-one days of intense and sometimes bewilderingly complex fighting, a series of divergent, but often simultaneous German attacks sought to capture Hazebrouck and regain control of Ypres so as to cut-off and then destroy British and Belgian forces to the north. These aims were ultimately frustrated by desperate and stubborn Allied defensive fighting in which the newly-established Royal Air Force played an important role.

Following spectacular gains on 9 April 'Georgette' was extended next day north of Armentières against Second Army whose formations were driven back across familiar ground: Messines village and part of the hard-won Messines-Wytschaete ridge were lost. The deteriorating situation on 11 April, with the abandonment of Messines Ridge and German infantry pouring across the Lys to within five miles of Hazebrouck, was one of acute crisis, soberly acknowledged by Sir Douglas Haig's 'Backs to the Wall' special Order of the Day. Pushed back but not broken, hard-pressed and exhausted defenders were gradually shored-up by the feeding-in of reserves, but not before good German progress towards Ypres by 14 April convinced Plumer of the need to shorten his lines and relinquish the gains of the previous year's Passchendaele fighting. Following desperate but unsuccessful attempts to seize Béthune on 18 April, German attention switched northwards.

After a respite in the fighting, ferocious assaults wrested Mount Kemmel from the French on 25 April, the last important enemy success; German moves towards the vantage of the Scherpenberg on 29 April were heavily defeated and though spasmodic local fighting continued, 'Georgette', having failed to attain its objectives, was called off.

Western Front 1918 – Road to Victory

Even after the exhausting and costly failures of the German Somme and the Lys offensives in the spring of 1918, Ludendorff grimly persisted with his obsession: the destruction of the British Army within the decisive arena of the Flanders battleground. To this end, after a lull in the fighting in the first weeks of May, he sanctioned a series of diversionary offensives (targeting French positions in the south) intended to draw Allied reserves far away from the Flanders front prior to a German attack there in order to smash, once and for all, British and Belgian military power.

But dramatic successes in the first two German diversionary attacks, on the Chemin des Dames in late May, and towards the River Matz in early June, lured Ludendorff into prolonging these operations to the detriment of preparations for the Flanders campaign. The third diversionary offensive, launched between Reims and Soissons on 15 July (the last major German attack on the Western Front of the war,) met with startling gains west of Reims, but eventually stalled (to the east of that city) and a powerful French counter-offensive, launched on 18 July, then forced (in a crucial series of complex actions known as the Second Battle of the Marne) a German retirement behind the rivers Vesle and Aisne.

The Marne fighting provoked a crisis of confidence in the German High Command and signalled the end of Ludendorff's diversion battles; cumulative high casualties meant that his great Flanders attack was postponed. By high-summer the balance of forces in the West no longer favoured the Germans as increasing numbers of American troops arrived in France. The Allies, heartened by inspiring French counter-attacks and their growing strength (in manpower and material resources), began to believe in and plan for the defeat of Germany before the winter.

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in August 1918

Despite having suffered terribly during the epic German offensives of March and April, British and Imperial forces had ultimately held these onslaughts; this fact helped restore a confidence that would daily grow as troop

replacements and the arrival of huge quantities of new equipment helped make good the incalculable losses of the spring. For the BEF the three months from the beginning of May to the start of August 1918 were a period of recuperation and re-organisation as the French temporarily bore the brunt of the fighting associated with Ludendorff's 'diversion offensives'.

The BEF in August 1918 bore little resemblance to the tiny professional Army that had crossed the Channel at the outset of the war: it was now an immense and complex multi-national organisation, comprising some five Armies with over sixty fighting divisions – of which five were Australian, four Canadian, one New Zealand and two American. Though of unprecedented size the BEF's reserves remained strictly limited and manpower constraints encouraged the adoption of a new type of fighting, reflecting the cruel lessons learned on the Somme, at Passchendaele and during the 'Retirements' of early 1918. Crucially command styles changed; as Haig, became subordinate to Foch (the Allied 'Generalissimo'), so decisions were increasingly delegated down the British military hierarchy – to Corps and Divisions and even Brigades – allowing for more initiative and innovation; staffs at all levels became more technical and mobile. Increasingly the exploitation of the technical arms (artillery, tanks and aircraft) was sought in order to conserve the infantry, who were now exposed to relentless training in improved small-unit battle tactics.

As the vastly improved firepower of British formations was married to the re-discovered principles of surprise, mobility, flexibility and all-arms co-operation, the BEF was transformed into a weapon of formidable offensive potential.

The Battle of Hamel, 4 July 1918

The growing appreciation within the BEF of the need to conserve manpower through more efficient battle-planning and better exploitation of new technologies was clearly demonstrated in a small-scale surprise attack on Hamel by Monash's Australian Corps in early July. In this limited-objective 'all-arms' assault, based on the most thorough preparations, little was left to chance.

