

British Second Army and Coalition Warfare in Flanders in the Hundred Days, 1918

by

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Abstract

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During the Hundred Days, British Second Army fought a successful *War of Liberation* alongside French and Belgian forces in the *Groupe d'Armées des Flandres* (GAF). The Army's achievements, deployed within a coalition army group under foreign command, have been overlooked in histories of the final year of the war

Although their initial role was to secure the flank of the Belgian Army for the *Liberation Offensive*, General Plumer's troops fought and won two major battles, the *breakthrough at Ypres 1918* and the *breakout* following *Courtrai*. Second Army's performance led to it being appointed the strike force for the GAF, assisting allied forces to clear the coast and liberate occupied Belgium. Plumer's methodological leadership of combined arms operations enabled this weakest of Haig's armies to overcome stubborn enemy resistance. An unseen consequence was the major dispute between Haig and Foch, involving British and French governments, over the return of Second Army to Haig's command.

The strategic German withdrawal, aided by the Flanders terrain and notorious weather, forced the final advance to follow a *staccato* rhythm. While the British troops exploited successfully their advantages in firepower through 'fire and movement' tactics, fighting this modern warfare came at the cost of heavy casualties.

Dedication

To the citizen soldiers of British Second Army who fought in the *Liberation Offensive* in Flanders, 1918.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, this study would not have been possible without the ongoing support of my family, who helped to create the necessary time and space when I could see none.

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Introduction

Somewhere within the pages of many of the personal photograph albums kept by German officers would be found an aerial photograph of Ypres... These photographs give us a sense of the feeling that must have weighed on any German commander who had been posted to that front for any length of time: so tantalisingly near and yet so frustratingly far.¹

While the phrase *War of Liberation* is not one closely associated with the First World War, during those final months on the Western Front, British and Dominion troops advanced alongside French and American allies to drive the German Army out of northern France. Further north a British Army fought alongside French and Belgian forces to liberate Belgium from four years of occupation.²

In Britain little public knowledge remains of this campaign; its story is buried even deeper than the forgotten history of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and its successful series of victories during the final 'Hundred Days' of the war.³

¹ B. Stichelbaut and P. Chielens, *The Great War Seen From the Air: In Flanders Fields 1914-1918* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2013), p. 12.

² Belgium had not been party to the build up to war and had sought to remain neutral; despite this it had been attacked by Germany as a consequence of the latter's *Schlieffen Plan* for the concentration of forces to carry out a decisive defeat of the French army. For a recent summary see M. MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2013), pp.584-92.

*The campaign of the 'Hundred Days', 8 August to 11 November 1918, was, in terms of sheer scale, the greatest in British military history. It was also, arguably, the campaign in which ground forces under British command exercised the most influence on the history of the world in the twentieth century.*⁴

In 1964 John Terraine had concluded that these 'stupendous victories', which did so much to hasten the final armistice, 'form... a little-known chapter of British military history'.⁵ It is a chapter still to be fully appreciated within public knowledge of the First World War, and within it can be found the story of the *Groupe d'Armées des Flandres* (Army Group, Flanders) (GAF), composed of Belgian and French forces, and British Second Army.

The *Official History of the War* represents the only detailed record of Second Army's operations during this period.⁶ Individual war diaries and unit histories record the campaign from a necessarily limited perspective rather than presenting an overall picture. While many military historians and others have written about the allied victories of 1918 and the achievements of the BEF and its commanders, there is little

³ This amnesia can be addressed via G. Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory – The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001); or for an earlier overview, J. Terraine, *To Win A War: 1918, The Year of Victory* (London: Cassell, 2008; first published by London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978).

⁴ J. P. Harris with N. Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice: The BEF in the Hundred Days Campaign, 8 August – 11 November 1918* (London: Brassey's, 1998).

⁵ From his editor notes in J. Terraine, ed., *General Jack's Diary: War on the Western Front 1914-1918 – The Trench Diary of Brigadier-General J. L. Jack, D.S.O.* (London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, original 1964 edition).

⁶ For the purposes of this study the key volumes are, J. Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1918 Vol. IV, 8th August - 26th September (Official History)* (HMSO, 1947); J. Edmonds with R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1918 Vol. V 26th September – 11th November (Official History)*, (HMSO, 1947).

or no reference to the liberation of Belgium or British Second Army.⁷ For the first time since the *Official History*, this study tells that story.

The onset of the centenary of the First World War has produced a growing number of new titles and reprints. In 2011 David Stevenson wrote a comprehensive work on the final year of the war,⁸ examining all aspects of the conflict and its principal combatants, from the front line to the home front. The chapters which deal with the fighting on the Western Front include references to Flanders and the GAF, acknowledging the strategic achievements of the campaign; the wide-ranging nature of the book leaves no space however for a detailed coverage. More recently, Nick Lloyd has written specifically about the Hundred Days,⁹ but there are few references to Second Army and the fighting in Flanders, though he does point out the implications for the German high command of the breakthrough at Ypres on 28 September.

Missing from the range of research and writing undertaken on the Hundred Days is a description of, or in some cases a recognition of, British Second Army fighting two

⁷ Examples include P. Hart, *1918*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008); M. Brown, *1918 Year of Victory*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1998); M. M. Evans, *1918, The Year of Victories*, (London: Arcturus, 2002), W. Groom, *A Storm in Flanders: The Ypres Salient 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front*, (London: Cassell, 2003); J. H. Johnson, *1918: The Unexpected Victory*, (London: Cassell & Co, 1997); J. Toland, *No Man's Land: The Story of 1918*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980); N. Lloyd, *Hundred Days: The End of the Great War* (London: Viking, 2013). The one notable exception in providing coverage of the campaign in Flanders is by Harris with Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice*, though even here it can be argued that the detail concentrates primarily upon the other theatres of the Western Front.

⁸ D. Stevenson, *With Our Backs To The Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (London: Penguin Books, 2012; first published London: Allen Lane, 2011).

⁹ N. Lloyd, *Hundred Days: The End of the Great War*, (London: Viking, 2013).

major battles plus supporting operations, and advancing 53 miles across Belgium before the Armistice on 11 November 1918.¹⁰

... *The [British Second] Army swept forward with a magnificent dash and elation that carried the very spirit of victory over the arena of the long conflict – over the mortal resting-place of those who died that this day might come.*¹¹

A series of victories in battle by a British Army, commanded by one of the most respected and successful British generals of the war,¹² has become forgotten over time. The *Liberation Offensive*,¹³ the campaign to liberate occupied Belgium in the Hundred Days, has received little attention.

This amnesia is paradoxical given the almost iconic status afforded to the city of Ypres within remembrance of the War, and the price paid by British forces in its defence.¹⁴

¹⁰ J. Edmonds with R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1918 Vol. V 26th September – 11th November (Official History)*, (HMSO, 1947).

¹¹ B. Brice, *The Battle Book of Ypres: A Reference to Military Operations in the Ypres salient 1914-18* (Stevenage: Spa Books in association with Tom Donovan Military Books, 1987; first published 1927), p. 49; a book that celebrates the achievements of British troops fighting in the Ypres Salient.

¹² For example, see the chapter on General Herbert Plumer's record in J. Terraine, *The Western Front 1914-1918* (Hutchinson, 1964) (Pen & Sword, 2003); also P. Simkins, 'Herbert Plumer', in Beckett, I. F. W. and Corvi, S. J. ed., *Haig's Generals* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2006).

¹³ The term *Liberation Offensive* is one recognised in Belgium: see B. Stichelbaut and P. Chielens, *The Great War Seen from the Air*, p. 259.

