

***Sir Douglas Haig's fifth despatch as British Army Commander-in-Chief, dated 20 February 1918. It summarises details of operations at Cambrai during November and December 1917***

*General Headquarters,  
British Armies in the Field,  
20th February, 1918*

*My Lord;*

*I have the honour to submit the following Report on the operations on the Cambrai front during November and December, 1917.*

*General Plan*

*1. As pointed out in my last Despatch, the object of these operations was to gain a local success by a sudden attack at a point where the enemy did not expect it.*

*Our repeated attacks in Flanders and those of our Allies elsewhere had brought about large concentrations of the enemy's forces on the threatened fronts, with a consequent reduction in the garrisons of certain other sectors of his line.*

*Of these weakened sectors the Cambrai front had been selected as the most suitable for the surprise operation in contemplation. The ground there was, on the whole, favourable for the employment of tanks which were to play an important part in the enterprise, and facilities existed for the concealment of the necessary preparations for the attack.*

*If, after breaking through the German defence systems on this front, we could secure Bourlon to the north and establish a good flank position to the east, in the direction of Cambrai, we should be well placed to exploit the situation locally between Bourlon and the Sensee River and to the north-west.*

*The capture of Cambrai itself was subsidiary to this operation, the object of our advance towards that town being primarily to cover our flank and puzzle the enemy regarding our intentions.*

*The enemy was laying out fresh lines of defence behind those which he had already completed on the Cambrai front; and it was to be expected that his troops would be redistributed as soon as our pressure in Flanders was relaxed.*

*He had already brought large forces from Russia in exchange for divisions exhausted in the struggle in the Western theatre, and it was practically certain that heavy reinforcements would be brought from East to West during the winter. Moreover his tired divisions, after a winter's rest, would recover their efficiency.*

*For all these reasons, if the existing opportunity for a surprise attack were allowed to lapse, it would probably be many months before an equally favourable one would again offer itself. Furthermore, having regard to the future, it was desirable to show the enemy that he could not with impunity reduce his garrisons beyond a certain point without incurring grave risks.*

*Against these arguments in favour of immediate action I had to weigh the fact that my own troops had been engaged for many months in heavy fighting, and that, though their efforts had been uniformly successful, the conditions of the struggle had greatly taxed their strength.*

*Only part of the losses in my divisions had been replaced, and many recently arrived drafts, still far from being fully trained, were included in the ranks of the Armies. Under these conditions it was a serious matter to make a further heavy call on my troops at the end of such a strenuous year.*

*On the other hand, from the nature of the operation, the size of the force which could be employed was bound, in any case, to be comparatively small, since success depended so much on secrecy, and it is impossible to keep secret the concentration of very large forces. The demand made upon my resources, therefore, should not be a great one.*

*While considering these different factors, preparations were quietly carried on, so that all might be ready for the attack if I found it possible to carry it out. The success of the enemy's offensive in Italy subsequently added great force to the arguments in favour of undertaking the operation, although the means at my disposal for the purpose were further reduced as a consequence of the Italian situation.*

*Eventually I decided that, despite the various limiting factors, I could muster enough force to make a first success sufficiently sure to justify undertaking the attack, but that the degree to which this success could be followed up must depend on circumstances.*

*It was calculated that, provided secrecy could be maintained to the last moment, no large hostile reinforcements were likely to reach the scene of action for forty-eight hours after the commencement of the attack. I informed*

*General Sir Julian Byng, to whom the execution of the plans in connection with the Cambrai operations was entrusted, that the advance would be stopped by me after that time, or sooner if necessary, unless the results then gained and the general situation justified its continuance.*

*The general plan of attack was to dispense with previous artillery preparation, and to depend instead on tanks to smash through the enemy's wire, of which there was a great quantity protecting his trenches.*

*As soon as the advance of the tanks and infantry, working in close co-operation, began, the artillery was to assist with counter-battery and barrage work; but no previous registration of guns for this purpose could be permitted, as it would rouse the enemy's suspicions. The artillery of our new Armies was therefore necessarily subjected to a severe test in this operation, and proved itself entirely worthy of the confidence placed in it.*

*The infantry, tanks and artillery thus working in combination*

*were to endeavour to break through all the enemy's lines of defence on the first day. If this were successfully accomplished and the situation developed favourably, cavalry were then to be passed through to raid the enemy's communications, disorganise his system of command, damage his railways and interfere as much as possible with the arrival of his reinforcements.*

*It was explained to all Commanders that everything depended on secrecy up to the moment of starting, and after that on bold, determined and rapid action. Unless opposition could be beaten down quickly, no great results could be looked for.*

*The Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies, to whom I secretly communicated my plans, most readily agreed to afford me every assistance. In addition to the steps taken by him to engage the enemy's attention elsewhere, he arranged for a strong force of French infantry and cavalry to be in a position whence they could be moved forward rapidly to take part in the exploitation of our success, if the situation should render it possible to bring them into action.*

*On the 20th November certain of these French units were actually put in motion. The course of events, however, did not open out the required opportunity for their employment, but the French forces were held in readiness and within easy reach so long as there appeared to be any hope of it.*

*Had the situation on the 20th November developed somewhat more favourably in certain directions, the nature of which will become apparent in the course of this report, the presence and co-operation of these French troops would have been of the greatest value.*

*The Enemy's Defences*

*2. The German defences on this front had been greatly improved and extended since the opening of our offensive in April, and comprised three main systems of resistance.*

*The first of these three trench systems, constituting part of the Hindenburg Line proper, ran in a general north-westerly direction for a distance of six miles from the Canal de l'Escaut at Banteux to Havrincourt. There it turned abruptly north along the line of the Canal du Nord for a distance of four miles to Moeuvres, thus forming a pronounced salient in the German front.*

