

## **The First Battle of Ypres:**

*The reckless German gamble to secure a quick and decisive defeat of France at the outset of war ended in failure at the Battle of the Marne in September 1914. Forced to retreat, German forces dug in on the line of the River Aisne where French and British attacks were unable to breach well sited defences and fighting approached deadlock. Seeking to regain the initiative French and German forces made progressive moves northward in vain attempts to outflank and envelop each other's' armies. Repeated failures to outflank ensured the gradual extension of opposing trench lines as combatants sought cover from machine-gun and artillery fire.*

*In early October the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) relocated from the cramped stalemate on the Aisne to Flanders, on the extreme left of the Allied line, and was encouraged to make offensive movements within the sector La Bassée north to Ypres. These aggressive probing's coincided with simultaneous German moves westward and a series of confusing encounter battles ensued in which the larger forces deployed by the Germans forced British withdrawals to an extended and thinly held line. Following the failure of German attempts in the north to force the Allied line along the coast strong German forces were concentrated against Ypres in a search for a breakthrough to the Channel ports. It was during the relentless attacks on Ypres and its outlying villages between 19 October and 22 November 1914 that the famous 'Salient' was created.*

*First occupied by units of the 3rd Cavalry Division on 13 October 1914, British troops were to remain in possession of the town for the duration of the war; in the process Ypres itself took on a powerful symbolic importance, embodying in its tragic destruction, the virtues of gallantry, endurance and individual sacrifice.*

## **The First Battle of Ypres 1914, 19 October - 22 November 1914**

*'First Ypres' represented the last attempt by Allied and German forces to outflank each other and force a decisive breakthrough on the Western Front in 1914. Simultaneous advances met 'head on' and a series of bitterly contested actions followed in which superior German numbers forced the Allies into the fiercest of defensive battles. The fighting (in which French support was vital to British resistance) was widespread, desperate and continuous but three critical phases of action defined its progress.*

*Between 21 and 24 October, whilst the British 7th Division held off repeated German assaults to the east of Ypres, British I Corps to the north-east collided with strong advancing concentrations of German troops around Langemarck. A series of determined defensive actions, in which British rifle fire wreaked havoc against repeated German mass infantry attacks, prevented an enemy breakthrough. The German offensive faltered and on the evening of 24 October preparations were made for a separate great assault on Ypres further south. This new attack between Gheluvelt and Messines, began on 29 October, culminating in a crucial action on the 31st, when the British line was broken. The initiative of local commanders and a bold attack by the 2nd Worcesters restored the situation. A third major German assault on Ypres took place on 11 November when the Prussian Guard Division advanced along the Menin Road. This potentially decisive attack was checked by British field artillery and a hastily improvised rearguard force.*

*Fighting along the entire front continued but in deteriorating weather conditions further German offensives were called off. The German drive to the Channel ports had failed and the Allies now held a deep salient overlooked by enemy lines. The cost in casualties of the fighting had been enormous.*

## **The Battle of Langemarck, 21 - 24 October 1914**

*On 20 October British IV Corps cautious advance towards Menin was halted by the arrival of superior numbers of German forces; forced to dig-in the situation was improved by the arrival of Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig's I Corps, which, conforming to optimistic Allied plans, advanced north-east of Ypres on the morning of 21 October. Progress being checked in the early afternoon by approaching columns of enemy troops, I Corps hastily improvised*

*defensive positions and by nightfall a discontinuous line of shallow trenches merged roughly with those of IV Corps to form an incomplete and irregular arc around the east of the city.*

*On 22 October two major German breakthrough assaults were made against Ypres: from the south-east against IV Corps; and from the north and north-east against I Corps around Langemarck; British troops repeatedly repulsed mass German infantry attacks in these sectors. A particularly fierce thrust in the north near Bixchoote resulted in a German break-in around Kortekeer but rapid British redeployments stabilised the situation. A successful British counter-attack at dawn next day regained Kortekeer but aggressive German assaults either side the position continued until dusk. French reinforcements, arriving that same day, although failing to make headway, assisted in important defensive readjustments of the Allied line.*

*24 October witnessed German attacks diminishing to the north and a successful French move forward to regain Zonnebeke. Further south a combination of errors and exhaustion contributed to a German breakthrough in the hard pressed lines of IV Corps around Polygon Wood and a near break in around Gheluvelt. A successful British counter-attack through Polygon Wood, involving brutal close-quarter fighting, completed the earlier defensive work of the Northumberland Hussars and rear-echelon troops, and the line held.*

### **The Battle of Gheluvelt, 29 - 31 October 1914**

*At the end of October large concentrations of German assault troops assembled for a further breakthrough attempt on Ypres, putting the most vulnerable point of the Allied line, the sector held by the British between Ploegsteert Wood and Gheluvelt, in grave peril. The morning of 29 October saw repeated mass German infantry attacks astride the Menin Road against the British 1st and 7th Divisions, forcing them back to Gheluvelt. A day of desperately vicious close-quarter fighting ended with British units regaining much lost ground. Intense German attacks towards Gheluvelt were renewed the following day, but made little progress in the face of disciplined British defence. By nightfall, though heavily dented, the British line had not broken.*

*Saturday 31 October witnessed the main German assault, with Gheluvelt central to momentous events. The first German attacks, falling on 3rd and 2nd Brigades at the eastern edge of the village, were repelled but following intense enemy shelling, a second German onslaught around 10am overwhelmed the defenders. By 11.30am German troops were in Gheluvelt and crucially the British defensive line had been pierced. The way to Ypres, only four miles distant, lay open.*

*Following a precarious reconnaissance of the situation around midday, Brigadier-General Charles FitzClarence, Commander of 1st (Guards) Brigade, secured permission to commit the last available reserves: 2nd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment was instructed to recapture Gheluvelt and stabilise the line. In a most dramatic counter-attack this remnant force surprised German troops in the grounds of Gheluvelt Chateau and forced their retreat. Contact was established with British outposts to the north-east and the line restored. Again, though at immense human cost, German efforts at breakthrough to Ypres were frustrated.*

### **The Battle of Nonne Bosschen, 11 November 1914.**

*In the week of rain and cold weather following the crisis of 31 October the British line in front of Ypres remained relatively unchanged. During this period the German High Command agreed on a final bid for a decisive breakthrough and capture of Ypres before the onset of winter proper. To this end fresh German divisions were concentrated for a renewed effort.*

*On 11 November twelve-and-a-half German divisions attacked on a nine mile front between Messines in the south and Reutel in the centre. Launched at 9am on a cold mist-sodden morning the assault followed the most intense artillery barrage as yet experienced by the British on the Western Front. Despite smoke and fog, which allowed German infantry rapidly to close on British positions, the attackers met with little success except astride the Menin*

*Road where British and French troops were driven back. But a more critical situation soon developed to the north of the road where thinly held British defences were quickly overrun by elements of the 2nd Guard Grenadiers who secured (temporarily) the line up to Veldhoek Chateau. Continuing the advance, German 2nd Guard Brigade crucially crashed through the weakened British 1st (Guards) Brigade south-west of Polygon Wood forcing a near 1,000 yard gap.*

*By 10am German infantry were exploiting the breach. Despite being hampered by broken ground and intense rifle fire from isolated strong points, attacking groups passed into and through the undefended Nonne Bosschen wood to threaten 2nd Division's exposed gun line. A potentially disastrous situation was only averted by a gallantly improvised defence and a vitally important counter-attack in the afternoon which flushed German forces from Nonne Bosschen, and checked all hopes of an enemy breakthrough.*