¹⁴ An early example of the original status attached to Ypres in Britain is provided by B. Brice, *The Battle Book of Ypres: A Reference to Military Operations in the Ypres Salient 1914-18* (Stevenage: Spa Books in association with Tom Donovan Military Books, 1987; first published 1927); a later view is provided by W. Groom, *A Storm in Flanders: The Ypres Salient 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front* (London: Cassell, 2003). There is also an interesting examination of the Salient over the course of the war including both contemporary

[The Ypres Salient] was arguably the most hated battleground of the whole war in the eyes of the British Tommy... this zone of Belgium to the east of Ypres was fought over in every year of the war...¹⁵

The Salient was created through the desperate fighting during the first Battle of Ypres in 1914, and defended in the subsequent battles in 1915 ('Second Ypres'). It was the launching point for 'Third Ypres' in 1917 (popularly termed 'Passchendaele'), and the centre of resistance to Ludendorff's offensive in the Battles of the Lys during the Spring of 1918 (sometimes referred to as 'Fourth Ypres').¹⁶ However, each of these battles (or series of battles) has become remembered for reasons not directly associated with the city, Flanders or Belgium.

The Battle of Ypres, 1914, saw the desperate defensive fighting by the original BEF, which saved this final piece of Belgium at the expense of the near destruction of the 'Old Contemptibles'.¹⁷ The spring of 1915 brought *The Second Battles of Ypres*, most usually remembered for the first use of poison gas on the Western Front. The initial success of this German offensive also led to the removal of Smith-Dorrien as the Commander of British Second Army and the promotion of Herbert Plumer in his stead. Passchendaele, *the Battles of Ypres 1917*, has become synonymous with the

photographs of the battlefield and the same sites in the 1960s: J. Giles, *The Ypres Salient: Flanders Then and Now* (London: Picardy Publishing Ltd, 1979; first published by London: Leo Cooper Ltd, 1970).

¹⁵ From the introduction by M. Brown to *The Wipers Times: The Complete Series of the Famous Wartime Trench Newspaper* (London: Little Books Ltd., 2006), p. xv.

¹⁶ **Map 14** shows the area of concentration of the fighting around Ypres and the Salient during the course of the war; it was over these well-trod battlefields that Second Army would finally break through the German lines in the Battle of Ypres 1918.

¹⁷ It is alleged that the Kaiser had dubbed the small British Army in 1914 a 'contemptible little army' – the original BEF proudly adopted the term as a compliment.

'mud and blood' school of British recall of the First World War, the futility of a heavy loss of life for the gain of a few miles. Military experts often highlight the *Battle of Messines 1917*, because of the British success and the commander responsible, Plumer. *The Battles of the Lys, 1918*, are used to highlight the success of the German storm troop tactics and programmed artillery preparations.¹⁸

In Britain it seems that the name 'Ypres' is recognised primarily because of the war cemeteries and memorials the city is host to; the reasons for the scale of this British sacrifice, the determination to defend the city and retain this foothold in Belgium, are hazy or forgotten.¹⁹

For most of the Hundred Days, Second Army operated under foreign command and largely independently of the other British forces, making it easy to overlook its role. In addition, its initial task was restricted to that of providing the flank guard for an attack by the Belgian Army with French support. Such circumstances have caused it to become the 'forgotten army' within assessments of the British armies during the final period of the war.

¹⁸ For descriptions of these battles, examples include, 'First Ypres': I. F. W. Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle 1914* (Pearson Education Ltd, 2004), or A. Farrar-Hockley, *Ypres: Death of an Army* (Cerberus Publishing, 1967); 'Second Ypres': J. Dixon, *Magnificent But Not War – The Second Battle of Ypres 1915* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2003); 'The Battle of Messines' and 'Third Ypres': R. Prior and T. Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Unknown Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), P. Liddle, ed., *Passchendaele in Perspective: the Third Battle of Ypres* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1997), N. Steel and P. Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground* (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2007; first published 2000); *The Battles of the Lys*: M. Kitchen, *The German Offensives of 1918* (Stroud, Gloucester: Tempus 2005); for an example of the arguments praising the German successes in the Spring of 1918 see B. I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army 1914-1918* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

It is a paradox that the commander of Second Army, General Herbert Plumer, has been acknowledged to be one of the most successful British generals during the war.²⁰ Plumer left no private papers – these were destroyed at his instruction before he died – a probable factor in why there has been less attention paid to his role during the final year of the war. There is much more material available regarding other British Army and Corps commanders who were prominent during this period.

At the start of 1918, Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig had negotiated for Plumer's return from Italy as part of a trade-off after failing to obtain requested reinforcements and replacements for his armies; in return for Haig's agreement to release Second Army's then commander General Rawlinson as his representative at Versailles. Haig's original release of Plumer to Italy in the autumn of 1917 receives little reference in his diaries.²¹ It can be equally perplexing to understand why, having succeeded in bringing Plumer back to the Western Front, within six months Haig had once again transferred him to foreign command. Haig had relied on Plumer to lead the defence in Flanders against German attacks in spring 1918, but was then prepared to release Second Army to undertake what was, as proposed, a subordinate role within a coalition force. Haig's diaries say very little about this arrangement and the reasoning behind it. Six weeks later, having apparently acquiesced quietly to the release of Second Army, Haig demanded that the Army was returned to his command

¹⁹ Steel and Hart refer to the 'beleaguered city of Ypres' as 'a symbol of British resolve to honour their pledge to restore the national integrity of Belgium and defeat Imperial German ambitions': Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, p. 19.

²⁰ P. Simkins, 'Herbert Plumer', in I. F. W. Beckett, and S. J. Corvi, ed., *Haig's Generals* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2006), pp. 141-163.

²¹ Given Haig's willingness elsewhere in his diary writings to comment upon similar manoeuvrings regarding senior officers, the lack of comment on Plumer's transfer to Italy appears to be a surprising omission.

as a matter of urgency.²² The rationale behind the decision to create the GAF, the reasons for the incorporation of Plumer and Second Army, and the subsequent argument regarding the return of the Army to Haig's command, have all received limited attention from historians.

The denigration of British army command during the First World War has been a feature of modern commentary and public perception.²³ This study considers whether the record of Second Army during the 1918 Flanders campaign supports Plumer's standing as one of, or perhaps the most, consistent and successful commanders of a British army in the First World War.²⁴

Second Army operated for most of the final months of the war as part of an allied Army Group. With any coalition there will be internal politics with implications for military operations. Plumer had experience in Italy of working within such an environment, and he was to have every opportunity to show his ability to operate in a highly charged political situation, with his subsequent appointment in charge of British forces following the Armistice, and his later posting in Palestine. Although many British historians have commented upon the allied relationships at a strategic level

²² See the relevant sections of G. D. Sheffield and J. Bourne, ed., *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2005).

²³ '...the historiography of the Western Front during the middle years of the twentieth century was dominated in Britain by debates over the standard of senior command....'. D. Todman, 'The Grand Lamasery Revisited', in G. Sheffield and D. Todman, ed., *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's experience 1914-18* (London: Spellmount Ltd, 2004), p. 40; the Introduction to this book is also a useful summary of prevailing attitudes and misconceptions.

²⁴ As well as his initial record at Second Ypres in 1915 and the high point of Messines in 1917, there are Plumer's second stage successes during Third Ypres, 1917, his record in Italy during the latter part of 1917, and his leadership during the German offensives in Spring 1918, all highlighted as evidence of this general's abilities. There are further comments and references to his performance later in this study.

throughout the war,²⁵ particularly those between Haig, the politicians at home in Britain, and the French military command, there is very little reference to the relationship with the Belgian leadership. Operational links at corps level and below have also been overlooked.