*In advance of the Hindenburg Line the enemy had constructed a series of strong forward positions, including La Vacquerie and the north-eastern corner of Havrincourt Wood. Behind it, and at distances respectively varying from a little less to rather more than a mile, and from three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half miles, lay the second and third main German systems, known as the Hindenburg Reserve Line, and the Beaurevoir, Masnieres, Marquion Lines.*

*The Attack*

*3. All necessary preparations were completed in time, and with a secrecy reflecting the greatest credit on all concerned. At 6.20 a.m. on the 20th November, without any previous artillery bombardment, tanks and infantry attacked on a front of about six miles from east of Gonnellieu to the Canal du Nord opposite Hermies.*

*At the same hour, demonstrations with gas, smoke and artillery took place on practically the whole of the British front south of the Scarpe, and subsidiary attacks were launched east of Epehy and between Bullecourt and Fontaine-lez-Croisilles.*

*On the principal front of attack, the tanks moved forward in advance of the infantry, crushing down the enemy's wire and forming great lanes through which our infantry could pass. Protected by smoke barrages from the view of the enemy's artillery, they rolled on across the German trenches, smashing up the enemy's machine guns and driving his infantry to ground.*

*Close behind our tanks our own infantry followed and, while the tanks patrolled the line of hostile trenches, cleared the German infantry from their dug-outs and shelters.*

*In this way, both the main system of the Hindenburg Line and its outer defences were rapidly over-run, and tanks and infantry proceeded in accordance with programme to the attack upon the Hindenburg Reserve Line.*

*In this advance, the 12th (Eastern) Divisions (Major-General A. B. Scott), moving along the Bonavis Ridge on the right of our attack, encountered obstinate resistance at Lateau Wood, which sheltered a number of German batteries. Fierce fighting, in which infantry and tank crews displayed the greatest gallantry, continued throughout the morning at this point, and ended in the capture of the position, together with the enemy's guns.*

*Meanwhile, the 20th (Light) Division (Major-General W. D. Smith), which had captured La Vacquerie at the opening of its attack, stormed the powerful defences of Welsh Ridge. The 6th Division (Major-General T. O. Marden) carried the village of Ribetourt, after sharp fighting among the streets and houses, while the 62nd (West Riding) Division (T.) (Major-General W. P. Braithwaite) stormed Havrincourt, where also parties of the enemy held out for a time.*

*The capture of these two villages secured the flanks of the 51st (Highland) Division (T.) (Major-General G. M. Harper), advancing on the left centre of our attack up the slopes of Flesquieres Hill against the German trench lines on the southern side of Flesquieres Village. Here very heavy fighting took place. The stout brick wall skirting the Chateau grounds opposed a formidable obstacle to our advance, while German machine guns swept the approaches.*

*A number of tanks were knocked out by direct hits from German field batteries in position beyond the crest of the hill. None the less, with the exception of the village itself, our second objectives in this area were gained before midday.*

*Many of the hits upon our tanks at Flesquieres were obtained by a German artillery officer who, remaining alone at his battery, served a field gun single-handed until killed at his gun. The great bravery of this officer aroused the admiration of all ranks!*

*On the left of our attack west of the Canal du Nord, the 36th (Ulster) Division (Major-General O. S. W. Nugent), captured a German strong point on the spoil bank of the canal and pushed northwards in touch with the West Riding troops, who, as the first stage in a most gallant and remarkably successful advance, had taken Havrincourt.*

*By 10.30 a.m. the general advance beyond the Hindenburg Reserve Line to our final objectives had begun, and cavalry were moving up behind our infantry.*

*In this period of the attack tanks and British infantry battalions of the 29th Division (Major-General Sir H. de B. De Lisle) entered Masnieres and captured Marcoing and Neuf Wood, securing the passages of the Canal de l'Escaut at both villages.*

*At Marcoing the tanks arrived at the moment when a party of the enemy were in the act of running out an electrical connection to blow up one of the bridges. This party was fired on by a tank and the bridges secured intact. At Masnieres, however, the retreating enemy succeeded in destroying partially the bridge carrying the main road. In consequence the first tank which endeavoured to cross at this point fell through the bridge, completing its destruction.*

*The advance of a number of our guns had been unavoidably delayed in the sunken roads which served this part of the battle-field, and though our infantry continued their progress beyond Masnieres, without the assistance of tanks and artillery they were not able at first to clear the enemy entirely from the northern portion of the village.*

*Here parties of Germans held out during the afternoon, and gave the enemy time to occupy Rumilly and the section of the Beaura-voir-Masnieres line south of it; while the destruction of the bridge also prevented the cavalry from crossing the canal in sufficient strength to overcome his resistance.*

*In spite of this difficulty, a squadron of the Fort Garry Horse, Canadian Cavalry Brigade (5th Cavalry Division, Major-General H. I. M. Macandrew), succeeded during the afternoon in crossing the canal by a temporary bridge constructed during the day. This squadron passed through the Beaura-voir-Masnieres line and charged and captured a German battery in position to the east of it.*

*Continuing its advance, it dispersed a body of about 300 German infantry, and did not cease its progress until the greater part of its horses had been killed or wounded. The squadron thereupon took up a position in a sunken road, where it maintained itself until night fell. It then withdrew to our lines, bringing with it several prisoners taken in the course of a most gallant exploit.*

*Meanwhile, west of the Canal de l'Escaut patrols of the 6th Division during the afternoon entered Noyelles-sur-l'Escaut, where they were reinforced by cavalry, and other cavalry units pushed out towards Cantaing. West of Flesquieres, the 62nd Division, operating northwards from Havrincourt, made important progress.*

*Having carried the Hindenburg Reserve Line north of that village, it rapidly continued its attack and captured Graincourt, where two anti-tank guns were destroyed by the tanks accompanying our infantry. Before nightfall*

infantry and cavalry had entered Anneux, though the enemy's resistance in this village does not appear to have been entirely overcome until the following morning.

