

Sir Douglas Haig's 3rd Despatch (German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line), 31 May 1917

It summarises details of the Allied advance of Spring 1917 and the German Army's consequent retreat to the formidable Hindenburg Line, which eventually fell only in the final, successful Allied offensive of Summer 1918.

*General Headquarters,
British Armies in France,
31st May, 1917*

My Lord;

I have the honour to submit the following Report on the operations of the British Armies in France from the 18th November, 1916, to the commencement of our present offensive.

Nature of Operations

1. My plans for the winter, already decided on at the opening of the period under review, were based on several considerations:-

The enemy's strength had been considerably reduced by the severe and protracted struggle on the Somme battlefields, and so far as circumstances and the weather would permit it was most desirable to allow him no respite during the winter.

With this object, although possibilities were limited by the state of the ground under winter conditions, I considered it feasible to turn to good account the very favourable situation then existing in the region of the River Ancre as a result of the Somme battle.

Our operations prior to the 18th November, 1916, had forced the enemy into a very pronounced salient in the area between the Ancre and the Scarpe Valleys, and had obtained for us greatly improved opportunities for observation over this salient.

A comparatively short further advance would give us complete possession of the few points south of the Ancre to which the enemy still clung, and would enable us to gain entire command of the spur above Beaumont Hamel.

Thereafter, the configuration of the ground in the neighbourhood of the Ancre Valley was such that every fresh advance would enfilade the enemy's positions and automatically open up to the observation of our troops some new part of his defences.

Arrangements could therefore be made for systematic and deliberate attacks to be delivered on selected positions, to gain further observation for ourselves and deprive the enemy of that advantage. By these means the enemy's defences would be continually outflanked, and we should be enabled to direct our massed artillery fire with such accuracy against his trenches and communications as to make his positions in the Ancre Valley exceedingly costly to maintain.

With the same object in view a number of minor enterprises and raids were planned to be carried out along the whole front of the British Armies.

In addition to the operations outlined above, preparations for the resumption of a general offensive in the spring had to be proceeded with in due course. In this connection, steps had to be taken to overcome the difficulties which a temporary lack of railway facilities would place in the way of completing our task within the allotted time.

Provision had also to be made to cope with the effect of winter conditions upon work and roads, a factor to which the prolonged frost at the commencement of the present year subsequently gave especial prominence.

Another very important consideration was the training of the forces under my command. It was highly desirable that during the winter the troops engaged in the recent prolonged fighting should be given an adequate period out of the line for training, rest and refitting.

Certain modifications of my programme in this respect eventually became necessary. To meet the wishes of our Allies in connection with the plan of operations for the spring of 1917, a gradual extension of the British front southwards as far as a point opposite the town of Roye was decided on in January, and was completed without incident of importance by the 26th February, 1917.

This alteration entailed the maintenance by British forces of an exceptionally active front of 110 miles, including the whole of the Somme battle front, and, combined with the continued activity maintained throughout the winter, interfered to no small extent with my arrangements for reliefs.

The training of the troops had consequently to be restricted to such limited opportunities as circumstances from time to time permitted.

The operations on the Ancre, however, as well as the minor enterprises and raids to which reference has been made, were carried out as intended. Besides gaining valuable positions and observation by local attacks in the neighbourhood of Bouchavesnes, Sailly-Saillisel and Grandcourt, these raids and minor enterprises were the means of inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, and contributed very appreciably to the total of 5,284 prisoners taken from him in the period under review.

Operations on the Ancre

The Enemy's Position

2. At the conclusion of the operations of the 13th November and following days the enemy still held the whole of the Ancre Valley from Le Transloy to Grandcourt, and his first line of defence lay along the lower northern slopes of the Thiepval Ridge.

North of the Ancre, he still held the greater part of the spur above Beaumont Hamel. Beyond that point the original German front line, in which the enemy had established himself two years previously, ran past Serre, Gommecourt and -Monchy-au-Bois to the northern slopes of the main watershed, and then north-east down to the valley of the River Scarpe east of Arras.

