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# **The Great War**

## **The British Campaign in France and Flanders, Vol. IV**

**By Arthur Conan Doyle**

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### **PREFACE**

This, the fourth volume of *The British Campaign in France and Flanders*, carries the story through the long and arduous fighting of 1917, which culminated in the dramatic twofold battle of Cambrai. These events are cut deep into the

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permanent history of the world, and we are still too near it to read the whole of that massive and tremendous inscription. It is certain, however, that this year marked the period in which the Allies gained a definite military ascendancy over the German forces, in spite of the one great subsequent rally which had its source in events which were beyond the control of the Western powers. So long as ink darkens and paper holds, our descendants, whose freedom has been won by these exertions, will dwell earnestly and with reverence upon the stories of Arras, Messines, Ypres, Cambrai, and other phases of this epic period.

I may be permitted to record with some thankfulness and relief, that in the course of three thick volumes, in which for the first time the detailed battle-line of these great encounters has been set out, it has not yet been shown that a brigade has ever been out of its place, and even a battalion has seldom gone amiss. Such good fortune cannot last forever. *Absit omen!* But the fact is worth recording, as it may reassure the reader who has natural doubts whether history which is so recent can also lay claim to be of any permanent value.

The Censorship has left me untrammelled in the matter of units, for which I am sufficiently grateful. The ruling, however, upon the question of names must be explained, lest it should seem that their appearance or suppression is due to lack of knowledge or to individual favour or caprice. I would explain, then, that I am permitted to use the names of Army and Corps Commanders, but only of such divisional Generals as are mentioned in the Headquarters narrative. All other ranks below divisional Generals are still suppressed, save only casualties, in connection with the action where they received the injury, and those who won honours, with the same limitation. This regulation has little effect upon the accuracy of the narrative, but it appears in many cases to involve some personal injustice. To record the heroic deeds of a division and yet be compelled to leave out the name of the man who made it so efficient, is painful to the feelings of the writer, for if any one fact is clearer than another in this war it is that the good leader makes the good unit.

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The tremendous epic of 1918 will call for two volumes in its treatment. One of these, bringing the story up to June 30, 1918, is already completed, and should appear by the summer. The other may be ready at the end of the year.

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE,

Crowborough,  
January 20, 1919.

## **I. THE GERMAN RETREAT UPON THE ARRAS-SOISSONS FRONT**

Hindenburg's retreat—The advance of the Fifth and Fourth Armies—Capture of Bapaume and Peronne—Atrocious devastation by the Germans—Capture of guns at Selency — Definition of the Hindenburg Line—General survey

In the latter days of 1916 and the beginning of 1917, the British Army, which had in little more than two years expanded from seven divisions to over fifty, took over an increased line. The movement began about Christmas time, and early in the New Year Rawlinson's Fourth Army, side-stepping always to the south, had covered the whole of the French position occupied during the Somme fighting, had crossed the Somme, and had established its right flank at a point near Roye. The total front was increased to 120 miles, which may seem a small proportion as compared to the whole. In making such a comparison, however, one must bear in mind the difference in the effort of sustaining an army in one's own country and in a foreign land with all communications by water. The task of the British was continually made more difficult by the precarious nature of their connection with their base. Dullness of vision may be as dangerous to a nation as treason, and no enemies could have harmed the country more than those perfectly sincere

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and patriotic individuals who had for so long opposed the construction of a Channel Tunnel.

The general disposition of the British forces after prolongation to the south was as follows. Plumer's Second Army still held that post of danger and of honour which centred round the Ypres salient. South of Plumer, in the Armentières district, was the First Army, now commanded by General Horne, whose long service with the Fifteenth Corps during the Somme Battle had earned him this high promotion. Allenby's Third Army carried the line onwards to the south of Arras. From the point upon which the British line had hinged during the Somme operations Gough's Fifth Army took over the front, and this joined on to Rawlinson's Fourth Army near the old French position. From the north then the order of the armies was two, one, three, five, and four.

The winter was spent by both sides in licking their wounds after the recent severe fighting and in preparing for the greater fighting to come. These preparations upon the part of the British consisted in the addition to the army of a number of fresh divisions, and the rebuilding of those divisions, fifty-two in number, which had taken part in the Somme fighting, most of them more than once. As the average loss in these divisions was very heavy indeed, the task of reconstructing them was no light one. None the less before the campaign re-opened, though the interval was a short three months, the greater part of the battalions were once again at full strength, while the guns and munitions were very greatly increased. A considerable addition to the strength of the army was effected by the civilian railway advisers, under Sir Eric Geddes, who by the simple expedient and re-laying them in France, enormously improved the communications of the army.