After four bruising years of conflict, there was still a final price to pay for the achievements of the Hundred Days: 'As far as the British were concerned, they not only suffered more casualties in 1918 than in any other year of the war, but also, remarkably, than in the whole of the second war'.²⁶

In his 2013 book, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century*,²⁷ David Reynolds draws comparisons between our respective memories of the First and Second World Wars; and how our memory of the former has been shaped by the impact of the later conflict.

*The British were unique in treating the First World War as an almost totally negative experience by which to accentuate the positives of the Second.*²⁸

This contrast has led to the loss of life in the First World War becoming its overwhelming legacy – particularly when viewed through the prism of the Second World War which is remembered primarily as a 'good fight' to defeat unambiguous

²⁵ Most notably, W. J. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front 1914-18* (London: Macmillan, 1996); see also, E. Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁶ M. Brown, *1918: Year of Victory* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1998).

evil.²⁹ Hence the military achievements of 1914-1918, and the successful prosecution of the war by the British Army in the second half of 1918, have been eclipsed in our memory of the war.

Despite the failures of the peace that followed, it was important for the Allies to win the war.³⁰ While acknowledging the underlying considerations relating to the prevention of a German hegemony in Europe, the attack on Belgium created legitimate and moral arguments in support of Britain's entry into the war. The victories of Second Army were therefore a direct contribution towards achieving a principal war aim and satisfying public demand for a Belgium free of German invaders. Victory also supported strategic concerns regarding Britain's economy and ability to trade.³¹ Britain continued to stand by its French and Belgian allies who had no other option but to fight to remove the German occupiers from their lands.³² For this, if for no other reason, there was a moral case in support of Britain's role in the war.³³ Belgium was central to this.

There has been very little reference in the War's historiography to Anglo-Belgian relationships after 1914, particularly military liaison. Information about or references to

²⁷ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*.

²⁸ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, p. 305 and p. 428.

²⁹ Reynolds draws this point from a paper by Hannah Arendt: 'Nightmare and Flight', *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, 1994), p. 134.

³⁰ These arguments are addressed in, for example, Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*.

³¹ For examples of the different views on the importance of the breach of Belgium's neutrality for the subsequent decision of the British Government to declare war on Germany, see N. Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), who sees underlying reasons based upon flawed political and economic considerations (Some Conclusions, pp. 443-4); or Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, who views the invasion of Belgium as the clinching argument for Britain's entry to the war (Chapter 2, pp. 40-42).

³² See the preface of M. Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Western Front* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2001; first published, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1993), p. xvi.

the Belgian Army, particularly English language studies, rarely go beyond the initial valiant resistance to the German invasion – and often the focus is on the alleged atrocities of the invaders, rather than the performance of the Belgian forces. The operations by the GAF in 1918 provide an insight into the actions of the Belgian command, and the development of the Belgian Army.

The joint offensive made particular demands upon Second Army commanders and troops. This study examines the implications of these, how Second Army responded, and with what success. The Army Group had the potential to produce a sum greater than its parts; alternatively, Second Army could have been restricted in its actions by the demands of its partners. When allied forces again fought for the future of Europe a generation later, lessons could have been learned from this earlier experience of coalition warfare.

The roots of modern war in terms of strategy, tactics and weaponry are contained in the final battles of 1918. A feature of the more recent historiography regarding the Western Front has been the range of objective and reasoned analyses of how the British Army performed and why.³⁴ These assessments do not all reach the same conclusion, witness the generally positive views of writers such as Paddy Griffith and Gary Sheffield, in comparison to the more critical Tim Travers (who stresses the

³³ This point is made in Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, pp. 421-2.

³⁴ Some prime examples include: S. Bidwell and D. Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982, 1985); P. Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-18* (Yale University Press, 1994); P. Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); T. Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare 1900-1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2003; first published, London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

worsening condition of the German Army during 1918), and Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson (who tend to view the subsequent British army successes as being due more to accident than design). Studies on the organisation and tactics of British forces during the final months of 1918 have tended to concentrate on Fourth Army, the Battle of Amiens (and the deployment of 400 tanks) and the breaching of the Hindenburg Line (undoubtedly a fine piece of arms); highlighting the successes of the Dominion troops, notably the Australians and the Canadians. These works have emphasised to varying degrees the 'combined arms' nature of the British Army's offensive, and the development of a 'modern' style of warfare.³⁵ The circumstances in which Second Army operated had certain obvious differences – for example, it had no tanks of its own, and faced particular challenges from the terrain and climate of Flanders. However, the Army was subject to the same direction and guidance on tactics and operations as other British armies. Given that 'surely the [British] Army learned from its experience...'³⁶ then there should be evidence that this applied to Second Army.

Its performance provides evidence of the BEF's learning curve and the improved integration of arms and tactics by 1918. The opening of the Battle of Ypres, 1918 was a combined arms attack³⁷ – the previous night had seen squadrons of the Royal Air Force's II Brigade undertake reconnaissance missions and bombing raids on enemy

³⁵ For an example refer to J. B. A. Bailey, 'The First World War and the Birth of Modern Warfare', in M. Knox and W. Murray, ed., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Bidwell and Graham, *Fire-Power*, p.65.

³⁷ This summary of the Battle of Ypres is drawn primarily from J. Edmonds, *Official History, Vol .V*; supplemented by other secondary works, primarily J. P. Harris with N. Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice*.

supply dumps and communications.³⁸ The British troops attacked following a surprise artillery barrage concentrated on enemy batteries and specified targets, utilising smoke and gas shells to neutralise defenders. A field artillery creeping barrage was complemented by a bombardment from heavy artillery to disrupt communications and any attempts by the Germans to move reserves forward. The successful advance was supported by the swift forward manoeuvring of artillery to exploit early gains, regular ground attacks by the RAF, and flexible troop deployment including advance squads, encircling attacks, and immediate fire support by Lewis-Gun teams.³⁹

In common with other British formations, Second Army faced challenges in the maintenance of its fighting strength and the quality of troop replacements. More than any other British Army, Plumer's force was composed of a number of units which had suffered severely during the German offensives earlier in the year; subsequently being re-formed or re-established, some only months or even weeks before the Battle of Ypres.⁴⁰

Second Army's campaign in Flanders took place within the context of the 'Liberation Offensive' waged by the GAF. This was a key moment in Belgian history, not least for those civilians who experienced it (an aspect of the First World War neglected by British historians and deserving of more investigation).

³⁸ The next week saw the RAF drop almost 7,000 bombs on German sectors: figures taken from analysis of the records of Second Army operations (TNA WO158/218, *Operations on the Second Army Front*).

³⁹ See Chapter Three.

⁴⁰ One example is 28 Brigade, 9th (Scottish) Division (referred to in, for example, J. Terraine, ed., *General Jack's Diary: War on the Western Front 1914-1918 – The Trench Diary of Brigadier-General J. L. Jack, D.S.O.* (London, Cassell & Co., 2000 edition); Jack only assumed command of 28 Brigade on 8 September 1918, with

This study is also an opportunity to revisit some of the myths regarding the First World War. The unique elements of coalition warfare and the liberation offensive provide the opportunity for a different perspective on some of the preconceived ideas in Britain on the war, its conduct, and its outcomes. Gail Braybon, in her review of modern historiography, identifies two key approaches to research into the war; adopting a 'comparative European perspective' and seeking for detail within 'the vast, multi-faceted edifice of war history'.⁴¹ The Flanders campaign offers the scope to pursue both these forms of examination – setting this analysis within a study of military history. Military history can both embrace and be informed by the cultural, social and economic histories of the period in question – and a military study without these perspectives can be considered to be incomplete.