Besides the positions held by him on our immediate front, and in addition to the fortified villages of the Ancre Valley with their connecting trenches, the enemy had prepared along the forward crest of the ridge north of the Ancre Valley a strong second system of defence.

This consisted of a double line of trenches, heavily wired, and ran north-west from Saillisel past Le Transloy to the Albert-Bapaume Road, where it turned west past Grevillers and Loupart Wood and then north-west again past Achiet-le-Petit to Bucquoy.

This system, which was known as the Le Transloy-Loupart line, both by reason of its situation and as a result of the skill and industry expended on its preparation, constituted an exceedingly, strong natural defensive position; second only to that from which the enemy had recently been driven on the Morval-Thiepval Ridge.

Parallel to this line, but on the far side of the crest, he had constructed towards the close of the past year a third defensive system on the line Rocquigny, Bapaume, Ablainzevelle.

Operations Commenced

3. The first object of our operations in the Ancre Valley was to advance our trenches to within assaulting distance of the Le Transloy-Loupart line.

Accordingly, on the 18th November, 1916, before the rapidly deteriorating condition of the ground had yet made an undertaking on so considerable a scale impossible, an attack was delivered against the next German line of defence, overlooking the villages of Pys and Grandcourt.

Valuable positions were gained on a front of about 5,000 yards, while a simultaneous attack north of the Ancre considerably improved the situation of our troops in the Beaucourt Valley.

By this time winter conditions had set in, and along a great part of our new front movement across the open had become practically impossible. During the remainder of the month, therefore, and throughout December, our energies were principally directed to the improvement of our own trenches and of roads and communications behind them.

At the same time the necessary rearrangement of our artillery was completed, so as to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by our new positions for concentration of fire.

The Beaumont Hamel Spur

4. As soon as active operations again became possible, proceedings were commenced to drive the enemy from the remainder of the Beaumont Hamel Spur. In January a number of small operations were carried out with this object by the 3rd, 7th and 11th Divisions (Major-Generals C. I. Deverell, H. E. Watts and A. B. Ritchie), resulting in a progressive improvement of our position.

Before the end of the month the whole of the high ground north and east of Beaumont Hamel was in our possession, we had pushed across the Beaucourt Valley 1,000 yards north of Beaucourt Village, and had gained a footing on the southern slopes of the spur to the east.

The most important of these attacks was undertaken at dawn on the morning of the 11th January by the 7th Division, against a system of hostile trenches extending for some 1,500 yards along the crest of the spur east and north-east of Beaumont Hamel.

By 8.30 a.m. all our objectives had been captured, together with over 200 prisoners. That afternoon an enemy counter-attack was broken up by our artillery.

Throughout the whole of the month's fighting in this area, in which over 500 German prisoners were taken by us, our casualties were exceedingly light. This satisfactory circumstance can be attributed mainly to the close and skilful co-operation between our infantry and artillery, and to the excellence of our artillery preparation and barrages.

These in turn were made possible by the opportunities for accurate observation afforded by the high ground north of Thiepval, and by the fine work done by our aircraft.

Grandcourt

5. Possession of the Beaumont Hamel Spur opened up anew and extensive field of action for our artillery. The whole of the Beaucourt Valley and the western slopes of the spur beyond from opposite Grandcourt to Serre now lay exposed to our fire.

Operations were, therefore, at once commenced under the cover of our guns to clear the remainder of the valley south of the Serre Hill, and to push our line forward to the crest of the spur.

On the night of the 3rd/4th February an important German line of defence on the southern slopes of this spur, forming part of the enemy's original second line system north of the Ancre, was captured by our troops (63rd Division, Major-General C. D. Shute) on a front of about three-quarters of a mile.

The enemy's resistance was stubborn, and hard fighting took place, which lasted throughout the whole of the following day and night. During this period a number of determined counter-attacks were beaten off by our infantry or dispersed by our artillery, and by the 5th February we had gained the whole of our objectives

In this operation, in which the excellence of our artillery co-operation was very marked, we took 176 prisoners and four machine guns. This success brought our front forward north of the Ancre to a point level with the centre of Grandcourt, and made the enemy's hold on his position in that village and in his more western defences south of the river very precarious.