With the aim of improving Fourth Army's defensive lines on the Villers-Bretonneux plateau and gaining observation up the Somme valley, Brigades of the 4th Australian Division (with four companies of American infantry), supported by tanks, aircraft and precise artillery barrages, attempted a 2,500 yard advance to eliminate the awkward Hamel salient. Careful and well-concealed preparations underpinned operational success: training programmes encouraged good working relations between infantry and tanks; additional artillery was allocated to the attack frontage; flying units were clearly instructed in their support role.

Assault troops took up their positions during the two nights prior to the attack; on the evening of 3 July the tanks were brought forward to their start lines. At 3.10am the following morning, infantry and tanks advanced behind the cover of a devastating creeping barrage. Despite some early setbacks resulting from British shells falling short and problems with uncut wire in front of Pear Trench, the co-ordinated attack went exceedingly well. The more heavily defended enemy-held localities, Vaire and Hamel woods and Hamel village, were dealt with by special detachments, whilst the remaining attackers pressed on to their objectives, which were gained in just over ninety minutes at a cost of around 1,000 Australian and American casualties. German losses were considerable and well over 1,000 prisoners and much equipment was taken; more notably, a precedent had been set for Allied offensive practice, which would be followed successfully, and on a far more massive scale, at Amiens the following month.

Deeply troubled by the success of the French counter-offensives on the Marne and Aisne during late July, Ludendorff rejected sound advice to pull his exhausted forces in the west back from the now-vulnerable Amiens salient. Here Rawlinson's Fourth Army, invigorated by recent local successes, was poised to strike and renew the Allied offensive momentum.

Plans for an eastward assault from Amiens had long been considered, but formal approval was only obtained at an Allied conference on 24 July; in subsequent meetings the aims of the offensive were precisely defined and date of attack fixed for 8 August. The Amiens battle was not envisaged as a one-off attempt at strategic breakthrough; rather, reflecting hard-acquired wisdom in allied planning, it represented merely one part of a complex and massive scheme for co-ordinated allied offensives to be launched on different sectors of the front. The immediate purpose of the Amiens battle was to clear the invaders from Picardy; the cumulative purpose of the separate offensives was to win the war.

Planned with meticulous care and in the greatest secrecy, the Amiens attack, launched early in the morning of 8 August, met with dramatic initial success; but progress gradually slowed and fighting was effectively closed down by 12 August. The weight of assaults shifted north and a series of successive attacks initiated by Haig between 21 August and the beginning of September (in which Third and First Army formations complemented the aggressive forward moves of Fourth Army) repeatedly forced the Germans back, regaining much ground lost during the spring.

Within the context of the Picardy arena, the momentous attack of 8 August set in motion a series of co-ordinated assaults which ultimately compelled the Germans to abandon the old Somme battlegrounds and seek shelter behind the profound defences of the Hindenburg Line.

First day of the Battle of Amiens, 8 August 1918

The Somme, scene of tragedy and disaster for the British Army in July 1916, was, two years later, the setting for an undisputed Allied triumph. A reconstituted and invigorated British Fourth Army spearheaded a crippling blow against the German Army and set in trail a series of memorable victories that would ultimately drive the enemy from the occupied territories.

After the most thorough and secret preparations the Allies launched a momentous offensive against German positions on the Somme uplands, east of Amiens, in the early morning of Thursday 8 August 1918. At 4.20am, just before first light, almost 100,000 Canadian, Australian and British infantrymen, with the support of hundreds of tanks, advanced behind a devastating artillery barrage. Shrouded by dense ground mist the assault, on a near 14 mile front, was a complete surprise to the enemy. In combination with a French attack in the south, the phased forward-moves of Fourth Army saw the leading shock-troops of the elite Canadian Corps (on the right) and Australian Corps (in the centre) reach their first objectives around 7.30am; a pause for consolidation was followed by two further controlled 'steps' forward. Displaying characteristic aggressive flair, Canadian and Australian troops swept forward, bolstered by wire-crushing tanks and ground- strafing aircraft. With final objectives gained the main fighting was over by 2pm. The only setbacks occurred on the extreme flanks of the attack: to the right (south) the French advance was slow and cautious; on the left, north of the Somme, British III Corps encountered stiff German resistance.

The day was a stunning Allied success and a triumph of all-arms co-operation. Enemy casualties were estimated at 27,000; the German Army and its leaders had been dealt an overwhelming physical and psychological blow. The offensive would be continued on the following day.

Battle of Amiens: 8 - 11 August 1918

Fourth Army's colossal surprise attack east of Amiens on 8 August, spearheaded by tanks and Canadian and Australian infantry, began with spectacular success; but the lavish scale of achievements could not be maintained and during the subsequent three days' fighting forward impetus slowed. Facing increasingly difficult ground, defended by a reinforced enemy, the faltering rate of advance induced Haig to break off costly British assaults in favour of potentially more rewarding offensive operations on other fronts.