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In the case of the Germans their army changes took the form of a considerable new levy from those classes which had been previously judged to be unfit, and a general comb-out of every source from which men could be extracted. A new law rendered every citizen liable to national service in a civilian capacity, and so released a number of men from the mines and the factories. They also increased the numbers of their divisions by the doubtful expedient of reducing the brigades, so that the divisions were shorn of a third of their strength. The battalions thus obtained were formed into new divisions. In this way it was calculated that a reserve force had been created which would be suddenly thrown in on one or the other front with dramatic effect. Some such plan may have been in contemplation, but as a matter of fact the course of events was such that the German generals required every man and more for their own immediate needs during the whole of the year.

It has been shown in the narrative of 1916 how the British had ended the campaign of that year by the brilliant little victory of Beaumont Hamel, which gave them not merely 7000 prisoners, but command of both sides of the Valley of the Ancre. This victory had been the sequel to the capture of the Thiépval Ridge, and this again had depended upon the general success of the Somme operations, so that the turn of events which led to such considerable results always traces back to the tragic and glorious 1st of July.

It was clear that whenever the weather permitted the resumption of hostilities, Sir Douglas Haig was in so commanding a position at this point that he was perfectly certain to drive the enemy out of the salient which they held to the north of Beaumont Hamel. The result showed that this expectation was well founded, but no one could have foreseen how considerable was the retreat which would be forced upon the enemy—a retreat which gave away for

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nothing the ground which cost Hindenburg so much to regain in the following year.

Although the whole line from the sea to the Somme was a scene of activity during the winter, and though hardly a day, or rather a night, went by that some stealthy party did not cross No-Man's-Land to capture and to destroy, still for the purposes of this narrative the three northern armies may be entirely ignored in the succeeding operations since they had no occasion to alter their lines. We shall fix our attention in the first instance upon Gough's Army in the district of the Ancre, and afterwards upon Rawlinson's which was drawn into the operations. Gough's Army consisted, at the beginning of the year, of three corps, the Fifth (E.A. Fanshawe) to the left covering the ground to the north of the Ancre, the Second Corps (Jacob) immediately south of the river, and the First Australian Corps (Birdwood) extending to the junction with Rawlinson's Army, and covering the greater part of the old British line upon the Somme. It was upon the Fifth and the Second Corps that the immediate operations which opened the campaign were to devolve.

The Fifth Corps was formed at this period of three divisions, the Eleventh, Thirty-first, and Seventh. Each of these divisions by constant pressure and minor operations, backed by a powerful artillery fire, played a part in the wearing process of constant attrition which ended in making the position of the Germans impossible. On January 10, the 32nd Yorkshire Brigade of the Eleventh Division carried an important trench due east of Beaumont Hamel, taking 140 prisoners. On the next day the movement extended farther north, where three-quarters of a mile of trench with 200 prisoners was the prize. On January 17, another 600 yards north of Beaumont fell into British hands. Of the 1228 prisoners who were taken in January a



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considerable proportion came from this small section of the line, though the largest single haul consisted of 350 men who were captured by a brilliant advance of the Australians in the Le Transloy sector upon January 29. The movement along the valley of the Ancre was continued in February, but at an accelerated pace, the Second Corps, which consisted of the Sixty-third, Eighteenth, and Second Divisions, moving in conformity with Fanshawe's men upon the northern bank.

The chief initiative still rested with the latter, and upon February 3 another push forward of 500 yards upon a mile front yielded a hundred more prisoners, while two sharp counter attacks by the Germans only served to increase their losses. A number of small spurs run down to the river upon the northern bank, and each of these successive advances represented some fresh ridge surmounted. Upon February 6 the Second Corps was moving upon Beaucourt, which is to the immediate south of the river, and upon the 7th the village was evacuated—the first of that goodly list which was to adorn the official communiqués during the next two months. On the 9th the advance crept onwards upon both banks, gathering up a hundred prisoners, while eighty more were taken in Baillescourt Farm upon the north bank. These men were Hamburgers of the 85th Regiment.