It was not unexpected, therefore, when on the morning of the 6th February our patrols reported that the last remaining portion of the old German second line system south of the river, lying between Grandcourt and Stuff Redoubt, had been evacuated.

The abandoned trenches were occupied by our troops the same morning. Constant reconnaissance's were sent out by us to keep touch with the enemy and to ascertain his movements and intentions.

Grandcourt itself was next found to be clear of the enemy, and by 10 a.m. on the morning of the 7th February was also in our possession (63rd Division). That night we carried Baillescourt Farm, about half-way between Beaucourt and Miraumont, capturing 87 prisoners.

The Advance against Serre

6. The task of driving the enemy from his position in the Beaucourt Valley was resumed on the night of the 10th/11th February.

Our principal attack was directed against some 1,500 yards of a strong line of trenches, the western end of which was already in our possession, lying at the southern foot of the Serre Hill. Our infantry (32nd Division, Major-General R. W. R. Barnes) were formed up after dark, and at 8.30 p.m. advanced under our covering artillery barrage.

After considerable fighting in the centre and towards the left of our attack, the whole of the trench line which formed our objective was gained, with the exception of two strong points which held out for a few days longer. At 5 a.m. a determined counterattack from the direction of Puisieux-au-Mont was beaten off by our artillery and

machine gun fire. Two other counter-attacks on the 11th February and a third on the 12th February were equally unsuccessful.

The Advance towards Miraumont

7. The village of Serre now formed the point of a very pronounced salient which our further progress along the Ancre Valley would render increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for the enemy to hold.

Accordingly, an operation on a somewhat larger scale than anything hitherto attempted since the new year, was now undertaken. Its object was to carry our line forward along the spur which runs northwards from the main Morval-Thiepval Ridge about Courcellette, and so gain possession of the high ground at its northern extremity.

The possession of this high ground, besides commanding the approaches to Pys and Miraumont from the south, would give observation over the upper valley of the Ancre, in which many hostile batteries were situated in positions enabling their fire to be directed for the defence of the Serre sector.

At the same time arrangements were made for a smaller attack on the opposite bank of the river, designed to seize a portion of the sunken road lying along the eastern crest of the second spur north of the Ancre and so obtain control of the approaches to Miraumont from the west.

Our assault was delivered simultaneously on both banks of the Ancre at 5.45 a.m. on the 17th February by the 2nd, 18th and 63rd Divisions (Major-Generals C. E. Pereira and R. P. Lee commanding respectively the 2nd and 18th Divisions).

The night was particularly dark, and thick mist and heavy conditions of ground, produced by the thaw that had just set in, added to the difficulties with which our troops had to contend. The enemy was, moreover, on the alert, and commenced a heavy barrage some time before the hour of our assault, while our attacking battalions were still forming up.

None the less, our troops advanced to the assault with great gallantry. On the left of our attack (south of the river) our artillery preparation had been assisted by observation from the positions already won on the right bank of the Ancre. In consequence, our infantry were able to make a very considerable advance, and established themselves within a few hundred yards of Petit Miraumont.

The right of our attack encountered more serious resistance, but here also valuable progress was made. North of the Ancre our troops met with complete success. The whole of the position attacked, on a front of about half a mile, was secured without great difficulty, and an enemy counter-attack during the morning was easily driven off.

Next day, at 11.30 a.m., the enemy delivered a second counterattack from the north with considerable forces, estimated at two battalions, upon our new positions north of the river. His advancing waves came under the concentrated fire of our artillery and machine guns while still some distance in front of our lines, and were driven back in disorder with exceedingly heavy losses.

Eleven officers and 588 other ranks were taken prisoners by us in these operations.