High tank casualties on the previous day meant that significantly fewer vehicles supported the renewed attacks on 9 August, which despite the early capture of Le Quesnel, were delayed and disjointed and failed to exploit the opportunities offered by an enemy in full retreat. By nightfall the important Chipilly spur had been secured and a general advance of around three miles achieved.

10 August, a fine summer's day, saw French advances on the extreme right of the battlefield (extended by the participation of the French Third Army), but poor communications and command anxieties about German counter-attacks (which effectively shackled the leading Dominion troops) constrained the British advance. Tank casualties were again high as German field gunners took the measure of British armour; Fourth Army's maximum advance, in the Canadian sector, amounted to around two miles. This small progress convinced Haig of the need to switch the fronts of attack.

The good weather continued on 11 August, a day of minimal gains for Fourth Army as Rawlinson sought to conserve his tiring troops; a mere 38 tanks supported a much-restricted advance (including the Australian occupation of Lihons) as the re-organised German defence offered increasingly fierce resistance.

Though huge gains had been made in the four days' fighting, offensive operations were now wound down as preparations began for a major British thrust north of Albert

The Battle of Albert, 21 - 23 August 1918

The Battle of Albert represented a new phase in the fighting that had begun on 8 August – a northward extension of the British advance to include Third Army so as to support Fourth Army's eastward and south-eastward progress.

With the initial aim of gaining the line of the Arras-Albert railway, Third Army's battle preparations were undertaken with the utmost secrecy; additional divisions were filtered into the battlezone, new artillery positions concealed, infantry units trained in tank co-operation and air-support co-ordinated. At 4.55am on the densely foggy morning of Wednesday 21 August, infantry of five divisions, advanced on a seven mile front in the wake of a precise creeping barrage, completely surprising the enemy. VI Corps gained its first objective (the Moyenneville-Ablainzeville spur) by 5.40am; on the right, IV Corps, facing stiffer resistance, took its first objective twenty minutes later. Varying success met the renewed attacks towards the railway. With less ground to cross in the north, Guards units and 3rd Division infantry gained their objectives by 11.30am; but to the south, as the mist cleared, 63rd and 5th Divisions became involved in much exhausting fighting (many supporting tanks were lost) and failed to make headway, though on the extreme right V Corps captured Beaucourt and advanced beyond Baillescourt Farm.

Byng decided to pause the attack on Thursday 22 August to allow his forces to regroup; a series of German counter-attacks were beaten off during that intensely hot summer's day, and to the right, Fourth Army advances, resulted in the occupation of Albert. On 23 August Third and Fourth British Armies participated in a huge general Allied attack which, with French assaults on the right, extended over a battlefield of 33 miles. The day's fighting saw Third Army edge significantly nearer Bapaume, which would remain its principal objective in the days immediately following.

The Second Battle of Bapaume, 31 August - 3 September

In the last week of August eastward progress by British Fourth and Third Armies forced unceasing German retirements. By evening on 29 August pressure exerted, especially by Fourth Army's aggressive Australian Corps, had tumbled the Germans back to the line of the Somme. Here, near Péronne, where the river turned westwards in an almost right-angled bend, the pursuit stalled, held up by the watery barriers of the Somme and the immensely strong German defences sited on the commanding tactical feature of Mont St Quentin – the key position to this sector of the front.

In a bid to restore movement Rawlinson agreed to a daring plan for the Australian Corps to turn the river line and, by late evening of 30 August, preparations were in hand for assaults on Mont St Quentin and the ancient fortress-town of Péronne.

At 5am on Saturday 31 August, 5th Australian Brigade, (having crossed the Somme at Feuilleres and following a most difficult approach to its start-line), assaulted Mont St Quentin; despite the Australians' gallantry and tactical skill in violently bloody encounters, the assault on the mount was held. That same morning 14th Australian Brigade moved-off towards Péronne.

By nightfall the situation was one of great confusion but the decision was made to commit 6th Australian Brigade to renew the attack on Mont St Quentin. At 6am on the morning of 1 September (simultaneous with a strike on Péronne by 14th Australian Brigade), 6th Brigade attacked and gradually wrested control of the hilltop village which was in Australian hands by mid-afternoon. The day witnessed a remarkable double achievement following 14th Brigade's dramatic assault on Péronne; by evening almost all the town had been secured. German defensive positions of great strength had been broken and the enemy was forced into further hasty withdrawals towards the Hindenburg Line.

During the last week of August and first weeks of September 1918 Sir Douglas Haig's, First, Third and Fourth Armies became involved in a complex series of operations intended to advance their formations towards the forward areas of a formidable system of German field-defences called the 'Siegfried Stellung' (Siegfried Line) – better known to the British as the Hindenburg Line. More a series of well-defended zones than a single line, Haig was determined that these positions should and could be broken within the next few weeks as part of a general Allied offensive. But it was accepted that the imposing strength of the Hindenburg Line would pose the advancing British Armies with the most profound and unprecedented challenges.