Upon February 10 the left of the Fifth Corps began to feel out towards Serre, that village of sinister memories, and 215 prisoners were taken from the trenches to the south of the hamlet. This provoked a new counter from the enemy which was beaten back upon February 12. A period of impossible weather suspended the advance, but again upon February 17 the British tide swelled suddenly into a wave which swept forward on either bank, engulfing some crowded trenches north of Baillescourt Farm, which yielded 12 officers and 761 men of the 65th, 75th, and 395th Prussians. The main

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success was gained by the Sixty-third Division upon the left of the Second Corps, but it was aided by the work of the Eighteenth and Second Divisions to the south of the Ancre. The latter met with strong resistance and had considerable losses. The burden of this work fell chiefly upon the 99th and 54th Brigades, both of which reached their objectives in the face of mist, darkness, uncut wire, heavy fire, and vigorous resistance. This blow stung the enemy into a sharp reaction, and three waves of infantry stormed up to the lost position, which for a time they entered, but were again beaten out of. During their temporary success they claim to have taken 130 prisoners.

All these advances, with their accompanying and ever-extending bombardments, had been like those multiplied causes, each small in itself, which eventually loosen and start a great landslide. The effect must undoubtedly have been begun some weeks before when the Germans perceived that they could no longer hold on, and favoured by wind, rain, and fog, started their rearward movement to the great permanent second line, the exact position of which was still vague to the Allies. Upon February 25 the whole German front caved in for a depth of three miles both north and south of the Ancre. Wading through seas of mud Gough's infantry occupied Serre, Pys, Miraumont, Eaucourt, Warlencourt, and all the ground for eleven miles from Gomiecourt in the north to Gueudecourt in the south. On February 28 Gomiecourt itself had been occupied by the North Country troops of the Thirty-first Division, while Puisieux and Thillooy had also been added to the British line. The advance was not unopposed. The battle-patrols continually extended to attack some trench of snipers or nest of machine-guns. Mined roads and all manner of obstructions impeded the onward flow of the army. The retreat was orderly and skilful, and the pursuit was necessarily slow and wary. By a pleasing coincidence the

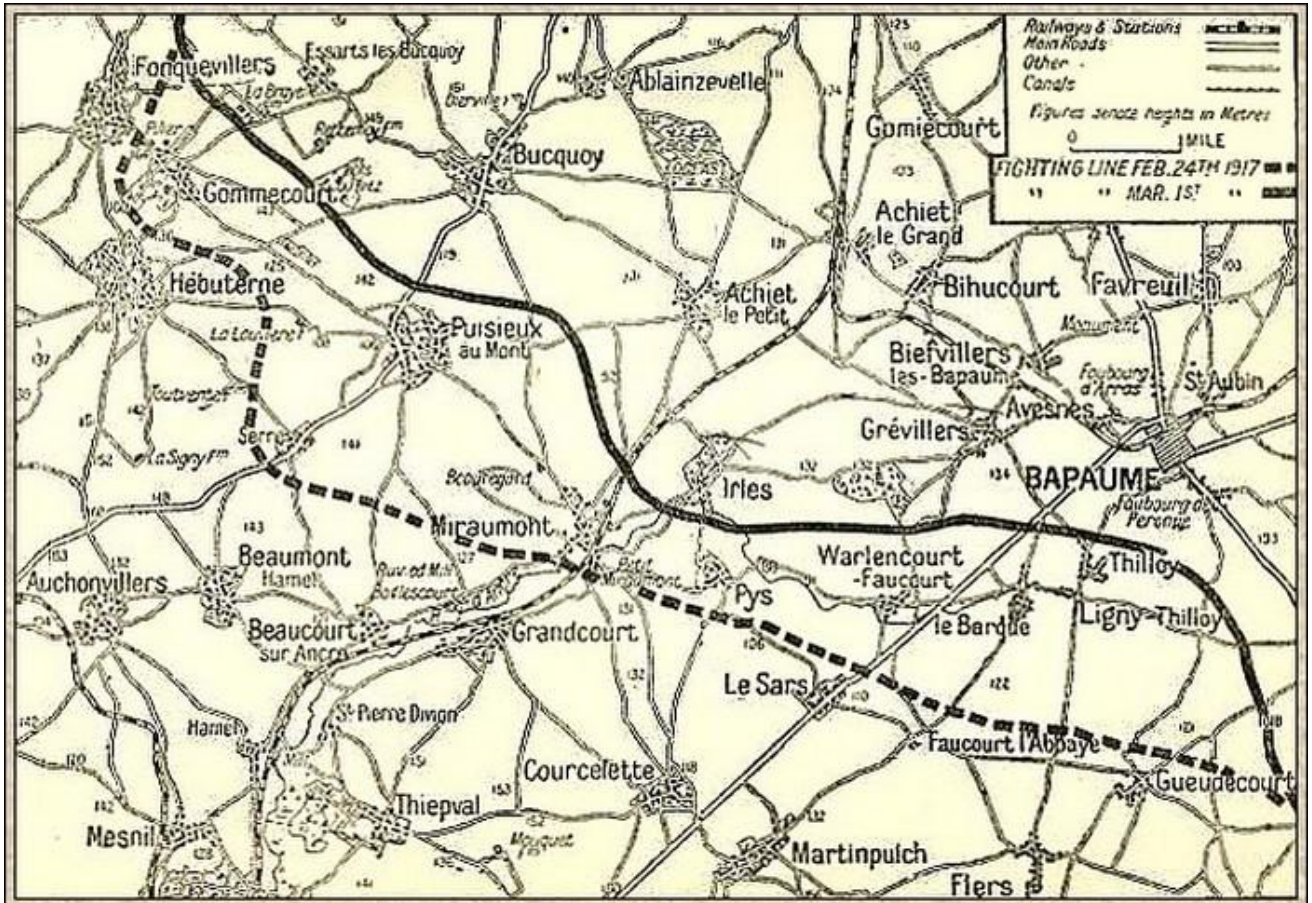
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Thirty-first Division, which occupied Serre, was the same brave North Country Division which had lost so heavily upon July 1 and November 13 on the same front. On entering the village they actually found the bodies of some of their own brave comrades who had got as far forward seven months before.