Miraumont and Serre Evacuated

8. The ground gained by these two attacks, and by minor operations carried out during the succeeding days, gave us the observation we desired, as well as complete command over the German artillery positions in the upper Ancre Valley and over his defences in and around Pys and Miraumont.

The constant bombardment by our artillery, combined with the threat of an attack in which his troops would have been at great disadvantage, accordingly decided the enemy to abandon both villages. Our possession of Miraumont, however, gravely endangered the enemy's positions at Serre by opening up for us possibilities of a further advance northwards, while the loss of Serre would speedily render Puisieux-au-Mont and Gommecourt equally difficult of defence.

There was, therefore, good ground to expect that the evacuation of Pys and Miraumont would shortly be followed by a withdrawal on a more considerable scale. This in fact occurred. On the 24th February the enemy's positions before Pys, Miraumont and Serre were found by our patrols to have been evacuated, and were occupied by our troops.

Our patrols were then at once pushed forward, supported by strong infantry detachments, and by the evening of the 25th February the enemy's first system of defence from north of Gueudecourt to west of Serre, and including Luisenhof Farm, Warlencourt-Eaucourt, Pys, Miraumont, Beauregard Dovecot and Serre, had fallen into our hands.

The enemy offered some opposition with machine guns at selected strong points in his line, and his I artillery actively shelled the areas from which he had withdrawn; but the measures taken to deal with such tactics proved adequate,

and the casualties inflicted on our troops were light.

The enemy's retirement at this juncture was greatly favoured by the weather. The prolonged period of exceptional frost, following on a wet autumn, had frozen the ground to a great depth.

When the thaw commenced in the third week of February the roads, disintegrated by the frost, broke up, the sides of trenches fell in, and the area across which our troops had fought their way forward returned to a condition of slough and quagmire even worse than that of the previous autumn.

On the other hand, the condition of the roads and the surface of the ground behind the enemy steadily improved the further he withdrew from the scene of the fighting. He was also materially assisted by a succession of misty days, which greatly interfered with the work of our aeroplanes.

Over such ground and in such conditions rapid pursuit was impossible. It is greatly to the credit of all ranks concerned that, in spite of all difficulties, constant touch was maintained with the enemy and that timely information was obtained of his movements.

Le Barque and Gommecourt

9. Resistance of a more serious character was encountered in a strong secondary line of defence which, from a point in the Le Transloy-Loupart line due west of the village of Beaulencourt, crossed in front of Ligny-Thillois and Le Barque to the southern defences of Loupart Wood.

Between the 25th February and the 2nd March a series of attacks were carried out by the 1st Anzac Corps (Lieut. - General Sir W. R. Birdwood) against this line, and the enemy was gradually driven out of his positions. By the evening of the latter day the whole line of trenches and the villages of Le Barque, Ligny-Thillois and Thillois had in turn been captured.

One hundred and twenty-eight prisoners and a number of trench mortars and machine guns were taken in this fighting, in the course of which the enemy made several vigorous but unsuccessful counter-attacks.

Meanwhile rapid progress had been made on the remainder of the front of our advance. On the 27th February the enemy's rearguards in Puisieux-au-Mont were driven to their last positions of defence in the neighbourhood of the church, and to the north-west of the village our front was extended to within a few hundred yards of Gommecourt.

That evening our patrols entered Gommecourt Village and Park, following closely upon the retreating enemy, and by 10.0 p.m. Gommecourt and its defences had been occupied. Next morning the capture of Puisieux-au-Mont was completed.

Irlles

10. The enemy had, therefore, been driven back to the Le Transloy-Loupart line, except that he still held the village of Irlles, which formed a salient to his position, and was linked up to it at Loupart Wood and Achiet-le-Petit by well-constructed and well-wired trenches.

Accordingly, our next step was to take Irlles, as a preliminary to a larger undertaking against the Le Transloy-Loupart line itself; but before either operation could be attempted exceedingly heavy work had to be done in the improvement of roads and communications, and in bringing forward guns and ammunition.