This attack of the 62nd (West Riding) Division constitutes a brilliant achievement, in which the troops concerned completed an advance of four and a half miles from their original front, overrunning two German systems of defence and gaining possession of three villages.

On the left flank of our attack Ulster battalions pushed northwards along the Hindenburg Line and its forward defences, maintaining touch with the West Riding troops, and carried the whole of the German trench systems west of the Canal du Nord as far north as the Bapaume-Cambrai Road.

At the end of the first day of the attack, therefore, three German systems of defence had been broken through to a depth of some four and a half miles on a wide front, and over 5,000 prisoners had already been brought in. But for the wrecking of the bridge at Masnieres and the check at Flesquieres, still greater results might have been attained. Throughout these operations the value of the services rendered by the tanks was very great, and the utmost gallantry, enterprise and resolution were displayed by both officers and crews. In combination with the other arms they helped to make possible a remarkable success.

Without their aid in opening a way through the German wire, success could only have been attained by methods which would have given the enemy ample warning of our attack, and have allowed him time to mass troops to oppose it. As has been pointed out above, to enable me to undertake such an operation with the troops at my disposal, secrecy to the last moment was essential.

The tanks alone made it possible to dispense with artillery preparation, and so to conceal our intentions from the enemy up to the actual moment of attack.

Great credit is due also to the Royal Flying Corps for very gallant and most valuable work carried out under conditions of the greatest difficulty from low clouds and driving mist.

In the subsidiary attack at Bullecourt battalions of the 3rd Division (Major-General C. J. Deverell) and the 16th (Irish) Division (Major-General W. B. Hickie) successfully completed the work begun by our operations in this area in May and June, 1917, capturing the remainder of the Hindenburg support trench on their front, with some 700 prisoners.

A number of counter-attacks against our new positions at Bullecourt on this and the following day were repulsed, with great loss to the enemy.

*The Advance Continued*

4. On the morning of the 21st November the attack on Flesquieres was resumed, and by 8.0 a.m. the village had been turned from the north-west and captured. The obstacle which more than anything else had limited the results of the 20th November was thereby removed, and later in the morning the advance once more became general.

Masnieres had been cleared of the enemy during the previous evening, and at 11.0 a.m. our troops attacked the Beaufort-Masnieres line and established themselves in the portion to the east and north of Masnieres. Heavy fighting took place, and a counter-attack from the direction of Rumilly was beaten off.

At the same hour we attacked and captured Les Rues des Vignes, but later in the morning the enemy counter-attacked and compelled our troops to fall back from this position. Progress was also made towards Creve-Coeur; but though the canal was crossed during the afternoon, it was found impossible to force the passage of the river in face of the enemy's machine gun fire.

That evening orders were issued by the Third Army to secure the ground already gained in this area of the battle, and to capture Rumilly on the morrow; but in consequence of the exhaustion of the troops engaged it was found necessary later in the night to cancel the orders for this attack.

West of the Canal de l'Escaut infantry of the 29th Division and dismounted regiments of the 1st and 5th Cavalry Divisions; including the Ambala Brigade, were heavily engaged throughout the day in Noyelles, and beat off all attacks in continuous fighting.

Following upon the capture of Flesquieres, the 51st and 62nd Divisions, in co-operation with a number of tanks and squadrons of the 1st Cavalry Division, attacked at 10.30 a.m. in the direction of Fontaine-notre-Dame and Bourlon.

In this attack the capture of Anneux was completed, and early in the afternoon Cantaing was seized, with some hundreds of prisoners. Progress was made on the outskirts of Bourlon Wood, and late in the afternoon Fontaine-notre-Dame was taken by troops of the 51st Division and tanks. The attack on Bourlon Wood itself was checked by machine gun fire, though tanks advanced some distance into the wood.

Farther west, the 36th Division advanced north of the Bapaume-Cambrai Road, and reached the southern outskirts of Moeuvres, where strong opposition was encountered.

#### *The Position on the 21st November*

5. *On the evening of the second day of the attack, therefore, our troops held a line which ran approximately as follows:-*

*From our old front line east of Gonnelieu the right flank of our new positions lay along the eastern slopes of the Bonavis Ridge, passing east of Lateau Wood and striking the Masnieres-Beaurevoir line north of the Canal de l'Escaut at a point about half way between Crevecoeur and Masnieres. From this point our line ran roughly north-west, past and including Masnieres, Noyelles and Cantaing, to Fontaine, also inclusive.*

*Thence it bent back to the south for a short distance, making a sharp salient round the latter village, and ran in a general westerly direction along the southern edge of Bourlon Wood and across the southern face of the spur to the west of the wood, to the Canal du Nord, south-east of the village of Moeuvres. From Moeuvres the line linked up once more with our old front at a point about midway between Boursies and Pronville.*

*The forty-eight hours after which it had been calculated that the enemy's reserves would begin to arrive had in effect expired, and the high ground at Bourlon Village and Wood, as well as certain important tactical features to the east and west of the wood, still remained in the enemy's possession.*

*It now became necessary to decide whether to continue the operation offensively or to take up a defensive attitude and rest content with what had been attained.*

#### *The Decision to Go On*

6. *It was not possible, however, to let matters stand as they were. The positions captured by us north of Flesquieres were completely commanded by the Bourlon Ridge, and unless this ridge were gained it would be impossible to hold them, except at excessive cost. If I decided not to go on, a withdrawal to the Flesquieres Ridge would be necessary and would have to be carried out at once.*