Extending from near Vailly on the Aisne in the south to Tilloy (south-east of Arras) in the north, the Hindenburg Line had its origins in the strategic realities of late 1916. The heavy casualties and strains imposed upon the German Army on the Western Front, especially as a result of the terrible fighting on the Somme, induced the German High Command, in September 1916, to decide on a shortening of their defensive lines by withdrawing to a newly-prepared and near impregnable position far in the rear of the Somme battlegrounds. Constructed between late-September 1916 and March 1917, the building of the Hindenburg Line represented a major task of field engineering, which utilised vast quantities of materials and manpower (including the forced labour of civilians and Russian prisoners of war). The end product represented the physical embodiment of German acceptance of a new outlook on the war – the 'strategic defensive'.

Though temporarily abandoned during the risky German bid for victory in March-April 1918, the re-garrisoning of the Hindenburg Line in August-September 1918 represented a last-ditch attempt to prolong the fighting into 1919.

The Battle of the Scarpe, 26 - 30 August

As German forces reeled back from the incessant thrusts of Third and Fourth Armies made in the wake of the successful the Battle of Albert, Haig extended the offensive northwards to the Arras front. To intensify pressure on an increasingly demoralised enemy, General Sir Henry Horne's First Army now endeavoured to support Third Army's progress by undertaking an eastward drive towards the formidable Drocourt-Quéant Line – preparatory to a breakthrough assault on that vital German position.

The principal planning and assault role in First Army's offensive was allocated to the Canadian Corps, elements of which had been recently restored to Horne's command. 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions would spearhead a phased advance, supported (north of the River Scarpe) by the 51st (Highland) Division.

In drizzle and darkness First Army's attack, supported by hugely effective artillery and machine-gun barrages, opened at 3am on Monday 26 August. It met with immediate success though German resistance stiffened as the day wore on. By dusk, having advanced near three-miles, the Canadians held a line approximately 1,000 yards east of Monchy le Preux. Continuing poor weather and resolute German resistance slowed progress on the 27 and 28 August and Currie's intention of pushing on through the Fresnes-Rouvroy line (effectively the outlying defences of the Drocourt-Quéant position) was frustrated. Severe fighting resulted in high casualties and the exhausted 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions were relieved during the night of 28/29 August by the 1st Canadian and 4th British Divisions who attempted to revive the faltering forward progress.

Following vicious actions on 30 August, German defences were in part breached east of Boiry-Notre Dame and the general advance halted prior to finalising arrangements for the assault on the Drocourt-Quéant Line. The Scarpe offensive destroyed crucial German defence systems and paved the way for continued Allied progress

The Breaking of the Drocourt-Quéant Line, 2 – 3 September 1918

Between 31 August and 1 September, while British artillery pounded the dense mass of wire entanglements shielding the Drocourt-Quéant Line, First Army's Canadian Corps paused to prepare and re-organise prior to its next daunting forward move. With the aim of breaking through the D-Q position, its three attacking infantry divisions (1st and 4th Canadian and 4th British) were provided with essential tank and air support.

Attacking at 5am on Monday 2 September, in early morning half-light, 1st Canadian Division (going forward south-eastwards on the extreme right, south of the Arras-Cambrai road) and 4th Canadian Division (in the centre, between Dury and the main road) led the assault up the exposed ridges, behind an intense artillery barrage. On the left, the supporting British 4th Division advanced south of the River Sensée. Tanks proved invaluable in crushing paths through the dense barbed-wire and dealing with strongpoints; despite heavy enemy machine-gun fire, the first objectives (the front-system of the D-Q trenches) were gained before 9am, and the follow-up battalions passed through the leading attacking waves. Despite the obvious strength of their field-defences enemy resistance varied considerably and large numbers of German prisoners were taken.

The second phase of the attack took the advance beyond the range of artillery support and owed much to the infantry's courage and tactical skill, as forward rushes, made by platoons and sections, slowly gained ground within the D-Q support trenchlines. Despite continuing heavy fighting (especially in the Buissy Switch), by nightfall it was clear that the Drocourt-Quéant Line had been emphatically breached and Canadian Corps formations surged into the open country beyond.

A general German retirement took place during the night of 2/3 September and, on the following day, British forces cautiously moved forward to within striking distance of their next objective - the Canal du Nord.

The Battle of Havrincourt, 12 September 1918

Though British advances (notably of Third and Fourth Armies) in the period 3–10 September conformed to a recommended policy of due caution, a more confident General Byng was keen not to allow the retreating enemy to settle and attempt any form of recovery. He thus sought to drive his Third Army as rapidly as possible through the outer 'approach defences' of the Hindenburg Line to obtain better positions for observation and preparation for the crucial attack on the main Hindenburg Line system itself.