The following week was devoted to these very necessary tasks. Meanwhile, operations were limited to small enterprises, designed to keep in touch with the enemy and to establish forward posts which might assist in the forthcoming attack.

The assault on Irlles and its defences was delivered at 5.25 a.m. on the morning of the 10th March by the 2nd and 18th Divisions, and was completely successful. The whole of our objectives were captured, and in the village and the surrounding works 289 prisoners were taken, together with sixteen machine guns and four trench mortars.

Our casualties were very light, being considerably less than the number of our prisoners.

The Loupart Line

11. The way was now open for the main operation against the centre of the Le Transloy-Loupart line, which throughout the 11th March was heavily shelled by all natures of our artillery.

So effective was this bombardment that during the night of the 12th/13th March the enemy once more abandoned his positions, and fell back on the parallel system of defences already referred to on the reverse side of the ridge.

Grevillers and Loupart Wood were thereupon occupied by our troops, and methodical preparations were at once begun for an attack on the enemy's next line of defence.

The Enemy's Retreat

The General Withdrawal

12. For some time prior to this date a number of indications had been observed which made it probable that the area of the German withdrawal would be yet further extended.

It had been ascertained that the enemy was preparing a new defensive system, known as the Hindenburg Line, which, branching off from his original defences near Arras, ran south-eastwards for twelve miles to Queant, and thence passed west of Cambrai towards St. Quentin. Various "switches", branching off from this line were also under construction.

The enemy's immediate concern appeared to be to escape from the salient between Arras and Le Transloy, which would become increasingly difficult and dangerous to hold as our advance on the Ancre drove ever more deeply into his defences.

It was also evident, however, from the preparations he was making that he contemplated an eventual evacuation of the greater salient between Arras and the Aisne Valley, north-west of Reims.

Constant watch had accordingly been kept along the whole front south of Arras, in order that instant information might be obtained of any such development. On the 14th March patrols found portions of the German front line empty in the neighbourhood of St. Pierre Vaast Wood.

Acting on the reports of these patrols, during that night and the following day our troops occupied the whole of the enemy's trenches on the western edge of the wood. Little opposition was met, and by the 16th March we held the western half of Moislains Wood, the whole of St. Pierre Vaast Wood with the exception of its north-eastern corner, and the enemy's front trenches as far as the northern outskirts of Saily-Saillisel.

Meanwhile, on the evening of the 15th March, further information had been obtained which led me to believe that the enemy's forces on our front south of the Somme had been reduced, and that his line was being held by rearguard detachments supported by machine guns, whose withdrawal might also be expected at any moment.

The Corps Commanders concerned were immediately directed to confirm the situation by patrols. Orders were thereafter given for a general advance, to be commenced on the morning of the 17th March along our whole front from the Roye Road to south of Arras.

Bapaume and Peronne

13. Except at certain selected localities, where he had left detachments of infantry and machine guns to cover his retreat, such as Chaulnes, Vaux Wood, Bapaume and Achiet-le-Grand, the enemy offered little serious opposition to our advance on this front, and where he did so his resistance was rapidly overcome.

Before nightfall on the 17th March Chaulnes and Bapaume had been captured (61st Division and 2nd Australian Division, Major-Generals C. J. Mackenzie and N. M. Smyth), and advanced bodies of our troops had pushed deeply into the enemy's positions at all points from Damery to Monchy-au-Bois.

On our right our Allies made rapid progress also, and entered Roye. On the 18th March and subsequent days our advance continued, in co-operation with the French. In the course of this advance the whole intricate system of German defences in this area, consisting of many miles of powerful, well-wired trenches which had been constructed with immense labour and worked on till the last moment, were abandoned by the enemy and passed into the possession of our troops.

At 7.00 a.m. on the 18th March our troops (48th Division, Major-General R. Fanshawe) entered Peronne and occupied Mont St. Quentin, north of the town. To the south our advanced troops established themselves during the day along the western bank of the Somme from Peronne to just north of Epenancourt.