In their book on the British Army's approach to war during the first half of the twentieth century,⁴² Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham discuss the role of the historian relative to the perspective of those who lived (and died) during the fighting. They point out the very limited view of the direct participants: 'Once a battle started, no one knew much more than was within his sight and hearing; nor would they until an historian reconstructed the scene'. There are also 'discontinuities' between a series of battles over time: 'Improvements in methods between one battle and the next went almost

its new battalions and other constituent units still in transit. Details of other units and formations re-established from cadre are contained in chapter two.

⁴¹ G. Braybon, in the Introduction to G. Braybon, ed., *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-18* (Berghan Books, 2003), p.1 – however this book, despite its variety of writers and themes from across Europe, contains very little reference to Belgium (only three references under 'Belgium' in the index, and one chapter on Belgian film post-1918) – thus highlighting the overlooked nature of the 1918 campaign in Flanders.

unnoticed because so many survived or fought in but one episode of a long ordeal... [soldiers] could not write historically about the changes in the way battles were fought'. Accordingly, this study examines what was happening both before and during the actions of Second Army. While the *Official History* represents the one serious and detailed review of the final campaign in Flanders, the work has flaws. Bidwell and Graham point out that '... as that memorial is dull and seldom visited it has not preserved the memory of how the victory was won, what it took to win it or why the sacrifice was necessary'.⁴³

The research for this study has the advantage of assessing the story of Second Army through the prism of the detailed writing on the First World War, and the British Army, from the past forty years. The result is intended to be consistent with the view presented by Brian Bond, writing on the eightieth anniversary of the war:

*The time is at last coming when the First World War can be treated as history (like earlier wars) rather than be approached emotionally and polemically in terms of 'futility', 'horror' and 'national trauma'.*⁴⁴

The initial starting point was to construct a framework and timetable for the campaign; this was done using the relevant volumes of the *Official History*,⁴⁵ together with the 1998 book by J P Harris with N Barr: *Amiens to the Armistice*.⁴⁶

⁴² Bidwell and Graham, *Fire-Power*, pp. 64-5.

⁴³ Bidwell and Graham, *Fire-Power*, p. 65.

The next step was to review available writings on 1918 and in particular to find secondary material on Second Army during the Hundred Days. This confirmed that there were very limited references to the operations of British Second Army and the GAF within descriptions and assessments of the final period of the War. There were acknowledgements of the allied advance in Flanders, and often the opening of the Battle of Ypres on 28 September 1918 was referred to, usually because of its place within the sequence of Foch's timed offensives along the Western Front. However a coherent military history of Second Army's campaign is always missing.

In reconstructing this history, the *Official History* narrative has been revised, developed and expanded. The key sources have been the war diaries of the units involved. These are contemporary documents written during or very soon after the events described, by someone directly involved in or close to the operations, and drawing upon other relevant plans, orders and intelligence reports. The quality of a war diary is however variable:

⁴⁴ From the Foreword to B. Bond et al, *Look to Your Front: Studies in the First World War by The British Commission for Military History* (London: Spellmount, 1999), p. vii; the book collects together a series of papers by writers who shared similar convictions.

⁴⁵ As referred to earlier, these are, J. Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1918 Vol. IV, 8th August - 26th September (Official History)* (HMSO, 1947); J. Edmonds with R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1918 Vol. V 26th September - 11th November (Official History)* (HMSO, 1947).

⁴⁶ Harris with Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice*; the book describes the history of the Hundred Days including the part played by British Second Army.

*They are not personal diaries... the information and quality of each war diary varies, often quite substantially. Some diaries will record little more than daily losses and map references whilst others will be much more descriptive...*⁴⁷

It is also important to acknowledge the circumstances in which the diary may have been completed:

*Writing such documents in the trenches would have been a difficult enough job in its own right but amid the clutter and confusion of battle it must have been doubly so.*⁴⁸

Many Second Army war diary entries for this period will have been written while the writer was on the move as part of the general advance. With the amount of detail varying considerably between diaries, greater use is made of the evidence from certain units. Overall the aim has been to ensure that the result is a balanced and well-informed description of the operations undertaken across the Army.

This study covers the war diaries produced at battalion, brigade, division and corps levels, as well as Second Army records. All the diaries, irrespective of the varying levels of detail or quality of writing, contain valuable additional papers; reports of actions and events, maps and diagrams, correspondence, copies of orders both issued and received. Crucially, there are subsequent reviews and analyses of

⁴⁷ M. Mace and J. Grehan, '1 July 1916 – The Somme War Diaries: Unvarnished Accounts of the British Army's Worst Day', *Stand To! The Journal of the Western Front Association*, 98 (September 2013), p. 23.

operations. Together, a more rounded assessment of a unit's history and operations can be made.

Use has also been made of first-hand accounts by participants where these add texture to the description of an event or emphasise a piece of information through commentary. Such memoirs have usually been written years after the events described, although they may be based upon diaries kept during the war. The study makes selective use of such records because the focus has been on presenting a narrative and analysis of the military operations; and to do this as objectively and impartially as possible. Eye-witness testimony can provide a snap-shot of an incident or event at the very sharp end but does not allow for context or show the wider picture. Commenting on the large growth in books on the First World War that are based on an individual's memoirs or, increasingly, the collation of extracts from a range of personal accounts, Reynolds points to this 'problematic approach to the writing of history'.

Although the recollections of ordinary participants can often provide fascinating and important historical detail that is not recorded in official archives, scholars cannot treat such 'testimony' as intrinsically more reliable than any other source.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Mace and Grehan, 'Somme War Diaries', p. 23.

⁴⁹ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), pp. 367-370.

These primary and first hand eyewitness sources have interpreted and analysed by researching selected and relevant secondary writing. There are histories of individual formations and units belonging to Second Army.⁵⁰ A number of books include limited references to Second Army during the Hundred Days. The two titles which have provided the most perceptive commentary on the strategic import of the GAF victories were written thirty years apart: John Terraine's summary account of 1918, written at the end of the 1970s in his drive to have the military history of the First World War looked at afresh; and the recent comprehensive history and analysis of that year by David Stevenson.⁵¹ The study also draws upon key assessments of the British Army in 1918, its composition, doctrine and tactics, logistics and supply, weaponry and resources; particular examples include Bidwell and Graham's book on the development of artillery and its place in the all-arms battle;⁵² and Paddy Griffith's analyses of the British Army's fighting tactics.⁵³ Important context has been provided by the revisionist writings on the British Army's performance during the war and in 1918 in particular; the principal starting point being Gary Sheffield's seminal *Forgotten Victory*,⁵⁴ plus Gordon Corrigan's *Mud, Blood and Poppycock*,⁵⁵ an excellent re-examination of the various myths and misperceptions regarding the War.

⁵⁰ Two prime examples are C. Falls, *A History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (London: Constable, 1996; first published, Belfast: McCraw, Stevenson, 1922); D. Bilton, *Hull Pals: 10th, 11th, 12th & 13th (Service) Battalions of the East Yorkshire Regiment: A History of 92 Infantry Brigade, 31st Division* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1999). Please refer to the Bibliography for further sources.

⁵¹ Terraine, *To Win A War*; Stevenson, *Backs To The Wall*.

⁵² Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower*.

⁵³ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*; Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods*.

⁵⁴ Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*.

⁵⁵ G. Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock: Britain and the First World War* (London: Cassell, 2003).

The most useful and relevant of these works are referred to within the text and listed in the accompanying bibliography.

The research has informed the themes referred to in this Introduction; as the narrative proceeds, these are described and analysed, drawing upon primary sources wherever possible. The composition of Second Army, its preparation for and conduct of operations, and the conclusions regarding the campaign outcomes, have also been analysed with the aid of secondary writings on the performance of British forces during the latter stages of the war.