*On the other hand, the enemy showed certain signs of an intention to withdraw. Craters had been formed at road junctions, and troops could be seen ready to move east. The possession of Bourlon Ridge would enable our troops to obtain observation over the ground to the north, which sloped gently down to the Sensee River.*

*The enemy's defensive lines south of the Scarpe and Sensee Rivers would thereby be turned, his communications exposed to the observed fire of our artillery, and his positions in this sector jeopardised. In short, so great was the importance of the ridge to the enemy that its loss would probably cause the abandonment by the Germans of their carefully prepared defence systems for a considerable distance to the north of it.*

*The successive days of constant marching and fighting had placed a very severe strain upon the endurance of the troops, and, before a further advance could be undertaken, some time would have to be spent in resting and relieving them. This need for delay was regrettable, as the enemy's forces were increasing, and fresh German divisions were known to be arriving, but, with the limited number of troops at my command, it was unavoidable.*

*It was to be remembered, however, that the hostile reinforcements coming up at this stage could at first be no more than enough to replace the enemy's losses; and although the right of our advance had definitely been stayed, the enemy had not yet developed such strength about Bourlon as it seemed might not be overcome by the numbers at my disposal.*

*As has already been pointed out, on the Cambrai side of the battlefield I had only aimed at securing a defensive flank to enable the advance to be pushed northwards and north-westwards, and this part of my task had been to a large extent achieved.*

*An additional and very important argument in favour of proceeding with my attack was supplied by the situation in Italy, upon which a continuance of pressure on the Cambrai front might reasonably be expected to exercise an important effect, no matter what measure of success attended my efforts. Moreover, two divisions previously under orders for Italy had on this day been placed at my disposal, and with this accession of strength the prospect of securing Bourlon seemed good.*

*After weighing these various considerations, therefore, I decided to continue the operations to gain the Bourlon position. The 22nd November was spent in organising the captured ground, in carrying out certain reliefs, and in giving other troops the rest they already needed.*

*Soon after midday the enemy regained Fontaine-notre-Dame; but, with our troops already on the outskirts of Bourlon Wood and Cantaing held by us, it was thought that*

*the recapture of Fontaine should not prove very difficult. The necessary arrangements for renewing the attack were therefore pushed on and our plans were extended to include the recapture of Fontaine-notre-Dame.*

*Meanwhile, early in the night of the 22nd November, a battalion of the Queen's Westminsters (56th Division, Major-General F. A. Dudgeon) stormed a commanding tactical point in the Hindenburg Line west of Moeuvres*

known as Tadpole Copse, the possession of which would be of value in connection with the left flank of the Bourlon position when the latter had been secured.

#### *The Struggle for Bourlon Wood*

7. On the morning of the 23rd November the 51st Division, supported by tanks, attacked Fontaine-notre-Dame, but was unable to force an entrance. Early in the afternoon this division repeated its attack from the west, and a number of tanks entered Fontaine, where they remained till dusk, inflicting considerable loss on the enemy.

We did not succeed, however, in clearing the village, and at the end of the day no progress had been made on this part of our front.

At 10.30 a.m. the 40th Division (Major-General I. Ponsonby) attacked Bourlon Wood, and after four and a half hours of hard fighting, in which tanks again rendered valuable assistance to our infantry, captured the whole of the wood and entered Bourlon Village. Here hostile counter-attacks prevented our further progress, and though the village was at one time reported to have been taken by us, this proved later to be erroneous.

A heavy hostile attack upon our positions in the wood, in which all three battalions of the 9th Grenadier Regiment appear to have been employed, was completely repulsed.

Throughout this day, also, the 36th Division and troops of the 56th (London) Division (T.) were engaged in stubborn fighting in the neighbourhood of Moeuvres and Tadpole Copse, and made some progress.

This struggle for Bourlon resulted in several days of fiercely contested fighting, in which English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish battalions, together with dismounted cavalry, performed most gallant service and inflicted heavy loss on the enemy.

During the morning of the 24th November the enemy twice attacked, and at his second attempt pressed back our troops in the north-eastern corner of the wood. An immediate counter-attack delivered by the 14th Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the 15th Hussars, dismounted, and the remnants of the 119th Infantry Brigade (40th Division and 1st Cavalry Division), drove back the enemy in turn, and by noon our line had been re-established.

Meanwhile, dismounted cavalry had repulsed an attack on the high ground west of Bourlon Wood, and in the afternoon a third hostile attack upon the wood was stopped by our artillery and rifle fire.

On this afternoon our infantry again attacked Bourlon Village, and captured the whole of it. Later in the evening a fourth attack upon our positions in the wood was beaten off after fierce fighting. Further progress was made on this day in the Hindenburg Line west of Moeuvres, but the enemy's resistance in the whole of this area was very strong.

On the evening of the 25th November a fresh attack by the enemy regained Bourlon Village, though our troops offered vigorous resistance, and parties of the 13th Battalion, East Surrey Regiment (40th Division), held out in the south-east corner of the village until touch was re-established with them two days later.

The continual fighting and the strength of the enemy's attacks, however, had told heavily on the 40th Division, which had borne the brunt of the struggle. This division was accordingly withdrawn, and on the following day our troops were again pressed back slightly in the northern outskirts of Bourlon Wood.

With the enemy in possession of the shoulder of the ridge above Fontaine-notre-Dame, as well as of part of the high ground west of Bourlon Wood, our position in the wood itself was a difficult one, and much of the ground to the south of it was still exposed to the enemy's observation. It was decided, therefore, to make another effort on the 27th November to capture Fontaine-notre-Dame and Bourlon Village, and to gain possession of the whole of the Bourlon Ridge.

In this attack, in which tanks co-operated, British Guards (Major-General G. P. T. Feilding) temporarily regained possession of Fontaine-notre-Dame, taking some hundreds of prisoners, and troops of the 62nd Division once more entered Bourlon Village.