By 10.0 p.m. on the same day Brie Bridge had been repaired by our engineers sufficiently for the passage of infantry in single file, and our troops crossed to the east bank of the river, in spite of some opposition.

Further south French and British cavalry entered Nesle. North of Peronne equal progress was made, and by the evening of the 18th March our troops had entered the German trench system known as the Beugny-Ytres Line, beyond which lay open country as far as the Hindenburg Line.

On the same day the left of our advance was extended to Beaurains, which was captured after slight hostile resistance. By the evening of the 19th March our infantry held the line of the Somme from Canizy to Peronne, and infantry outposts and cavalry patrols had crossed the river at a number of points.

North of Peronne our infantry had reached the line Bussu, Barastre, velu, St. Leger, Beaurains, with cavalry in touch with the enemy at Nurlu, Bertincourt, Noreuil, and Henin-sur-Cojeul. Next day considerable bodies of infantry and cavalry crossed to the east of the Somme, and a line of cavalry outposts with infantry in support was established from south of Germaine, where we were in touch with the French, through Hancourt and Nurlu to Bus. Further north we occupied Morchies.

Difficulty of Communications

14. By this time our advance had reached a stage at which the increasing difficulty of maintaining our communications made it imperative to slacken the pace of our pursuit.

South of Peronne, the River Somme, the bridges over which had been destroyed by the retreating enemy, presented a formidable obstacle. North of Peronne, the wide belt of devastated ground over which the Somme Battle had been fought offered even greater difficulties to the passage of guns and transport.

We were advancing, therefore, over country in which all means of communication had been destroyed, against an enemy whose armies were still intact and capable of launching a vigorous offensive should a favourable opening present itself. Strong detachments of his infantry and cavalry occupied points of advantage along our line of advance, serving to keep the enemy informed of our progress and to screen his own movements.

His guns, which had already been withdrawn to previously prepared positions, were available at any moment to cover and support a sudden counter-stroke, while the conditions of the country across which we were moving made the progress of our own artillery unavoidably slow. The bulk of the enemy's forces were known to be holding a very formidable defensive system, upon which he could fall back should his counter-stroke miss its aim.

On the other hand, our troops as they moved forward left all prepared defences further and further behind them. In such circumstances the necessity for caution was obvious. At different stages of the advance successive lines of resistance were selected and put in a state of defence by the main bodies of our infantry, while cavalry and infantry outposts maintained touch with the enemy and covered the work of consolidation.

Meanwhile, in spite of the enormous difficulties which the condition of ground and the ingenuity of the enemy had placed in our way, the work of repairing and constructing bridges, roads and railways was carried forward with most commendable rapidity.

Enemy Resistance Increasing

15. North of the Bapaume-Cambrai Road between Noreuil and Neuville-Vitasse our advance had already brought us to within two or three miles of the Hindenburg Line, which entered the old German front line system at Tilloy-lez-Moffiaines.

The enemy's resistance now began to increase along our whole front, extending gradually southwards from the left flank of our advance, where our troops had approached most nearly to his new main defensive position.

A number of local counter-attacks were delivered by the enemy at different points along our line. In particular five separate attempts were made to recover Beaumetz-lez-Cambrai, which we had captured on the 21st March, and the farm to the north of the village. All failed with considerable loss to the enemy.

Meanwhile our progress continued steadily, and minor engagements multiplied from day to day all along our front. In these we were constantly successful, and at small cost to ourselves took many prisoners and numerous machine guns and trench mortars.

In every fresh position captured large numbers of German dead testified to the obstinacy of the enemy's defence and the severity of his losses. Our cavalry took an active part in this fighting, and on the 27th March in particular carried out an exceedingly successful operation, in the course of which a squadron of the 5th Cavalry Division (Major-General H. J. M. Macandrew) drove the enemy from Villers Faucon and a group of neighbouring villages, capturing 23 prisoners and four machine guns.

In another series of engagements on the 1st and 2nd April, in which Savy and Selency were taken by the 32nd Division (Major-General C. D. Shute) and our line advanced to within two miles of St. Quentin, we captured 91 prisoners and six German field guns.