On March 4 the advance which had steadily continued in the north spread suddenly southwards to Bouchavesnes north of Peronne, the sector held by the Twentieth and Forty-eighth Divisions of Rawlinson's Army, which from this time onward was more and more engaged in the forward movement. Three machine-guns and 172 prisoners were taken.

There was some interruption of the operations at this stage owing to severe snowstorms, but upon March 10 Irles, west of Bapaume, was taken by assault by the Eighteenth Division. This was a formidable point, well wired and trenched, so that the artillery in full force was needed for preparation. The infantry went forward before sunrise, and within an hour the village with 15 machine-guns and 290 prisoners was in British hands. The losses were light and the gain substantial. Grevillers also fell next day. This advance in front of Bapaume was of importance as it turned Loupart Wood, forming part of a strong defensive line which might have marked the limit of the German retreat. It was clear from that day onwards that the movement was not local but far reaching. The enemy was still too strong to be hustled, however, especially upon the northern sector of the operations, where Jacob's Second Corps was feeling the German line along its whole front. An attempt at an advance at Bucquoy upon the night of March 13, carried out by the 137th Brigade of the Forty-sixth North Midland Division, met with a check, though most bravely attempted. The two battalions concerned, the 5th South Staffords and

5th North Staffords, found themselves entangled in the darkness amid uncut wire and suffered considerable loss before they could extricate themselves from an impossible position.



*Fighting Line, February 24, 1917, and Fighting Line, March 1, 1917*

On March 19 and 20 the whole movement had become much more pronounced, and the French as well as the British were moving over a seventy-mile front, extending from Arras in the north to Soissons in the south. Each day now was a day of joy in France as some new strip of the fatherland was for a time recovered, but the joy was tempered by sorrow and anger as it was learned with what barbarity the Germans had conducted their retreat. To lay a country waste is no new thing in warfare. It has always been

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held to be an occasional military necessity though the best commander was he who used it least. In all Napoleon's career it is difficult to recall an instance when he devastated a district. At the same time it must be admitted that it comes within the recognised chances of war, and that when Sherman's army, for example, left a black weal across the South the pity of mankind was stirred but not its conscience. It was very different here. These devils—or to be more just—these devil-driven slaves, with a malignity for which it would be hard to find a parallel, endeavoured by every means at their command to ruin the country for the future as well as for the present. Buildings were universally destroyed, including in many cases the parish churches. Historical monuments, such as the venerable Castle of Coucy, were blown to pieces. Family vaults were violated and the graves profaned. The furniture of the most humble peasants was systematically broken. The wells were poisoned and polluted. Worst of all, the young fruit-trees were ringed so as to destroy them for future seasons. It was considered the last possibility of savagery when the Mahdi's men cut down the slow-growing palm-trees in the district of Dongola, but every record upon earth has been swept away by the barbarians of Europe. As usual these outrages reacted upon the criminals, for they confirmed those grim resolutions of the Allies which made that peace by compromise for which the Germans were eternally working an absolute impossibility. Their Clausewitz had taught them that it is of supreme importance to make peace before there comes a turn of the tide, but he had not reckoned upon his descendants being so brutalised that a peace with them was a self-evident impossibility.