The objectives of Third Army's action at Havrincourt were to capture the high ground of the Trescault and Havrincourt spurs and advance the line to within assault distance of the Hindenburg Position proper. Three Divisions were tasked with the forward move on a near five mile front from Gouzeaucourt Wood in the south to the Canal du Nord in the north.

At 5.25am on Thursday 12 September, following a considerable overnight bombardment of enemy positions, infantry brigades from the New Zealand Division, 37th Division and 62nd (2nd West Riding) Division attacked. The pattern of assault was one of good early progress followed by a gradual slowing of momentum as German resistance intensified. The day saw fierce close-quarter fighting and a series of energetic German counter-attacks disproved any notion that enemy morale had as yet been broken. On the right the New Zealanders, encountering severe defensive fire, made least progress but 37th Division captured Trescault, and Havrincourt, taken by the 62nd Division, was resolutely held against a determined early evening German counter-attack.

The assault advanced Third Army's line on average nearly one mile; but only around Havrincourt did the 62nd Division manage to pierce the Hindenburg front system. Though generally satisfactory, the results of the attack did not, as yet, represent a strategic breakthrough.

The Battle of Epéhy, 18 September 1918

Despite recent hard fighting Rawlinson acknowledged his faith in the superior spirit and attacking potential of his newly strengthened Fourth Army by outlining plans to close-up rapidly with the enemy. With the aim of establishing advanced positions from which a major strike could be made against the main Hindenburg Line, his proposal to capture the strong outlying German posts on the ridges between le Verguier and Epéhy was approved by Haig and the date of assault fixed for 18 September. Superior firepower of massed artillery support underpinned arrangements for this large-scale operation in which eight Fourth Army divisions were committed on an attack frontage of over 11 miles; on the left of the attack vital assistance would be provided by Third Army's V Corps.

At 5.20am in the morning of Wednesday 18 September, having assembled in darkness and drenching rain, the infantry went forward behind the protective screen of a precise creeping artillery barrage and massed machine-gun fire. Regardless of rain, sodden ground, poor visibility and severe initial German resistance, good progress was made, especially in the centre, between le Verguier and Hargicourt, by the Australian Corps. Gains were less marked on the right and left flanks where unfavourable terrain and solid German defences posed considerable problems. Key to the day's achievements lay in the Australians' swift overrunning of enemy lines and the exploitation of this success; working with tanks their second objectives were taken by late morning. Subsequently units of the 4th Australian Division caused much disruption by breaking into the Advanced Hindenburg System.

Though fierce fighting continued long after nightfall, the battle represented a considerable Allied success with over 9,000 enemy prisoners taken and the British line advanced over two miles. Encouraged by this progress Haig began planning for his breakthrough assault on the main Hindenburg System.

The Battle of the Canal du Nord, 27 September – 1 October 1918

In the last week of September 1918 four separate major Allied offensives were launched on the Western Front with the aim of finishing the war before the winter. In the second of these attacks the British First and Third Armies were to drive across the northern extension of the Hindenburg Line, towards Cambrai. The operation was a logical consequence Canadian success at Drocourt-Quéant and once again the Canadian Corps was given a principal role in the renewed offensive. The task of crossing the formidable obstacle of the Canal du Nord required the most careful planning and precisely organised artillery and engineer support underpinned the success of the attack.

At 5.20am, on Friday 27 September, following a night of heavy rain, assault troops of the Canadian 4th and 1st Divisions left their cramped assembly positions and attacked on a narrow front (centred on Sains-lez-Marquion) behind a devastating creeping barrage; Third Army's infantry, immediately to the right (south) advanced simultaneously. With dense clouds of smoke blowing towards the enemy lines the leading Canadian assault troops, assisted by tanks, quickly crossed the canal; Royal Engineers immediately began bridging operations to speed troops, guns and supplies over the captured barrier for the next forward moves; the Marquion Line was passed

later that morning and following much fierce fighting, the high ground of Bourlon Wood was in Canadian hands by nightfall; good progress was also made by Third Army. Attacks were renewed next day; though Canadian progress slowed, Third Army forces captured Noyelles, Marcoing, and Gouzeaucourt, and seriously threatened Cambrai.

In two days an advance of six miles was made on a twelve mile front; 10,000 enemy prisoners and 200 guns were taken. This spectacular success represented a vital preliminary to Fourth Army's attack on the Hindenburg Line scheduled for 29 September.

The Battle of the St Quentin Canal, 29 September - 2 October 1918

As the series of momentous Allied offensives that had opened on 26 September continued, Rawlinson's Fourth Army re-joined the fray on Sunday September 29 with the aim of breaking-through the main Hindenburg Position between St Quentin and Verduille. Monash's Australian Corps and Braithwaite's IX Corps were entrusted with the principal roles in the operation. The preparatory bombardment began on the evening of 26 September; gas shells drenched enemy headquarters and gun positions; high-explosives wreaked havoc on German field-defences.