The enemy's casualties were particularly heavy. On the 2nd April, also, an operation on a more important scale was undertaken against the enemy's positions north of the Bapaume-Cambrai Road.

The enemy here occupied in considerable strength a series of villages and well-wired trenches, forming an advanced line of resistance to the Hindenburg Line. A general attack on these positions was launched by the 4th Australian Division and the 7th Division (Major-Generals W. Holmes and T. H. Shoubridge) in the early morning of the 2nd April on a front of over ten miles, from Doignies to Henin-sur-Cojeul, both inclusive.

After fighting which lasted throughout the day the entire series of villages was captured by us, with 270 prisoners, four trench mortars and 25 machine guns.

The Hindenburg Line

16. By this date our troops were established on the general line Selency, Jeancourt, Epehy, Ruyaulcourt, Doignies, Mercatel, Beaurains, East of Selency, and between Doignies and our old front line east of Arras, our troops were already close up to the main Hindenburg defences.

Between Selency and Doignies the enemy still held positions some distance in advance of his new system. During the succeeding days our efforts were directed to driving him from these advanced positions, and to pushing our posts forward until contact had been established all along our front south of Arras with the main defences of the Hindenburg Line.

Fighting of some importance again took place on the 4th and 5th April in the neighbourhood of Epehy and Havrincourt Wood, in which Ronsoy, Lempire and Metz-en-Couture were captured by us, together with 100 prisoners, two trench mortars and eleven machine guns (48th, 8th and 20th Divisions, Major-Generals W. C. G. Heneker and T. G. Matheson commanding the two latter divisions).

General Review

17. Certain outstanding features of the past five months' fighting call for brief comment before I close this Report. In spite of a season of unusual severity, a winter campaign has been conducted to a successful issue under most trying and arduous conditions. Activity on our battle-front has been maintained almost without a break from the conclusion of last year's offensive to the commencement of the present operations.

The successful accomplishment of this part of our general plan has already enabled us to realise no inconsiderable instalment of the fruits of the Somme Battle, and has gone far to open the road to their full achievement.

The courage and endurance of our troops have carried them triumphantly through a period of fighting of a particularly trying nature, in which they have been subjected to the maximum of personal hardship and physical strain. I cannot speak too highly of the qualities displayed by all ranks of the Army.

I desire also to place on record here my appreciation of the great skill and energy displayed by the Army Commanders under whose immediate orders the operations described above were carried out.

The ability with which the troops in the Ancre area were handled by General Sir Hubert Gough. and those further south on our front from Le Transloy to Roye by General Sir Henry Rawlinson, was in all respects admirable.

The retreat to which the enemy was driven by our continued success reintroduced on the Western front conditions of warfare which had been absent from that theatre since the opening months of the war. After more than two years of trench warfare considerable bodies of our troops have been engaged under conditions approximating to open fighting, and cavalry has been given an opportunity to perform its special duties.

Our operations south of Arras during the latter half of March are, therefore, of peculiar interest, and the results achieved by all arms have been most satisfactory. Although

the deliberate nature of the enemy's withdrawal enabled him to choose his own ground for resistance, and to employ every device to inflict losses on our troops, our casualties, which had been exceedingly moderate throughout the operations on the Ancre, during the period of the retreat became exceptionally light.

The prospect of a more general resumption of open fighting can be regarded with great confidence. The systematic destruction of roads, railways and bridges in the evacuated area made unprecedented demands upon the Royal Engineers, already heavily burdened by the work entailed by the preparations for our spring offensive.

Our steady progress, in the face of the great difficulties confronting us, is the best testimony to the energy and thoroughness with which those demands were met.

The bridging of the Somme at Brie, to which reference has already been made, is an example of the nature of the obstacles with which our troops were met and of the rapidity with which those obstacles were overcome. In this instance six gaps had to be bridged across the canal and river, some of them of considerable width and over a swift-flowing stream.