There is a shortage of secondary material on certain themes. Writing on the allied coalition is limited and looks mainly at French and American links; there are few references to Belgium other than in 1914 and the German occupation. The exceptions are to be found in works by William Philpott and Elizabeth Greenhalgh, which include references to the relationships between Britain, France and Belgium. In particular, Greenhalgh provides a valuable commentary on Haig's dispute with Foch regarding the return of Second Army to the former's command.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ E. Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); also valuable is her later book on Foch: E. Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). W. J. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front 1914-18* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); W. J. Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', in Bond, B. et al, *'Look to your Front' Studies in the First World War by The British Commission for Military History* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), pp. 121-135.

Despite the general recognition of Plumer as one of the most successful commanders of the war, only two biographies have been written,⁵⁷ which give a limited narrative of his career and contain very little critical analysis; and he has a chapter by Peter Simkins in a book on Haig's army commanders.⁵⁸ There have been a range of books examining his major battles, particularly Messines and the later set-piece actions of Third Ypres; but he receives little coverage within writing on the final stages of the war.

Of the conscript army of 1918, there has only been one general study so far, Ilana Bet-El's 1999 excellent 'ground-breaking' description of the conscript experience, focusing on the reality of army life for the new troops.⁵⁹ Fourteen years later, Tim Lynch has published his study of a Yorkshire draft, which also provides a brief social and military history of the conscript generation, and their combat experience.⁶⁰

English language writing on the performance of the French Army in World War I is generally available, mostly as part of accounts of particular battles or periods of the War, often complementary to the British experience (the one exception being Verdun). Particular examples of the writer deliberately reminding us of the French

⁵⁷ G. Powell, *Plumer: The Soldiers' General: a Biography of Field-Marshal Viscount Plumer of Messines* (Pen & Sword, 2004); T. Harington, *Plumer of Messines* (John Murray, 1935). Perhaps understandably, the biography by his former Chief of Staff, Harington, presents a very positive and uncritical portrait of its subject.

⁵⁸ P. Simkins, 'Herbert Plumer', pp. 141-163.

⁵⁹ I. R. Bet-El, *Conscripts: Forgotten Men of the Great War* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2009; first published under the title *Conscripts: Lost Legions of the Great War* by Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999); the term 'ground-breaking' is taken from the paperback edition's sleeve notes.

⁶⁰ T. Lynch, *They Did Not Grow Old: Teenage Conscripts on the Western Front, 1918* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Spellmount (The History Press), 2013). This book is a wonderful read, combining social and military history, and providing a concise summary of the British Army's development during the war years. Lynch's ability to combine readability with academic rigour, to provide first hand experiences within a meaningful context, is to be

Army's role include William Philpott's account and re-assessment of the Battle of the Somme,⁶¹ and more recently, Nick Lloyd's history of the Hundred Days.⁶² The latter work has the added value of focusing on the French contribution in the latter part of 1918, a neglected topic. Anthony Clayton's *Paths of Glory* (2003) remains the one full history of the French Army in World War I.⁶³ There is no comprehensive account in English of the Belgian Army in the First World War;⁶⁴ accounts within more general texts deal mainly with 1914 and little thereafter. The best military history of the Army in 1914 is Paul Van Pul's account of the Battle of the Yser.⁶⁵

The first of the seven chapters in this study sets the context for the campaign. It describes the climate and terrain of Flanders, and the implications of these for the armies fighting there. The majority of the chapter concerns Second Army and its GOC, through examination of 'The Advance in Flanders' over the summer of 1918. Particular aspects of warfare in Flanders are considered; of these, gas was a constant factor, regularly employed within artillery shoots by both sides. In common with other British armies, the RAF was integral to the conduct of operations as part of Second Army's combined arms methodology.

admired. Lynch makes the point that 'More attention has been paid to pets in the trenches...' than to the conscripted soldiers (p. 230).

⁶¹ W. J. Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme* (London: Little, Brown, 2009).

⁶² N. Lloyd, *Hundred Days: The End of the Great War* (London: Viking, 2013).

⁶³ A. Clayton, *Paths of Glory: The French Army 1914-18* (London: Cassell, 2003).

⁶⁴ For this reason, the Osprey book (one of its *Men-at-Arms* series) on *The Belgian Army in World War I* has been helpful, including a useful summary of the Army's development over the course of the War and its operations in 1918: R. Pawley & P. Lierneux, *The Belgian Army in World War I* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2009).

⁶⁵ P. Van Pul, *In Flanders' Flooded Fields: Before Ypres there was Yser* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2006).

Chapter Two opens with the formation and composition of the *Groupe d'Armées des Flandres*, including the strategic and policy considerations behind its creation. The chapter then looks briefly at the Belgian Army before providing a detailed insight into the operational readiness of Second Army.

Chapters Three to Six describe the major battles and operations undertaken by Second Army from the opening day of the Battle of Ypres on 28 September 1918, through to the Armistice. The planning of the crucial first attack is considered in detail, including liaison within the GAF and with the Belgian Army. The subsequent fighting is examined, explaining how Second Army strove to exploit the breakthrough of enemy lines, with the advance frustrated by a combination of the rear guard actions of the enemy and the interaction of climate and terrain conditions. The success achieved by Second Army led to Plumer's force taking the lead role for the GAF in the subsequent Battle of Courtrai. The breakout by the army group saw the liberation of large areas of Flanders. Up to 11 November, Second Army units continued to exploit the gains made, crossing the River Lys and developing preparations for assaulting beyond the River Scheldt; thus helping to precipitate the overall defeat of the German Army on the Western Front and the search by its commanders for a negotiated peace.

Chapter Seven considers the consequences for the civilians of Flanders as the British forces drove forward the advance. A final section then examines the arguments

around the return of Second Army from the GAF to Haig's command, within the crucial context of the ongoing armistice negotiations.

The Conclusion reviews the performance of British Second Army, its troops and commanders; the strategy and tactics adopted; and the wider implications of the Army's victories. The aim is to place on record an assessment of the achievements of Second Army, its contribution to the GAF, to the liberation of Flanders and the defeat of the German Army on the Western Front.

A set of appendices include comprehensive Orders of Battle for Second Army in 1918; bibliography; maps; notes on terminology and a glossary of terms; the full text of Foch's letter 19 October, and the resulting letters from Haig; plus supporting papers on particular aspects of Second Army operations.

The forgotten story of British Second Army in Flanders during the Hundred Days will now be told.

Dennis Williams

Note: Many locations in Flanders have alternative French and Dutch names.

At any particular point in the study, I have opted to apply the name and spelling from the relevant source or reference.

Chapter One

British Second Army: July-September 1918

*You do not know what Flanders means. Flanders means endless human endurance. Flanders means blood and scraps of human bodies. Flanders means heroic courage and faithfulness even unto death.*¹

Flanders is the ancient name for the area of land along the North Sea coast in Belgium adjoining the French coast along the English Channel. The name means literally 'flooded land', reflecting the elaborate drainage system which channels most of its heavy rainfall into the river Yser. The area is largely flat and therefore the series of relatively low ridges (no more than 160 feet high) east of the main town of Ypres, provide a commanding view of the entire plain; hence the military value of these ridges and the small villages and key pieces of ground in and around them. Many of the names record key battles and actions, as control was contested over the course of the War.²

Ian Beckett describes Flanders as:

¹ Quoted in J. Giles, *The Ypres Salient: Flanders Then and Now* (London: Picardy Publishing Ltd, 1979; first published by London: Leo Cooper Ltd, 1970), p. 226; the words are from an 'extract from a letter of an unknown German officer found in the mud of the battlefield, quoted in *Realities of War*, by Philip Gibbs'.