Later in the morning, however, heavy counter-attacks developed in both localities, and our troops were unable to maintain the ground they had gained. During the afternoon the enemy also attacked our positions at Tadpole Copse, but was repulsed.

As the result of five days of constant fighting, therefore, we held a strong position on the Bourlon Hill and in the wood, but had not yet succeeded in gaining all the ground required for the security of this important feature. The two following days passed comparatively quietly, while the troops engaged were relieved and steps were undertaken to prepare for a deliberate attack which might give us the tactical points we sought.

Meanwhile, on other parts of the front the organisation of our new positions was proceeding as rapidly as conditions would allow. In particular, troops of the 12th Division had effected some improvement on the right flank

of our advance opposite Banteux, and the 16th Division had made further progress in the Hindenburg Line north-west of Bullecourt.

At the end of November the number of prisoners taken in our operations south-west of Cambrai exceeded 10,500. We had also captured 142 guns, some 350 machine guns, and 70 trench mortars, with great quantities of ammunition, material and stores of all kinds.

*The German Attack*

*Early Warnings*

8. During the last days of November increased registration of hostile artillery, the movements of troops and transport observed behind the German lines, together with other indications of alike nature, pointed to further efforts by the enemy to regain the positions we had wrested from him.

The front affected by this increased activity included that of our advance, as well as the ground to Vendhuile and beyond. The massing of the enemy's infantry, however, his obvious anxiety concerning the security of his defences south of the Sensee River, the tactical importance of the high ground about Bourlon, and the fact that we were still only in partial possession of it, all pointed to the principal attack being delivered in the Bourlon sector.

*Our Dispositions for Defence*

9. Measures were accordingly taken, both by the Third Army and by the lower formations concerned, to prepare for eventualities.

Arrangements had been made after our last attack to relieve the troops holding the Bourlon positions by such fresh divisions as were available, and when these reliefs had been satisfactorily completed, I felt confident that the defence of this sector could be considered secure.

Covering our right flank from Cantaing to the Banteux Ravine, a distance of about 16,000 yards, five British divisions were disposed, and, though these had been fighting for several days and were consequently tired, I felt confident that they would prove equal to stopping any attack the enemy could make on them.

From the Banteux Ravine southwards the divisions in line were weak and held very extended fronts. On the other hand, the line held by us in this southern sector had been in our possession for some months. Its defences were for this reason more complete and better organised than those of the ground gained by us in our attack. Moreover, the capture of the Bonavis Ridge had added to the security of our position farther south.

The reserve divisions immediately available in the area consisted of the Guards and 2nd Cavalry Divisions (Major-General W. H. Greenly commanding 2nd Cavalry Division), both of which had been engaged in the recent fighting at Fontaine and Bourlon Wood.

These were located behind the La Vacquerie-Villers Guislain front, while another division, the 62nd, which had also been recently engaged, was placed farther to the north-west in the direction of the Bapaume-Cambrai Road. A fresh South Midland division (61st Division, Major-General C. I. Mackenzie) was assembling farther back, two other cavalry divisions were within two or three hours march of the battle area, and another cavalry division but a little farther distant.

In view of the symptoms of activity observed on the enemy's front, special precautions were taken by local commanders, especially from Villers Guislain to the south. Troops were warned to expect attack, additional machine guns were placed to secure supporting points, and divisional reserves were closed up. Special patrols were also sent out to watch for signs of any hostile advance.

*The Battle Reopened*

10. Between the hours of 7.0 and 8.0 a.m. on the last days of November the enemy attacked, after a short but intense artillery preparation, on the greater part of a front of some ten miles from Vendhuile to Masnieres inclusive. From Masnieres to Banteux, both inclusive, four German divisions would seem to have been employed against the three British divisions holding this area (29th, 20th and 12th Divisions).

Between Banteux exclusive and Vendhuile one German division and portions of two others were employed against the northern half of the British division holding that front (the 55th Division, Major-General H. S. Jeudwine).

On the Masnieres front the 29th Division, composed of English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Guernsey and Newfoundland battalions, although seriously threatened as the day wore on by the progress made by the enemy farther south, where their battery positions had been taken in reverse, most gallantly beat off a succession of powerful assaults and maintained their line intact.

At the northern end of the Bonavis Ridge and in the Gonnellieu sector the swiftness with which the advance of the enemy's infantry followed the opening of his bombardment appears to have overwhelmed our troops, both in line and in immediate support, almost before they had realised that the attack had begun.

*The nature of the bombardment, which seems to have been heavy enough to keep our men under cover without at first seriously alarming them, contributed to the success of the enemy's plans. No steadily advancing barrage gave warning of the approach of the German assault columns, whose secret assembly was assisted by the many deep folds and hollows typical of a chalk formation, and shielded from observation from the air by an early morning mist.*

*Only when the attack was upon them great numbers of low-flying German aeroplanes rained machine gun fire upon our infantry, while an extensive use of smoke shell and bombs made it extremely difficult for our troops to see what was happening on other parts of the battlefield, or to follow the movements of the enemy.*

*In short, there is little doubt that, although an attack was expected generally, yet in these areas of the battle at the moment of delivery the assault effected a local surprise.*

*None the less, stubborn resistance was offered during the morning by isolated parties of our troops and by machine gun detachments in the neighbourhood of Lateau Wood and south-east of La Vacquerie, as well as at other points. In more than one instance heavy losses are known to have been inflicted on the enemy by machine gun fire at short range.*

*North-east of La Vacquerie the 92nd Field Artillery Brigade (20th Division) repulsed four attacks, in some of which the enemy's infantry approached to within 200 yards of our guns, before the surviving gunners were finally compelled to withdraw, after removing the breech-blocks from their pieces.*