The work was commenced on the morning of the 18th March, and was carried out night and day in three stages. By 10.00 p.m. on the same day foot-bridges for infantry had been completed, as already stated. Medium type bridges for horse transport and cavalry were completed by 5.00 a.m. on the 20th March, and by 2.00 p.m. on the 28th March, or four and a half days after they had been begun, heavy bridges capable of taking all forms of traffic had taken the place of the lighter type.

Medium type deviation bridges were constructed as the heavy bridges were begun, so that from the time the first bridges were thrown across the river traffic was practically continuous.

Throughout the past winter the question of transport, in all its forms, has presented problems of a most serious nature, both in the battle area and behind the lines. On the rapid solution of these problems the success or failure of our operations necessarily largely depended.

At the close of the campaign of 1916 the steady growth of our Armies and the rapid expansion of our material resources had already taxed to the utmost the capacity of the roads and railways then at our disposal existing broad and narrow gauge railways were insufficient to deal with the increasing volume of traffic, an undue proportion of which was thrown upon the roads.

As winter conditions set in, these rapidly deteriorated, and the difficulties of maintenance and repair became almost overwhelming. An increase of railway facilities of every type and on a large scale was therefore imperatively and urgently necessary to relieve the roads.

For this purpose rails, material and rolling stock were required immediately in great quantities, while at a later date our wants in these respects were considerably augmented by a large programme of new construction in the area of the enemy's withdrawal.

The task of obtaining the amount of railway material required to meet the demands of our Armies, and of carrying out the work of construction at the rate rendered necessary by our plans, in addition to providing labour and material for the necessary repair of roads, was one of the very greatest difficulty. Its successful accomplishment reflects the highest credit on the Transportation Service, of whose efficiency and energy I cannot speak too highly.

I desire to acknowledge in the fullest manner the debt that is owed to all who assisted in meeting a most difficult situation, and especially to Major-General Sir Eric Geddes, Director-General of Transportation, to whose great ability, organising power and energy the results achieved are primarily due.

I am glad to take this opportunity also to acknowledge the valuable assistance given to us by the Chemin de Fer du Nord, by which the work of the Transportation Service was greatly facilitated.

I wish also to place on record here the fact that the successful solution of the problem of railway transport would have been impossible had it not been for the patriotism of the railway companies at home and in Canada.

They did not hesitate to give up the locomotives and rolling stock required to meet our needs, and even to tear up track in order to provide us with the necessary rails. The thanks of the Army are due also to those who have accepted so cheerfully the inconvenience caused by the consequent diminution of the railway facilities available for civil traffic.

The various other special services, to the excellence of whose work I was glad to call attention in my last Despatch, have continued to discharge their duties with the same energy and efficiency displayed by them during the Somme Battle, and have rendered most valuable assistance to our artillery and infantry.

I desire also to repeat the well-merited tribute paid in my last Despatch to the different Administrative Services and Departments. The work entailed by the double task of meeting the requirements of our winter operations and preparing for our next offensive was very heavy, demanding unremitting labour and the closest attention to detail. The fighting on the Ancre and subsequent advance made large demands upon the devotion of our Medical Services. The health of the troops during the period covered by this Despatch has been satisfactory, notwithstanding the discomfort and exposure to which they were subjected during the extreme cold of the winter, especially in the areas taken over from the enemy.

The loyal co-operation and complete mutual understanding that prevailed between our Allies and ourselves throughout the Somme Battle have been continued and strengthened by the events of the past winter, and in particular by the circumstances attending the enemy's Withdrawal.

During the latter part of the period under review, a very considerable tract of country has been won back to France by the combined efforts of the Allied troops. This result is regarded with lively satisfaction by all ranks of the British Armies in France.

At the same time I wish to give expression to the feelings of deep sympathy and profound regret provoked among us by the sight of the destruction that war has wrought in a once fair and prosperous countryside.

I have the honour to be,

My Lord,

Your Lordship's obedient Servant,

D. HAIG, Field-Marshal,

Commanding-in-Chief, British Armies in France