² Iconic names and titles such as Messines, Wytschaete, Ploegsteert, Hollebeck, Polygon Wood, Hill 60, Passchendaele. A useful pen picture is given at the start of chapter 3 of W. Groom, *A Storm in Flanders: The Ypres Salient 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front* (Cassell, 2003). There is also the wide number of battlefield guides which are available for anyone wishing to visit the sites.

... a level plain broken only by a line of undulations rising to slight, almost imperceptible, hills which ran first west to east from Cassel to Mount Kemmel then, as gentle ridges, east to north-east through Wytschaete, Gheluvelt and Passchendaele, finally curving north to Dixmude. Technically the plain was mostly heavy marine clay known as Ypres clay, the hills of Ypresian and Paniselian sand sediments overlying the clay.

The hill line stood at about 400 feet at Kemmel, but not much more than 100 or 150 feet at Wytschaete and Gheluvelt, and only 70 feet at Passchendaele. From Kemmel it was possible to see the whole countryside from Lille to Menin and Dixmude. Various spurs extended from the ridge line, as at Messines... given the low-lying nature of much of the plain, these gentle slopes took on the appearance of dominant features, a saucer-like rim appearing to the observer from Ypres lying at the centre of the plain. Gradients were gentle nearly everywhere...³

The majority of Belgium had been under German occupation for four years. The Belgian Government had rejected the German demand on 2 August 1914 for Belgium to adopt a stance of 'benevolent neutrality' and allow free access across its borders

³ I.F.W. Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2004), pp. 42-3; Beckett's references include P. Doyle, *Geology of the Western Front, 1914-1918* (London: Geologists' Association, 1998), pp. 11-14, 29-32; J. Hussey, 'The Flanders Battleground and the Weather in 1917' in P. Liddle, ed., *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), pp. 140-158; in a later book, Beckett writes of 'one French general's description of Flanders in 1914 as a monotonous countryside with an air of melancholic sadness melting almost imperceptibly into the grey waters of the North Sea' (I.F.W. Beckett, *The Making of the First World War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 1.

for the German Army: invasion followed.⁴ The Belgians then sought to put up as much resistance as possible, with an inevitable outcome such was the imbalance of the opposing forces.⁵

The majority of occupied Belgium was under the administration of a Governor General, with the areas in the vicinity of the front line placed under military administration. It has been estimated that total Belgian war deaths, military and civilian, were around 50,000; its army recorded 13,716 soldiers killed, 44,686 wounded, and 34,659 captured or missing in action.⁶

The British Army had consistently defended Ypres, the principal remaining city of Belgium, since the dogged resistance by the 'Old Contemptibles' at the end of 1914.⁷

Malcolm Brown has noted:

⁴ Because the *Schlieffen Plan* required an attack on France from the direction of Belgium, the German army had already commenced crossing the border before the ultimatum expired.

⁵ M. MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2013), pp. 584-6. A subsequent attempt by the invaders to set up an independent Flanders under German influence and with a force to fight alongside the German Army failed, as most Flemish-speakers remained loyal to the country of their birth. Between October 1916 and June 1917 around 170,000 Belgians (including 4,000 women and 3,000 children) were deported for labour in Germany, although this was not seen as a successful policy and repatriation began in 1917 (M. Derez, 'The Experience of Occupation: Belgium', in J. Bourne, P. Liddle, I. Whitehead, eds., *The Great World War 1914-45: Volume 1: Lightning Strikes Twice* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 511-532). Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 279, states that 'during the war [Germany] used some 120,000 Belgian workers in France and Belgium (see also P. Haythornthwaite, *The World War One Source Book* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1992), pp. 148-9). The Belgians were forced to conform 'to German rules and German ways of life (even... to German time of day) (A. Garcia, 'Soup and Stoicism – Feeding occupied Belgium during the Great War', *Stand To! The Journal of the Western Front Association*, 82 (April/May 2008), pp. 57-60). This paper describes the operation of the American-based aid agency, Commission of Relief for Belgium (CRB); it points out that there is very little research available into the experiences of the Belgian civilian population during the war. Resources were seized for German consumption and homelessness and starvation became a fact of life for many Belgians, despite humanitarian aid from allied and neutral countries. Germany requisitioned all manner of goods from the populace such that 'From 1917 Belgium's industry was systematically dismantled... and its machines were melted down to make weapons' (Derez, 'Experience of Occupation', p. 519).

⁶ Haythornthwaite, *World War One Source Book*, pp. 149-152.

⁷ As referred to in the Introduction to this study, this description derives from an alleged remark made by the Kaiser about the small size of the volunteer British Army prior to 1914. .

...the British determination to hang onto this piece of torn and battered territory...

Not yielding ground to the enemy was part of the ethos of the time. Additionally the Belgians had lost so much of their homeland to the Germans that to concede even more – and by doing so to allow the Germans to advance to the very walls of Ypres – would not have been just a geographical adjustment, it would have been a psychological one, indeed almost a gesture of defeat.⁸

A parallel has been drawn between the ongoing conflict around the Ypres Salient and the epic Franco-German clash at Verdun.⁹ Fittingly, Ypres would provide the platform for the successful breakthrough by Second Army at the end of September 1918.

Operations in Flanders

In 1918 a British Army was composed of an Army Headquarters (HQ), at least two corps, plus units attached at army level for the purposes of management, supply and

⁸ From the introduction by M. Brown to *The Wipers Times: The Complete Series of the Famous Wartime Trench Newspaper* (London: Little Books Ltd., 2006), p. xv.

⁹ The analogy is drawn by M. Brown, *Verdun 1916* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2003; first published 2000), pp. 21-2: 'The city of Ypres, determinedly defended with the kind of 'they shall not pass' mentality which pertained at Verdun, is the only possible British equivalent'. The comparison had been made much earlier - Steel and Hart quote Captain Harry Yoxall, 18/KRRC '...there is only one battle of Ypres... [lasting] from October 1914 and, with Verdun, it is the biggest battle of all' (IWM documents, H. W. Yoxall, letter, 3 August 1917); see also N. Steel and P. Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground* (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2007; first published 2000), p. 13.

strategic firepower. This included artillery, engineers, transport, medical, machine gun, veterinary and labour units. Army HQ reported to General Headquarters (GHQ).

The Orders of Battle for British Second Army during 1918 are set out in Appendix A.

From their original structure in 1914 of two divisions plus Signals Section, Army Corps grew and increased in complexity. The number of divisions could be more than two and, as these were moved around or in and out of the line, so they might be moved to different corps. By 1918 a corps HQ could consist of 50 officers and up to 150 other ranks. Corps units included heavy trench mortar batteries, signals, cyclists, motor transport and mobile workshops. The average soldier would know which Army he was in and its commander, and his division, but was far less likely to know which corps they were attached to due to formation changes and the lack of a corps 'identity'.

The largest tactical unit of the British Army was the division. It consisted of a division HQ, three infantry brigades, plus troops from all ground forces including artillery, engineers, signals, transport, and medical. At full establishment it could consist of 18,000 men and 5,000 horses.

The infantry brigade was an intermediate and largely administrative unit, between the division and battalions. Regular *Intelligence Summaries* were prepared by a brigade for division HQ, recording information on its own and enemy operations, plus other

intelligence of use.¹⁰ Its HQ would have a small number of officers and men, often drawn by secondment from battalions. In early 1918, as a consequence of the manpower shortage, brigades were reduced from four to three infantry battalions. A number were wound up and men redeployed in order to ensure that most remaining battalions were as close to full-strength as possible.