*East of Villers Guislain the troops holding our forward positions on the high ground were still offering a strenuous resistance to the enemy's attack on their front, at a time when large forces of German infantry had already advanced up the valley between them and Villers Guislain.*

*South of this village a single strong point known as Limerick Post, garrisoned by troops of the 1/5th Battalion (King's Own), Royal Lancaster Regiment, and the 1/10th Battalion, Liverpool Regiment (both of the 55th Division), held out with great gallantry throughout the day, though heavily attacked.*

*The progress made by the enemy, however, across the northern end of the Bonavis Ridge and up the deep gully between Villers Guislain and Gonnelleu, known as 22 Ravine, turned our positions on the ridge as well as in both villages. Taken in flank and rear, the defences of Villers Guislain, Gonnelleu and Bonavis were rapidly over-run.*

*Gouzeaucourt was captured about 9.0 a.m., the outer defences of La Vacquerie were reached, and a number of guns which had been brought up close to the line, in order to enable them to cover the battle-front about Masnieres and Marcoing, fell into the hands of the enemy.*

*At this point the enemy's advance was checked by the action of our local reserves, and meanwhile measures had been taken with all possible speed to bring up additional troops. About midday the Guards came into action west of Gouzeaucourt, while cavalry (4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions, Major-General A. A. Kennedy commanding 4th Cavalry Division) moved up to close the gap on their right and made progress towards Villers Guislain from the south and south-west.*

*The attack of the Guards, which was delivered with the greatest gallantry and resolution, drove the enemy out of Gouzeaucourt and made progress on the high ground known as the St. Quentin Ridge, east of the village. In this operation the Guards were materially assisted by the gallant action of a party of the 29th Division, who, with a company of North Midland Royal Engineers, held on throughout the day to a position in an old trench near Gouzeaucourt.*

*Valuable work was also done by a brigade of field artillery of the 47th Division, which moved direct into action from the line of march.*

*During the afternoon three battalions of tanks, which when they received news of the attack were preparing to move away from the battlefield to refit, arrived at Gouzeaucourt and aided the infantry to hold the recaptured ground. Great credit is due to the officers and men of the Tank Brigade concerned for the speed with which they brought their tanks into action.*

*Meanwhile, the defence of La Vacquerie had been successfully maintained, and our line had been established to the north of that village, in touch with our troops in Masnieres.*

*The Northern Attack*

*11. In the northern area, from Fontaine-notre-Dame to Tadpole Copse, the German attack was not launched until some two hours later. This was the enemy's main attack, and was carried out with large forces and great resolution.*

*After a heavy preliminary bombardment, and covered by an artillery barrage, the enemy's infantry advanced shortly after 9.0 a.m. in dense waves, in the manner of his attacks in the first battle of Ypres.*

*In the course of the morning and afternoon no less than five principal attacks were made in this area, and on one portion of the attack as many as eleven waves of German infantry advanced successively to the assault. On the whole of this front a resolute endeavour was made to break down by sheer weight of numbers the defence of the London Territorials and other English battalions holding the sector.*

*In this fighting the 47th (London) Division (T.) (Major-General Sir G. F. Goringe), the 2nd Division (Major-General C. E. Pereira) and the 56th (London) Division (T.) greatly distinguished themselves, and there were accomplished many deeds of great heroism.*

*Under the fury of the enemy's bombardment a company of the 17th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, were in the course of being withdrawn from an exposed position in a sap-head in advance of our line between Bourlon Wood and Moeuvres when the German attack burst upon them.*

*The officer in command sent three of his platoons back, and with a rearguard composed of the remainder of his company held off the enemy's infantry until the main position had been organised. Having faithfully accomplished their task, this rearguard died fighting to the end with their faces to the enemy.*

*Somewhat later in the morning an attack in force between the Canal du Nord and Moeuvres broke into our foremost positions and isolated a company of the 13th Battalion, Essex Regiment, in a trench just west of the canal. After maintaining a splendid and successful resistance throughout the day, whereby the pressure upon our main line was greatly relieved, at 4.0 p.m. this company held a council of war, at which the two remaining company officers, the company sergeant-major, and the platoon sergeants were present, and unanimously determined to fight to the last and have "no surrender".*

*Two runners who were sent to notify this decision to Battalion Headquarters succeeded in getting through to our lines and delivered their message. During the remainder of the afternoon and far into the following night this gallant company were heard fighting, and there is little room for doubt that they carried out to a man their heroic resolution.*

*Early in the afternoon large masses of the enemy again attacked west of Bourlon Wood, and, though beaten off with great loss at most points, succeeded in overwhelming three out of a line of posts held by a company of the 1st Battalion, Royal Berks Regiment, on the right of the 2nd Division.*

*Though repeatedly attacked by vastly superior numbers the remainder of these posts stood firm, and when, two days later, the three posts which had been overpowered were regained, such a heap of German dead lay in and around them that the bodies of our own men were hidden.*

*All accounts go to show that the enemy's losses in the whole of his constantly repeated attacks on this sector of the battle front were enormous. One battery of eight machine guns fired 70,000 rounds of ammunition into ten successive waves of Germans.*

*Long lines of attacking infantry were caught by our machine gun fire in enfilade, and were shot down in line as they advanced. Great execution also was done by our field artillery, and in the course of the battle guns were brought up to the crest line and fired direct upon the enemy at short range.*

*At one point west of Bourlon the momentum of his first advance carried the enemy through our front line and a short way down the southern slopes of the ridge. There, however, the German masses came under direct fire from our field artillery at short range and were broken up.*