At 5.50am on 29 September, having assembled in rain and darkness, Fourth Army infantry attacked on a 12 mile front through dense fog and smoke, amid the din of machine-guns, tank engines, and the clamour of the protective artillery barrages. In the northern sector, the drive eastwards towards the tunnelled sector of the St Quentin Canal was led by tanks and two inexperienced American Divisions; confounded by fog and wire, their progress was slow and casualties heavy. Supporting Australian units were drawn into a bitter slogging match for the ridges and by late afternoon had made far less ground than anticipated. Much better success attended IX Corps' attack in the south, where 46th (North Midland) Division's 137th Brigade, in a breathtakingly audacious thrust, overran the German outer defences, stormed across the canal and captured intact the surviving bridges, notably, and in the most dramatic circumstances, at Riqueval. Follow-up brigades breached the Main Hindenburg System in this sector by mid-afternoon, when 32nd Division moved through to continue the advance.

The battle, despite some setbacks, proved a stunning success; the Main Hindenburg Position had been categorically broken and in an advance of three-and-a half miles over 5,000 prisoners and many guns captured. Later that same night Rawlinson issued orders for further forward moves to secure the rest of Hindenburg Line and Hindenburg Support.

The Battle of the Beaurevoir Line, 3 – 5 October 1918

In the days immediately following 29 September, General Rawlinson's British Fourth Army sought to exploit its breakthrough of the Hindenburg Line and maintain the Allied offensive momentum. Between 30 September and 2 October, Rawlinson's troops gained further ground in difficult piecemeal fighting in which his formations aligned with the leading thrusts of IX Corps, forcing the Germans back to their last prepared defensive position, the Beaurevoir Line, roughly two miles behind the main Hindenburg System. Rawlinson, eager to push on, initiated a large set-piece assault with the aim of piercing this final barrier but, despite the desperate state of enemy, Fourth Army's attacks met severe resistance including many counter-attacks. The fighting for the Beaurevoir Line was ferocious and intense.

At 6.05am on Thursday 3 October the assault began with simultaneous attacks by the IX and Australian Corps, well supported by artillery and wire-crushing tanks. On a 10,000 yard attack frontage an advance of 2,000 yards was achieved by nightfall, though neither the fortified villages of Montbréhain and Beaurevoir were secured. Further attempts to gain these localities failed on the following day as the actions of 4 October, beginning in dense fog, saw very limited gains.

The battle, supported by artillery bombardments and tanks, was renewed with vigour on Saturday 5 October; at 'Zero Hour', again 6.05am, in faint dawn light, the Australian 2nd Division moved against Montbréhain and the 25th Division, further to the north, attacked towards Beurevoir. Toiling through thick barbed-wire entanglements and concentrated German machine-gun fire, Australian and British infantry pressed forward: Montbréhain was secured by late afternoon and the greater part of Beurevoir was cleared of the enemy around 7pm.

By late evening it was clear that the Beurevoir Line, the final prepared German defensive position facing Fourth Army had been broken; open country lay beyond

Early October 1918 saw a slow-down in the pace of the combined Allied offensives. In the Argonne, on the Aisne and, far to the north, in Flanders, logistical difficulties and the onset of autumn rains seriously impeded communications, transportation of supplies and the forward movement of heavy artillery. Haig, however, seized on recent British successes, notably Fourth Army's breaking of the Beurevoir Line, and sought further to exploit events and reinvigorate the impetus of Allied attacks, by initiating a major joint Army assault on a 17 mile front, south of Cambrai. The attack, scheduled for 8 October, aimed seriously to imperil the retreating Germans and threaten a decisive breakthrough of their rapidly improvised defensive line.

At 1am on 8 October, in darkness and rain, the first of a series of carefully phased attacks was led off, by Third Army's V Corps' attempt to seize a northward extension of the Beurevoir Line, still in German hands. Though supported by tanks, infantry progress was much slowed by uncut enemy barbed-wire and intense machine gun fire. The main Third Army attack (by IV, VI and XVII Corps) was launched at 4.30am behind a protective artillery bombardment. Although VI Corps experienced serious mishaps, the day saw significant advances despite German counter-attacks, some involving the use of captured British tanks. The New Zealanders (IV Corps) and 63rd Division (XVII Corps) achieved notable successes.

On the right, Fourth Army's attack (from south to north, IX Corps, II American Corps and XIII Corps), supported by an immense artillery barrage and tanks, commenced at 5.10am. Despite subdued French assistance, hard fighting gained much ground and many prisoners were taken.

By evening British advances had rendered Cambrai untenable; enemy forces evacuated the city early next morning and, in a general withdrawal, sought shelter behind the line of the River Selle.