The core tactical unit of the Army was the infantry battalion. The HQ comprised the battalion CO with senior and administrative officers and men; key responsibilities included such specialist roles as medical and transport. The battalion was drawn from the British system of regiments. With the exception of the Guards regiments, which had no Territorial or New Army Battalions (though they did recruit from volunteers and conscripts), most County Regiments had two Regular Army battalions, two Territorial battalions, and also subsequently raised battalions of the New Army.

All soldiers carried a rifle, the Short Magazine Lee Enfield (SMLE), and bayonet. By 1918 each battalion was also equipped with 36 Lewis light machine guns, plus small mortars and grenades. This significant increase in firepower was designed to compensate for the reduced number of overall troops; it also reflected tactical improvements through which small units of infantry would be more flexible and effective when attacking. Trench mortar and machine gun units were deployed under divisions, increasing in number and scope during the war. There was a similar increase in heavy artillery at corps and army levels.

¹⁰ TNA WO95/2364, War Diary of 94th (Yeomanry) .Brigade HQ, *July 1917–May 1919*; ‘Intelligence Summary’ headings included *Our Operations (Infantry, Artillery, machine-guns, trench mortars, aircraft, visibility), Enemy*

Each battalion consisted of the HQ plus four companies of men; each company was made up of four platoons. By this stage of the war, the average platoon would comprise:¹¹

| | |
|----|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | <i>Platoon Commander and Runner</i> |
| 2 | <i>Scouts</i> |
| 6 | <i>Lewis Gun Team, Right</i> |
| 6 | <i>Lewis Gun Team, Left</i> |
| 4 | <i>Riflemen, Right</i> |
| 4 | <i>Riflemen, Left</i> |
| 1 | <i>Yukon Pack Carrier</i> |
| 2 | <i>Platoon Sergeant and Runner</i> |
| — | |
| 26 | <i>Officers and Other Ranks</i> |

The composition of the platoon, its weaponry and additional equipment, reflects the emphasis at this stage in the war of empowering this smallest operational unit of soldiers to provide its own covering and supporting firepower; with additional supplies and ammunition such that it can occupy and 'dig in' on seized ground. The platoon had become,

Operations (Infantry etc.), and Intelligence (Movement, General).

¹¹ The description is taken from the operational instructions issued for the troops of 1st Lancashire Fusiliers (86 Brigade, 29th Division – the one Regular Army Division within Second Army), as part of the preparations for the

... *An army in miniature, the Lewis guns supplying the covering machine gun fire, the rifle grenadiers acting as artillery; and the riflemen making the infantry assault.*¹²

The platoon had to be capable of altering its approach formation in order to respond to changing circumstances. It is implicit that the platoon command is expected to use its initiative in making the first response to whatever threat the enemy presents; and to take appropriate action to win a resulting firefight. These arrangements were responding to a more open style of warfare; a practical demonstration of the changes that have taken place – the ‘learning curve’ – in small arms tactics and the delegation of command within the British Army.

It became increasingly common for additional weapons teams to be added to companies or battalions for specific operations. For example, 87 Brigade (29th Division) attached one field gun, two machine guns, one trench mortar and a section of cyclists (with a forward scouting role) to each company.¹³

Battle of Ypres which opened three days later on 28 September 1918: TNA WO95/2013, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 1, 24/25.9.1918*.

¹² Captain A.O. Pollard, VC, quoted in Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front, 1914-18: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p.98; I first came across this descriptive metaphor in Boff, J. ‘Combined Arms During the Hundred Days Campaign, August-November 1918’, *War in History*, 2010, 17(4), pp. 459-477, online at <http://wih.sagepub.com/content/17/4/459>, p. 467.

¹³ TNA WO95/2303, War Diary of 87 Infantry Brigade, 1st September 1918. There are many other examples given throughout this study of attaching additional firepower and gun teams to infantry units and formations, all demonstrating the combined arms tactics applied by Second Army forces.

The *British Official History* sets the scene for British Second Army in the summer of 1918, pending the forthcoming *Advance in Flanders*.¹⁴

*The preparations of the enemy had been very carefully watched, complete air photographs being obtained week by week; and as the same formations, with the same staffs and same intelligence organisation had remained on the front since the battle in April, any change in the German situation had been at once noticed. Early in June, when an attack [by the Germans] seemed imminent, a systematic destruction of the enemy's establishments by bombardment was begun, and harassing fire had since been ceaselessly employed.*¹⁵

Following heavy fighting in April as part of Ludendorff's 'Georgette' offensive, causing Second Army to concede ground had won during Third Ypres, the northern sector had been relatively quiet. However, even the relatively limited actions of both sides had meant that casualty levels remained high; from 5 August – 7 September 1918 the Army sustained 10,437 casualties.¹⁶

¹⁴ This is the title given to this period of the war in Flanders, 8 August-26 September 1918, by the *Official History*.

¹⁵ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. IV*, pg. 428.

¹⁶

| British Second Army Casualties 5th August – 7th September 1918 | |
|---|--|
| II Corps | 346 (includes the American 30 th Division) |
| X Corps | 2,392 |
| XV Corps | 4,832 |
| XIX Corps | 2,867 (does <u>not</u> include the American 27 th Division) |
| TOTAL | 10,437 |

Source: Edmonds, *Official History Vol. IV*.

In July 1918 the German Chief of Staff, General Ludendorff, had continued to harbour hopes of a further offensive in Flanders, with some prospect of a breakthrough; resources including heavy artillery and aircraft had been directed to the area in readiness. However the losses at the Battle of the Marne dealt a final blow to this plan and the attack was cancelled.¹⁷ Flanders had strategic importance for both sides, guarding as it did access to the coast, BEF supply lines and the left flank of the British Army.

Typical of experiences on the Second Army front during July is that of 105 Brigade (35th Division),¹⁸ comprising 15th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment, 15th Battalion, Sherwood Foresters and 4th Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment.

During the course of 5-6 July 1918, the Brigade relieved the 358 French Infantry Regiment along a stretch of the front in the Locre Sector, Mont Rouge, to the south-east of Ypres. The exercise proceeded smoothly and without incident. 15/Cheshires relieved the French front line units; 15/Sherwood Foresters took over the support positions; 4/North Staffords moved into place as brigade reserve. These three roles would be rotated at regular and frequent intervals, to ensure that all troops had an equitable share of the responsibilities of the front line, and opportunities for training and recreation. While in the line the daily routine included regular forward patrols for reconnaissance purposes, raids on enemy trenches, and the regular tasks of wire examination and repair. The exchange of artillery, mortar or machine gun fire was a

¹⁷ Terraine, *To Win A War*, pp. 94-5, 100.

¹⁸ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

constant reminder of the state of hostilities, as was the resulting slow but sure toll of casualties that resulted. The brigade's diary gives various examples of the ongoing resistance by the German soldiers, opponents capable of stubborn defence.¹⁹

A similar routine persisted for the remainder of the month, with increased regular patrolling by front line battalions, occasionally generating fire from the German positions; bouts of enemy artillery fire, day and night, often intense and for a prolonged period. The consequences of the German actions, during what might be described as a reasonably quiet month, are evident from the brigade casualty figures of 33 soldiers killed, 110 wounded and 14 missing.²⁰

The Germans continued to mount occasional raids and limited attacks on parts of the Second Army line – not the actions expected of an enemy with low morale or contemplating defeat. On 11 August 1918 the diary of 18th Battalion (Arts and Crafts), King's Royal Rifle Corps (122 Brigade, 41st Division) records its troops manning the forward line of trenches and coming under a severe enemy barrage; the battalion was

¹⁹ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade, entries 6-25 July 1918. For example:

[On the night of 13/14 July a patrol of one NCO and three men] went out from our lines, and after proceeding some distance the N.C.O. gave orders for the men to remain behind. He went forward himself and ran into a party of 30 Germans, apparently forming up for a raid. The patrol being warned attempted to get back to bring up a Lewis Gun but were pursued by the enemy and bombed while taking cover in a building. The N.C.O. being wounded the 3 men made a dash for it and have not been seen since. When the enemy party were first discovered a heavy barrage of shells of all calibres was put down on Locre and our front line causing several casualties.