*Our local reserves at once counter-attacked, and succeeded in closing the gap that had been made in our line. Early in the afternoon the enemy again forced his way into our foremost positions in this locality, opening a gap between the 1/6th Battalion and the 1/15th Battalion, London Regiments. Counter-attacks, led by the two battalion commanders, with all available men, including the personnel of their headquarters, once more restored the situation. All other attacks were beaten off with the heaviest losses to the enemy.*

*The greatest credit is due to the troops at Masnieres, Bourlon and Moeuvres for the very gallant service performed by them on this day. But for their steady courage and staunchness in defence, the success gained by the enemy on the right of our battle front might have had serious consequences.*

*I cannot close the account of this day's fighting without recording my obligation to the Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies for the prompt way in which he placed French troops within reach for employment in case of need at the unfettered discretion of the Third Army Commander.*

*Part of the artillery of this force actually came into action, rendering valuable service, and though the remainder of the troops were not called upon, the knowledge that they were available should occasion arise was a great assistance.*

*The Fighting at Gonnellieu and Masnieres*

12. On the 1st December fighting continued fiercely on the whole front.

The Guards completed the capture of the St. Quentin Ridge and entered Gonnellieu, where they captured over 350 prisoners and a large number of machine guns. Tanks took an effective part in the fighting for the ridge. At one point, where our infantry were held up by fire from a hostile trench, a single tank attacked and operated up and down the trench, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy's garrison.

Our infantry were then able to advance and secure the trench, which was found full of dead Germans. In it were also found fifteen machine guns that had been silenced by the tank. In the whole of this fighting splendid targets were obtained by all tank crews, and the German casualties were seen to be very great.

Farther south, a number of tanks co-operated with dismounted Indian cavalry of the 5th Cavalry Division and with the Guards in the attacks upon Villers Guislain and Gauche Wood, and were in great measure responsible for the capture of the wood.

Heavy fighting took place for this position, which it is clear the enemy had decided to hold at all costs. When the infantry and cavalry finally took possession of the wood, great numbers of German dead and smashed machine guns were found. In one spot four German machine guns, with dead crews lying round, were discovered within a radius of twenty yards. Three German field guns, complete with teams, were also captured in this wood.

Other tanks proceeded to Villers Guislain, and, in spite of heavy direct artillery fire, three reached the outskirts of the village, but the fire of the enemy's machine guns prevented our troops advancing from the south from supporting them, and the tanks ultimately withdrew.

Severe fighting took place, also, at Masnieres. During the afternoon and evening at least nine separate attacks were beaten off by the 29th Division on this front, and other hostile attacks were repulsed in the neighbourhood of Marcoing, Fontaine-notre-Dame and Bourlon. With the Bonavis Ridge in the enemy's hands, however, Masnieres was exposed to attack on three sides, and on the night of the 1st/2nd December our troops were withdrawn under orders to a line west of the village.

On the afternoon of the 2nd December a series of heavy attacks developed against Welsh Ridge in the neighbourhood of La Vacquerie, and further assaults were made on our positions in the neighbourhood of Masnieres and Bourlon.

These attacks were broken in succession by our machine gun fire, but the enemy persisted in his attempts against Welsh Ridge and gradually gained ground. By nightfall our line had been pushed back to a position west and north of Gonnellieu.

Next day the enemy renewed his attacks in great force on the whole front from Gonnellieu to Marcoing, and ultimately gained possession of La Vacquerie. North of La Vacquerie repeated attacks made about Masnieres and Marcoing were repulsed in severe fighting, but the positions still retained by us beyond the Canal de l'Escaut were extremely exposed, and during the night our troops were withdrawn under orders to the west bank of the canal.

*The Withdrawal from Bourlon*

13. By this time the enemy had evidently become exhausted by the efforts he had made and the severity of his losses, and the 4th December passed comparatively quietly.

For some days, however, local fighting continued in the neighbourhood of La Vacquerie, and his attitude remained aggressive. Local attacks in this sector were repulsed on the 5th December, and on this and the following two days further fierce fighting took place, in which the enemy again endeavoured without success to drive us from our positions on Welsh Ridge.

The strength which the enemy had shown himself able to develop in his attacks made it evident that only by prolonged and severe fighting could I hope to re-establish my right flank on the Bonavis Ridge. Unless this was done, the situation of my troops in the salient north of Flesquieres would be difficult and dangerous, even if our hold on Bourlon Hill were extended.

I had therefore to decide either to embark on another offensive battle on a large scale, or to withdraw to a more compact line on the Flesquieres Ridge.

Although this decision involved giving up important positions most gallantly won, I had no doubt as to the correct course under the conditions. Accordingly, on the night of the 4th/5th December the evacuation of the positions held by us north of the Flesquieres Ridge was commenced. On the morning of the 7th December this withdrawal was completed successfully without interference from the enemy.

*Before withdrawing, the more important of the enemy's field*

*defences were destroyed, and those of his guns which we had been unable to remove were rendered useless. The enemy did not discover our withdrawal for some time, and when, on the afternoon of the 5th December, he began*

to feel his way forward, he did so with great caution. In spite of his care, on more than one occasion bodies of his infantry were caught in the open by our artillery.

Much skill and courage were shown by our covering troops in this withdrawal, and an incident which occurred on the afternoon of the 6th December in the neighbourhood of Graincourt deserves special notice.

A covering party, consisting of two companies of the 1/15th Battalion, London Regiment, 47th Division, much reduced in strength by the fighting at Bourlon Wood, found their flank exposed by a hostile attack farther east, and were enveloped and practically cut off. These companies successfully cut their way through to our advanced line of resistance, where they arrived in good order, after having inflicted serious casualties on the enemy.