Turning from the deeds of savages to those of soldiers, we have now to trace the progress and scope of the great German retreat, the first pronounced movement upon either side on the Western Front since September 1914.

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From Arras to Roye the British Army was advancing while the movement was carried on to Soissons by the French. On the curve of the trenches the front measured more than a hundred miles. So close was the touch between the two Allied armies that the patrols of French and British cavalry rode together into Nesle. On March 18 the Australians had occupied Bapaume, with the Seventh Division moving upon their left and the Twentieth upon their right, the cavalry fringe being formed of the Indian Lucknow Cavalry Brigade of the Fourth Division. To the south the Warwick Brigade of the Forty-eighth South Midland Division passed through Peronne. At each end of the long curve the Germans held fast, Arras in the north and Soissons in the south being the two fixed points, but the country between, to a depth of ten miles in the British sector and of thirty miles in the French, was rapidly overrun by the Allies, the cavalry patrols feeling their way everywhere while the infantry followed hard upon the heels of the horses. Guns and munitions had been successfully removed by the Germans but incredible quantities of barbed wire and other defensive material had been abandoned in their positions. Towards the end of March the left of the French and the right of the British were in touch in the immediate front of St. Quentin. There had been scattered fighting all along the line, and the resistance thickened each day, so that it was evident that the final German position had been nearly reached. On March 24 the Australians had a sharp fight at Beaumetz between Bapaume and Cambrai. The village was taken, lost, and retaken with considerable loss upon both sides. It was clear that in this quarter a definite German line had been approached. Similar reports soon came in from Croisilles, from Lagnicourt, from Ronssoy, from Jeancourt, and all along from Arras to St. Quentin. So gradually the famous Hindenburg line defined itself, and the Allied Generals became more clearly aware of the exact nature and extent of this new German position. Early in April, by pushing up to



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it and brushing aside the advanced forces which screened it, its outlines were more clearly mapped. This process of definition led to more serious fighting, the worst of which, as will presently be shown, fell upon the Australians at Bullecourt, some ten miles from the Arras end of the new line. Some foretaste, however, of the considerable resistance which they were about to meet with in their section was encountered by the Australians at Noreuil on April 2. The brunt of the attack upon the village was borne by the South Australians, who behaved with great gallantry, having to rush a difficult position intersected by sunken roads. A small body of the stormers, some sixty in number, were cut off and overwhelmed, but the main body captured the village, taking 137 German prisoners. Among other brisk skirmishes occurring at the beginning of April was one at Epehy, fifteen miles north of St. Quentin, where the 144th Brigade of the Forty-eighth South Midland Division cleared the hamlet and sugar-factory of St. Emilie. In this operation, which was carried out chiefly by the 4th Gloucesters, 5 officers and 80 men fell, but the German loss was considerable. A few days later the 145th Brigade of the same division distinguished itself by the capture after sharp fighting of Ronssoy and of Lempire, the first village being carried by the 4th Berks and the latter by the 5th Gloucesters. This brought the British line in that quarter up to the final German position.

Some sharp fighting had also taken place at Savy and Selency to the immediate west and north-west of St. Quentin, upon the front of the Thirty-second Division, which, together with the Thirty-fifth and Sixty-first, had been pressing the German line. On the morning of April 2 the 14th Brigade of this division was ordered to attack Selency. On the two previous days the village of Savy had been taken, and a strong attack made upon the Bois de Savy by the 96th and 97th Brigades. The advance of April 2 was