The third in Foch's series of co-ordinated Allied offensives began on 28 September, to the north, in Flanders. There, within the infamous Ypres battleground, British Second Army co-operated with Belgian and French forces to strike at a numerically weaker enemy and achieve spectacular success.

Maintaining the relentless offensive momentum, the attack in Flanders aimed initially at expelling the enemy from the Houthulst Forest and regaining the vital high ground of the Passchendaele and Ypres Ridges. To the right of Belgian forces, British Second Army occupied a 16 mile front running from just north of Ypres to the River Lys, west of Armentières in the south; Plumer allocated his two most northerly Corps, the II and XIX, for the principal roles in the assault, south of the Ypres-Zonnebeke road. Second Army staff displayed their usual efficiency in planning and preparations.

British infantry assembled in heavy rain on 27 September and attacked behind a fierce protective artillery barrage before light at 5.20am, the following morning. Despite the difficult ground much rapid progress was made: 9th (Scottish) Division advanced past Westhoek and on to Anzac Ridge; the 29th Division pushed towards Gheluvelt and 14th Division overran 'The Bluff'. Meanwhile the right of Second Army (X and XV Corps) offered flank protection (artillery support and aggressive patrols) before moving against Wytschaete and Messines. By evening a 6 mile advance had been made. Belgian attacks met with similar success.

Allied assaults continued on 29 September but torrential rainstorms slowed forward movement. Continuing poor weather and the arrival of German reserves brought the first phase of the Flanders operation to a close on 2 October. By then the Germans were much occupied with stemming the British tide further south, following the breaking of the St Quentin Canal defences of the Hindenburg Line by Fourth Army's attack on 29 September.

The Battle of Courtrai, 14 - 19 October 1918

Almost two weeks were needed to restore roads within the morass of the Flanders battleground before offensive operations could be resumed. In this period the enemy was persistently harried. By 14 October the GAF was again ready to attack. Plumer's Second Army, though initially given a flank-protection role, played a hugely significant part in the fighting; aggressive eastward thrusts, up to and across the River Lys, supported Franco-Belgian advances to the north (towards Ghent) and assisted British Fifth Army's advance past Lille, in the south.

Prior to assault, Second Army's front ran roughly north-east, from Warneton (in the south) to the boundary with Belgian forces near St Pieter in the north; the southernmost British Corps lay along the Lys, the remaining formations ranged at varying distances from the river, reflecting its near easterly course beyond Comines.

Just before Zero-hour on Monday 14 October, the British barrage opened with a deafening clamour; minutes later (at 5.35am) infantry of the three attacking Corps, surged forward through thick mist and across the sodden wire-strewn ground. Good progress was made and many prisoners taken; by evening a gain of four miles had been made. Belgian assaults on the left were equally successful and the general attack was resumed with utmost ferocity the following day (15 October) forcing a German pull-back to the Lys that evening. In subsequent pursuit actions, 16-17 October, XV Corps (already across the river) pushed rapidly eastwards while enemy counter-attacks frustrated the more northerly British attempts to establish bridgeheads on the Lys; it was not until the night of 18/19 October that 35th Division got significant numbers of troops across the waterway. Courtrai was occupied on 19 October and II Corps formations crossed the river that night. By morning of 20 October the whole front of Second Army was across the Lys.

By 11 October British forces had closed up upon the retreating Germans, now hastily dug-in immediately to the east of the River Selle. Haig, sensing the enemy's near exhaustion, initiated a series of operations designed to get British troops in strength across the river, and clear a way for a move against the Sambre-Oise Canal, a further five miles to the east.

After a six day halt for preparations and artillery bombardments Fourth Army troops attacked in thick mist at 5.20am on Thursday 17 October; infantry and tanks, preceded by a creeping barrage, moved forward on a ten mile front south of Le Cateau. The centre and left of Fourth Army forced crossings of the river despite unexpectedly tenacious enemy resistance and much uncut wire. Fighting was particularly fierce along the line of the Le Cateau – Wassigny railway. The right of the attack, across the upland watershed of the Selle, made most progress and by nightfall enemy defences had been broken and Le Cateau captured. Severe fighting continued on 18 and 19 October, by which time Fourth Army (much assisted by the French First Army on its right) had advanced over five miles, harrying the enemy back towards the Sambre-Oise canal.

Third and First British Armies (immediately to the left, north, of Fourth Army) maintained the offensive pressure next day. In a surprise joint night attack in the early morning of 20 October Third Army formations secured the high ground east of the Selle. Following a two day pause, to bring up heavy artillery, the attack was renewed on 23 October with a major combined assault by Fourth, Third and First Armies; the fighting, which continued into the next day, resulted in further gains.

The Battle of the Selle constituted a highly significant British victory: considerable advances were made and over 20,000 prisoners taken.