The new line taken up by us corresponded roughly to the old Hindenburg Reserve Line, and ran from a point about one and a half miles north by east of La Vacquerie, north of Ribecourt and Flesquieres to the Canal du Nord, about one and a half miles north of Havrincourt - i.e., between two and two and a half miles in front of the line held by us prior to the attack of the 20th November.

We therefore retained in our possession an important section of the Hindenburg trench system, with its excellent dug-outs and other advantages.

#### *The Results of the Battle*

14. The material results of the three weeks' fighting described above can be stated in general terms very shortly.

We had captured and retained in our possession over 12,000 yards of the former German front line from La Vacquerie to a point opposite Boursies, together with between 10,000 and 11,000 yards of the Hindenburg Line and Hindenburg Reserve Line and the villages of Ribecourt, Flesquieres and Havrincourt. A total of 145 German guns were taken or destroyed by us in the course of the operations, and 11,100 German prisoners were captured.

On the other hand, the enemy had occupied an unimportant section of our front line between Vendhuile and Gonnetieu. There is little doubt that our operations were of considerable indirect assistance to the Allied forces in Italy. Large demands were made upon the available German reserves at a time when a great concentration of German divisions was still being maintained in Flanders.

There is evidence that German divisions intended for the Italian theatre were diverted to the Cambrai front, and it is probable that the further concentration of German forces against Italy was suspended for at least two weeks at a most critical period, when our Allies were making their first stand on the Piave Line.

#### *General Review*

15. I have already summarised in the opening paragraphs of this Despatch both the reasons which decided me to undertake the Cambrai operations and the limitations to which those operations were subject.

In view of the strength of the German forces on the front of my attack, and the success with which secrecy was maintained during our preparations, I had calculated that the enemy's prepared defences would be captured in the first rush.

I had good hope that his resisting power behind those defences would then be so enfeebled for a period that we should be able on the same day to establish ourselves quickly and completely on the dominating Bourlon Ridge from Fontaine-notre-Dame to Moeuvres, and to secure our right flank along a line including the Bonavis Ridge, Crevecoeur and Rumilly to Fontaine-notre-Dame.

Even if this did not prove possible within the first twenty-four hours, a second day would be at our disposal before the enemy's reserves could begin to arrive in any formidable numbers.

Meanwhile, with no wire and no prepared defences to hamper them, it was reasonable to hope that masses of cavalry would find it possible to pass through, whose task would be thoroughly to disorganise the enemy's systems of command and inter-communication in the whole area between the Canal de l'Escaut, the River Sensee and the Canal du Nord, as well as to the east and north-east of Cambrai.

My intentions as regards subsequent exploitation were to push westward and north-westward, taking the Hindenburg Line in reverse from Moeuvres to the River Scarpe, and capturing all the enemy's defences and probably most of his garrisons lying west of a line from Cambrai northwards to the Sensee, and south of that river and the Scarpe.

Time would have been required to enable us to develop and complete the operation; but the prospects of gaining the necessary time, by the use of cavalry in the manner outlined above, were in my opinion good enough to justify the attempt to execute the plan.

I am of opinion that on the 20th and 21st November we went very near to a success sufficiently complete to bring the realisation of our full programme within our power.

*The reasons for my decision to continue the fight after the 21st November have already been explained. Though in the event no advantage was gained thereby, I still consider that, as the problem presented itself at the time, the more cautious course would have been difficult to justify.*

*It must be remembered that it was not a question of remaining where we stood, but of abandoning tactical positions of value, gained with great gallantry, the retention of which seemed not only to be within our power, but likely even yet to lead to further success.*

*Whatever may be the final decision on this point, as well as on the original decision to undertake the enterprise at all with the forces available, the continuation of our efforts against Fontaine-notre-Dame gave rise to severe fighting, in which our troops more than held their own.*

*On the 30th November risks were accepted by us at some points in order to increase our strength at others. Our fresh reserves had been thrown in on the Bourlon front, where the enemy brought against us a total force of seven divisions to three and failed. I do not consider that it would have been justifiable on the indications to have allotted a smaller garrison to this front.*

*Between Masnieres and Vendhuile the enemy's superiority in infantry over our divisions in line was in the proportion of about four to three; and we were sufficiently provided with artillery. That his attack was partially successful may tend to show that the garrison allotted to this front was insufficient, either owing to want of numbers, lack of training, or exhaustion from previous fighting.*

*Captured maps and orders have made it clear that the enemy aimed at far more considerable results than were actually achieved by him. Three convergent attacks were to be made on the salient formed by our advance; two of them delivered approximately simultaneously about Gonnelleu and Masnieres, followed later by a still more powerful attack on the Bourlon front.*

*The objectives of these attacks extended to the high ground at Beaucamp and Trescault, and the enemy's hope was to capture and destroy the whole of the British forces in the Cambrai salient.*

*This bold and ambitious plan was foiled on the greater part of our front by the splendid defence of the British divisions engaged; and, though the defence broke down for a time in one area, the recovery made by the weak forces still left and those within immediate reach is worthy of the highest praise. Numberless instances of great gallantry, promptitude and skill were shown, some few of which have been recounted.*

*I desire to acknowledge the skill and resource displayed by General Byng throughout the Cambrai operations, and to express my appreciation of the manner in which they were conducted by him, as well as by his Staff and the subordinate commanders.*

*In conclusion, I would point out that the sudden breaking through by our troops of an immense system of defence has had a most inspiring moral effect on the Armies I command, and must have a correspondingly depressing influence upon the enemy.*

*The great value of the tanks in the offensive has been conclusively proved. In view of this experience, the enemy may well hesitate to deplete any portion of his front, as he did last summer, in order to set free troops to concentrate for decisive action at some other point.*

*I have the honour to be,*

*My Lord,*

*Your obedient Servant,*

*D. HAIG, Field-Marshal,*

*Commanding-in-Chief, British Armies in France*