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at early dawn and the veteran 2nd Manchester Battalion was in the lead. The whole operation was conducted under heavy machine-gun fire, but by swift movement and a judicious use of the ground the losses were minimised. Whilst the Lancashire men made direct for the village the 15th Highland Light Infantry kept pace with them upon their right flank. A battery of six German field-guns opened fire in the very faces of the stormers, but C Company of the Manchesters, with admirable steadiness and presence of mind, swerved to each side and rushed the guns from the flank, capturing them all. The attack was at 5 A.M., and by 6:30 the whole objective had been captured. No further advance was possible as the April front line was already close to St. Quentin, which was a German stronghold. The position at the end of the action was that the village was in the hands of the British but that the six guns with their caissons were in the open where the Germans could cover them with their fire. The victors were determined to have their trophies, and their enemy was no less eager to make it impossible. The moment that darkness had fallen a party of Manchesters, under the lead of Lieut. Thomas, the adjutant, and Lieut. Ward of the 161st R.F.A., endeavoured to manhandle the guns into the British lines, but directly they began to haul so sharp a fire of shrapnel was opened at a range of 800 yards that they were compelled to desist. A covering party of the 15th Highland Light Infantry lay round the guns till dawn, and during the day they remained safe under the rifles of the infantry. At eight o'clock on April 3 a further attempt to bring them in was made by Major Lumsden of the Staff, with Lieutenants Ward and Lomax of the gunners. Horse teams were brought down, and amid a terrific barrage the gun wheels began at last to revolve. Maddened by the sight seen under the glare of their star shells, the German infantry surged forward and for a time were all round the Highlanders who still guarded the guns. One small party of Germans dashed in upon the guns with a



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charge of dynamite and managed to blow in the breach of one of them. They were driven off, however, and the six guns were all brought in, while upon April 4 the six artillery caissons were also salvaged. So ended a most satisfactory little operation for which Major Lumsden received a Victoria Cross and later the command of a brigade, while the other April,

On April 2 in the north of the new line, near the spot where very great things were pending. Snow's Seventh Corps had taken Henin and Croisilles, with the aid of the Fifth Army upon their right. It was a small operation in itself, but it was preparing the jumping-off place for the great battle of April 9. There was continued bickering along the line where the British were pushing in the German outliers. In this work the Thirty-fifth Division in the Epehy district distinguished itself greatly during the early summer. One attack upon a hill held by the Germans and carried by the 15th Chesters and 15th Sherwoods of the 105th Brigade was particularly brilliant. In addition, upon April 4, the village of Metz with the adjoining position was taken after a sharp fight by the 59th Brigade of the Twentieth Division. The 10th and 11th K.R.R. were the battalions chiefly engaged in this fight, which at one time had an ugly aspect, as the Germans slipped into a gap between the Twentieth on the left and the Eighth Division on the right. They were cleared out, however, and the line was advanced beyond the village to the right of the Australians.

A more serious action was that which began upon April 13, when the Thirty-second Division was ordered to support the left of the French in their unsuccessful attack upon St. Quentin. The task assigned to the British division, with the Thirty-fifth Division co-operating upon its left, was to attack the village of Fayet. This was carried out very gallantly by the 97th Brigade, with the 2nd York Light Infantry and the

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16th Highland Light Infantry in the lead. The village with 100 prisoners was taken at the first rush, but it was found to be more difficult to get possession of a wood called the Twin Copses, beyond the village. So severe was the fighting that the General of the 97th Brigade had seven battalions under his command before it was finished. Finally, the Twin Copses were splendidly carried by the 11th Borders. The total of prisoners came to 5 officers and 334 men in this very spirited operation.

With the conclusion of the German retreat and the solidification of the new line, some more general view may be taken of the whole operation. It cannot be denied that it was cleverly planned and deftly carried out, though it can hardly be said to have deserved the ecstasies of admiration which were bestowed upon it by the German Press. It was not, for example, as formidable an operation as the British withdrawal from Gallipoli, an extraordinarily clever manoeuvre which received less than its fair share of recognition at home, because it was associated with the sad ending of high hopes. It was also universally taken for granted in Germany that Hindenburg was going to "reculer pour mieux sauter" as he had done once before at Tannenberg, and that some extraordinary burst of energy at some other point would soon change the exultation of the Allies into despair. Nothing of the sort occurred during that year, and it speedily became evident that the old Marshal had simply moved because his lines were untenable, and because by shortening them he could make some compensation for the terrific losses of men at the Somme. That he ever regained the ground was due only to the subsequent Russian debacle.