The Battle of Valenciennes, 1 -2 November 1918

By the end of October 1918 it was clear that Germany was losing the war. On the Western Front signs of disintegration in her armies were increasing. Haig, convinced that another major blow might induce the German High Command to accept allied armistice terms before the end of the year, now planned a last great offensive. An essential preliminary for this operation was the capture of Valenciennes to allow First Army's formations to progress to their designated jumping-off positions.

Well protected on the west by the Schelde Canal, the attack on Valenciennes took place, from the south. An initial assault by 51st Highland Division on 28 October pushed the British line forward, despite determined German resistance, to Mount Houy, key feature to the defences of the city. The main phase of the assault, by the Canadian Corps and British XXII Corps (assisted on the right by Third Army's 61st Division) began in the early morning of 1 November. Attacking at 5.15am, behind a huge artillery barrage, the 10th Canadian Brigade raced forward from Famars over Mount Houy and northwards beyond; by 7am Aulnoy had fallen and the intact bridge over the Rhonelle secured. Progress was halted by fierce machine-gun fire from Marly Steelworks. Meanwhile 12th Canadian Brigade had crossed the Schelde Canal and secured footholds at the western corners of Valenciennes. By nightfall the Canadians had edged into Marly and were securely lodged behind the line of the railway, just west of the city itself.

Attacks were renewed early next morning; Marly was occupied and by 7.20am Canadian troops were in Valenciennes cautiously following-up a rapid enemy withdrawal. The capture of the city freed First Army to move forward and align itself in readiness to support Haig's planned great offensive on the Sambre, now scheduled for 4 November.

The Battle of the Sambre, 4 November 1918

Forced to abandon the stronghold of Valenciennes, retreating German forces now attempted a last-ditch stand on the line of the Sambre-Oise Canal and, where the canalised river angled away north-eastward, in defensive positions within (and to the north) of the extensive Forest of Mormal. Here, on a near 40 mile front running roughly north-south from Condé to Oisy on the Sambre, British Fourth, Third and First Armies, launched a major offensive designed to bring about the utter collapse of the enemy.

Just before dawn on Monday 4 November British infantry advanced through dense mist across difficult country behind a stupendous supporting bombardment. Fourth Army formations, on the right, faced the great obstacle of the Sambre Canal, and early assaults met the most violent resistance. Heavy casualties were taken in 1st Division's attack on Lock No.1, and immediately to the left, 32nd Division was bloodily rebuffed near Ors. Only the exceptional gallantry of infantry, sappers and pioneers ensured the establishment of vital bridgeheads; meanwhile 25th Division made good progress to Landrecies. Farther north, Fourth Army's left and Third Army's right wing successfully assaulted Germans dug-in within the still densely wooded Forest of Mormal. Confronting Third Army's centre, the ancient citadel of Le Quesnoy, was first encircled and then dramatically captured by the New Zealand Division. On the left of the battle-line advanced guards of the left of Third Army and those of First Army gained ground in vicious small-scale pursuit actions across fields, wired hedgerows, irrigation canals and scattered villages.

The Battle of the Sambre, the last battle fought by the British Army in the war, thrust the Germans from the Sambre Canal and pushed his defences back in the Forest of Mormal. By nightfall and in worsening weather, the enemy, on the brink of defeat, reeled back in disorder.

The Last Day – Armistice, 11 November 1918

At the beginning of November 1918 the German Armies on the Western Front were nearing the end of their endurance; repeatedly pushed back by relentless Allied advances few reserves existed to fill the ranks of the fallen;

morale was ebbing away. On the German home front starvation and political upheavals undermined civilian commitment to continue the struggle. It was in this atmosphere of acute military, political and social crisis that, on 7 November, German delegates to the Allied Armistice Commission made a dramatic journey across the battlefield in northern France to try and secure terms as the basis for peace.

Late that evening French authorities ferried the delegation by train to a railway siding at Rethondes, deep within the forest of Compiègne. Here, early in the morning of 8 November, the Germans were transferred to a nearby waiting train, the mobile headquarters of Marshal Foch, Head of the Allied Commission. Foch, with a deliberate sense of drama, had located the crucial meeting within the dense forest - away from public scrutiny and safe from enemy aircraft. His fully equipped train included a former restaurant saloon-car converted into an office; this railway carriage formed the scene for the historic gathering. Discussions began at 9am – the first in a series of uncomfortable meetings that would lead eventually to the signing of the instrument of armistice at just after 5am on 11 November 1918, when it was agreed that hostilities would formally cease six hours later.

At 11am on a dull and cold Monday, 11 November (the 1,568th day of the war), the guns at last fell silent. In the strangest of coincidences the end of the war found units of the British Army fighting close to the same ground as they had actively begun operations in August 1914, the familiar drab mining and industrial district around the Belgian town of Mons.