We have it upon the authority of Sir Douglas Haig that the great local retreat of the Germans had no very great effect in modifying the Allied plans. Those plans, so far as the British

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were concerned, were to make a combined assault from the north and from the south upon the Ancre salient, Gough attacking from the south and Allenby from the north. As the salient had now ceased to exist, the role of Gough was confined to following up the German retreat until he came to the new Hindenburg line, which was an obstacle of so formidable a character that it checked anything short of a very powerful attack. Allenby's part of the programme was still feasible, however, and resolved itself into an attack upon the high ground held by the Germans and their whole line down to the point where the new positions began. How Allenby carried out this task, and the great success which attended his efforts, will be described in the coming chapters.

Before passing to this and the other great battles which will make the year 1917 for ever memorable in our history, it would be well to briefly enumerate those world events which occurred during these three months and which directly or indirectly influenced the operations in France. The French line had remained stationary save for the forward movement already described. In Russia the lines had also remained firm, and there was no outward indication of the convulsions into which that unhappy country was about to be thrown by the revolution which broke out on March 12 of this year. From Italy also there was nothing momentous to report. The most cheering news which reached the Allies was from the British Eastern lines of battle, where both in the Sinai Peninsula to the east of Egypt, and in Mesopotamia, good progress was being made. The Sinai desert had been practically cleared of that enemy who had advanced so boastfully to the capture of Egypt, and the British lines were now upon the green terrain which faces Gaza upon the frontier of Palestine. The chief success, however, lay in Mesopotamia. A great soldier had apparently appeared in the person of General Maude,

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whose name may be recalled by the reader as the Commander of the 14th Brigade upon the Western front. Leaving his limited activities in the prosaic trenches of Flanders, he had suddenly reappeared, moving swiftly along the track of so many of the old conquerors, and leading his picturesque force of Britons and Indians against the ancient capital of Haroun-el-Raschid. In February he had avenged Townshend by recapturing Kut with more than 2000 prisoners. Following up his victory with great speed, he entered Bagdad upon March 11 at the heels of the defeated Turks, and chased them north along the line of the German railway, the constructors of which had never dreamed what strange stationmaster might install himself at their terminus. The approach of a Russian force seemed to hold out hopes for further combined operations, but meanwhile the whole of southern Mesopotamia remained in the hands of the British, and no Turk was left within forty miles of the ancient capital. The chief event in Great Britain was the successful flotation of the great war loan, which attained proportions never heard of before, and ended by bringing in the huge total of one thousand million pounds.

Beyond the usual skirmishes of light craft and isolated sinkings of warships by mine or submarine, there was nothing of importance in naval warfare, but an immense influence was brought to bear upon the course of the war by the German decision in February to declare a war zone round the allied countries, and to torpedo every merchant ship, whether neutral or hostile, which entered it. The measure was a counsel either of ignorance or of despair, for no one who knows the high spirit of the American people could imagine for a moment that they would permit their vessels to be destroyed and their fellow-citizens to be killed in such a manner. Within two days of the declaration of unlimited submarine warfare the President of the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, an act

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which was the precursor of war, though this was not formally declared until April 5. Great as were the loss, discomfort, and privation caused to Great Britain, and in a less degree to the other Allies, the accession of the United States with its enormous reserves of men and money to the cause of Democracy was far more than a sufficient make-weight. As events progressed, and as it became evident that Russia, swinging from the extreme of autocracy to the extreme of individualism, had ceased for a long time to come to be a useful ally, it grew more and more clear that the help of America was likely to save the Western Powers, not indeed from defeat, but from that pernicious stalemate and inconclusive peace which could only be the precursor of other wars to follow. Apart from the vast material help, the mere thought that the great race which has inherited our speech and so many of our traditions was lined up with us upon the day of Armageddon was a joy and an inspiration to every Briton.

## **II. THE BATTLE OF ARRAS**

**April 9 to April 23, 1917**

Vast preparations—Attack of Snow's Seventh Corps —The Ibez Trench—Attack of Haldane's Sixth Corps — Attack of Fergusson's Seventeenth Corps—A Scottish Front—The splendid Canadians—Capture of Monchy—Essex and Newfoundland —A glorious episode—The Chemical Works—Extension of the battle to the north—Desperate fight of the Australians at Bullecourt.

Whilst the German line was falling back to its new positions, and the Allies were eagerly following it across the ravished countryside until the increased resistance and the familiar lines of barbed wire warned them that the immediate retreat had come to an end, Sir Douglas Haig had managed, without relaxing his pursuit, to collect a

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strong striking force at the point of junction between the new German line and the old. The blow which he contemplated was no small local advance, but was a wide movement extending from the neighbourhood of Lens in the north to Arras in the south, a front of more than twelve miles. Upon this sector a tremendous concentration of artillery had been effected, and four corps were waiting the signal for the assault, the three southern ones forming Allenby's Third Army, while the fourth or northern one was the right-hand corps of Horne's First Army. The southern corps were the Seventh (Snow), which operated, to the south of Arras, having Croisilles for its southern boundary; the Sixth (Haldane), which advanced due east from Arras with the Scarpe for its northern boundary; the Seventeenth (Fergusson), which had its right on the Scarpe and its left on Thelus, with its front facing the three spurs which form this end of the Vimy Ridge; and finally the Canadian Corps (Byng), which faced this long and sinister slope, the scene of so much bloodshed in the past. Each corps was marshalled with three divisions in front and one in reserve, so that there were roughly 120,000 men in the storming line with 40,000 advancing behind them. Maxse's Eighteenth Corps was in reserve in the rear of the Third Army, while M'Cracken's Thirteenth Corps was behind the First Army. The Germans had six divisions, the Eleventh Prussian, Fourteenth Bavarian, First Bavarian Reserve, and the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Seventy-ninth reserve in the line. Their guns also were numerous, as subsequent captures were to prove, but it is probable that an extension of the Hindenburg retreat was in contemplation, and that some of the heavy artillery was already on the move. A second strong line from Drocourt to Quéant was known to exist, and its occupation would form a natural sequel to the retirement in the south.

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The German strategists had imagined that by withdrawing their troops over a long front they would throw out of gear all the preparations of the Allies for the spring offensive. What they actually did was to save their force in the Gommecourt peninsula from being cut off, which would surely have been their fate had they waited. But in the larger issue they proved to be singularly ill-informed, for they had stayed their retreat at the very points

of the line on which the offensive had been prepared, so that the plans of attack were neither modified nor delayed. That this is true is evident, since such tremendous blows as Arras in the north and Rheims in the south could not possibly have been delivered had the preparations only begun after the Hindenburg retreat.

One of the most difficult problems of this attack was how to arrange it upon that section which was covered by the town of Arras. It is true that the German line was 1700 yards east of the market-place, but the suburbs extended right up to it, and it was fringed with houses. The town itself, in which the storming troops must assemble and through which all supports and supplies must pass, was full of narrow streets within easy range of the German guns, and previous French experience had proved that each exit was so carefully and accurately barraged by the German fire that it was most difficult for the troops to debouch from it. This problem was solved by a fine piece of military engineering. The large cellars and other subterranean excavations with which the place abounded were connected up and fresh tunnels constructed, so that it was eventually found to be possible to put three whole divisions underground, with permanent headquarters and every necessary detail, including water, electric light, and a three-foot tramway. This fine work was carried out by the New Zealand, the 179th, and the 184th Tunnelling Companies. A huge dressing-station with 700

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beds was also constructed. In this great underground place of assembly the greater part of the Sixth Corps was assembled, while many of the tunnels on the south side of the town were allotted to the use of the Seventh Corps. All this had been carried out during the winter in the anticipation of a big attack being made at this point. For purposes of communication, over 1000 miles of twin cable was buried in six-foot trenches or secured to the sides of tunnels. Besides these special preparations, the usual immense labour of preparing for a modern attack had been thoroughly carried out along the whole line, including the construction of very many gun positions, trench mortar emplacements, dressing-stations, and innumerable dumps of munitions and engineering stores. Some dislocation had been caused in the plans by a partial withdrawal in the enemies' front trenches upon March 18, opposite the right end of the British lines. The abandoned works were occupied and linked up with the old system, so that upon April 9 all was in order for the assault. The extreme difficulties caused by the formidable defensive preparations of the enemy were fully realised, but everything which human forethought could suggest had been done to meet them. Above all, two great lessons taught by the Somme experience had been thoroughly assimilated; the one that the broader the attack the more successful it is likely to be, as it prevents a concentration of the German guns upon a single area; the other that it is wiser, even in the heat of battle and the glow of victory, to limit your objective to an area which is well within the range of your guns. That last blue line so far forward upon the map has been the cause of many a rebuff.

The British bombardment, which came in gusts during the days preceding the attack, did enormous damage to the German defences. The evidence of prisoners showed that for several days they had been reduced to their emergency



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