²⁰ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

| 105 Brigade: Casualties July 1918 | | | | | | |
|--|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| | Killed | | Wounded | | Missing | |
| | Officers | Other Ranks | Officers | Other Ranks | Officers | Other Ranks |
| 15/Cheshires | 1 | 8 | 1 | 31 | - | 3 |
| 15/Sherwood Foresters | 1 | 16 | - | 43 | 1 | 10 |
| 4/North Staffs | - | 7 | 1 | 34 | 1 | 13 |
| Totals | 2 | 31 | 2 | 108 | 1 | 13 |

then hit by a German attack in force. In consequence the British troops counter-attacked to recover lost ground, resulting in 49 casualties, including three officers and four other ranks (ORs) killed.²¹

At the start of August the front of Second Army (with Fifth Army on its right), ran from three miles north of the La Basse canal to the northern side of Ypres; to the left lay the Belgian line, extending to the coast. The *Official History* notes: 'All the British divisions of the Second and Fifth Armies had taken part in heavy fighting during the early part of the year and were regarded as not so forward in their recovery as those of the First, Third and Fourth Armies.'²² The implications of this for the operational readiness of Second Army are discussed in Chapter Two.

The Germans in Flanders were gradually withdrawing their line and reserve troops from the Lys salient, which had been won during the April offensive. Half these forces were redeployed south to assist with the defence of the German line from attacks by the other British armies. British Second Army successfully followed up these evacuations, in accordance with General Plumer's instructions 'to exert continuous pressure upon [German] retiring forces, acting vigorously against his rearguards and thus hampering his choice of defensive lines, whilst making his retirement as costly

²¹ WO95/2365, War Diary of 18th Battalion, Kings Royal Rifle Corps.

| 18th Kings Royal Rifle Corps: Casualties 11 August 1918 | | |
|---|----------|-------------|
| | Officers | Other Ranks |
| Killed | 3 | 4 |
| Wounded | 2 | 20 |
| Missing | 1 | 19 |
| Total | 6 | 43 |

as possible.²³ For example, on 24 August, 9th Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers (107 Brigade, 36th Division) seized a section of the enemy trench line and also secured *Tomlin Farm*, capturing 60 prisoners and five machine guns.²⁴

On 12 August 1918, 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers (86 Brigade, 29th Division) had carried out an operation to advance its forward line by 400 yards and seize a line of trenches east of a point designated as Celery Copse. The fierce fighting which resulted, the strength of the enemy defence and its subsequent counter-attack, led to battalion casualties of over 80 soldiers killed or wounded. The battalion's war diary remarked that 'This operation, though costly, established the position of the enemy's main line of resistance, which was required by higher authority'.²⁵

At the end of the first week in August, 35th Division, deployed in the Locre Sector, had been relieved by 30th Division. Accordingly, 90 Brigade replaced 105 Brigade in line, with the latter moving back to billets in the area of Sylvestre Cappel. Its war diary describes the subsequent training and work duties undertaken by 105 Brigade's troops, much of the content in preparation for offensive action. Two exercises involved signallers together with a contact aeroplane of 53rd Squadron RAF; this was linked to a practice attack on the Terdeghem Switch. Officers were lectured on counter battery operations. On 22 August, Plumer inspected the training of

²² Edmonds, *Official History Vol. IV*.

²³ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. IV*.

²⁴ Noted in the War Diary of 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles, TNA WO95/2502/3.

²⁵ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers.

15/Cheshires and 15/Sherwood Foresters, evidence of his interest in and commitment to training.²⁶

Together with other examples in this study, these actions are indicative of what might now be termed 'a learning organisation', demonstrating Second Army's emphasis on the development of its troops. References within the war diaries during this period, to men being deployed for work duties or taking part in recreational activities such as inter-unit sports competitions, are limited. The priority was to improve the skills of the soldiers while there was time and opportunity to do so. Reflecting the time spent behind the lines, the casualties' report for 105 Brigade in August recorded no soldiers killed or missing; two officers and 20 men were wounded. The system of rotation between rear and front-line positions was a firm policy of the British Army and one of its strengths.²⁷

In essence, this is soldiering as shift-work, an analogy appropriate for the new industrialised warfare. As one rota of men completed its 'shift' in the front line another 'clocked on' to take its place; thus the productivity of the workplace – the capability of the soldier for combat – was maintained.²⁸

The first hand evidence shows that units were working hard to learn lessons from the experience gained during minor operations. A common aim was to strengthen the

²⁶ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

²⁷ Corrigan, *Mud, Blood*, pp. 89-94, provides a concise summary of how the system operated and describes its advantages for the troops and the Army as a whole.

firepower of the infantry group and improve its ability to operate on its own initiative.

86 Brigade noted the following points from actions at the start of September:

Trench Mortars

At present owing to the establishment of personnel, they are practically useless, immobile. It is suggested as a temporary measure that 6 pack animals per Battalion be used as transport for Trench Mortars when they are required to come into action in mobile fighting.

18 mules will carry 4 Stokes Trench Mortars and 56 rounds per gun...

Maps

In mobile fighting it seems that more maps should be issued so that senior N.C.O.s may be in possession of a map of the immediate area – more instructions in map reading for all ranks appears to be necessary.

S.O.S.

A larger supply is necessary, so that the fighting troops may carry at least 4 rockets per Company and obviate the necessity of sending rockets to the Front Line at night time.²⁹

Inspections were also a regular feature of the Army's routine:

²⁸ My thanks to Thomas Keneally, from his novel about two Australian sisters working as nurses during the First World War, *The Daughters of Mars* (New York: Atria Books, 2012), for the use of the shift-work analogy.

²⁹ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Notes On Minor Operations 4th and 5th September, 7/9/18.*

*Transport inspected by the Brigadier at 10a.m. The state of the transport was by no means satisfactory, and the whole inspection was too painful to describe.*³⁰

Second Army had a number of formations which had been reconstituted or reorganised during the summer of 1918, in some cases from an initial training cadre.³¹ These required new administrative orders to provide a comprehensive outline of the deployment and organisation of the unit when it was ordered forward on active service. After its losses in the Battle of Hazebrouck during the German offensives in Spring 1918, 40th Division had been reduced to a training cadre; it was subsequently restructured and declared ready for front line action again by 18 July. The division's 120 Brigade was re-formed in June 1918 with 15th Battalion, the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry; and two former Garrison battalions: 10th Battalion, the King's Own Scottish Borderers (formerly 9th Garrison Battalion) and 11th Battalion, the Cameron Highlanders (formerly 6th Garrison Guard Battalion). In 'Brigade Administrative Order No. 207' (10 August 1918),³² issued pending the brigade taking over the forward positions for the division from 121 Brigade, there are four closely typed pages giving comprehensive details of locations, with the associated arrangements for supplies and support. Some of the supply points and service

³⁰ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 27th August 1918. True to his word, the writer provides no details!

³¹ This subject is considered in detail in Chapter Two.

³² WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Administrative Order No. 207, 10th August 1918*

arrangements (for example, clean clothing) were delivered via the neighbouring 31st Division.³³

The Order lists (by map reference) the sites for the headquarters of the brigade, the headquarters of each of the battalions when deployed respectively in one of the three active positions (Front Line, Support or Reserve), and for the brigade's trench mortar battery and RE company. This section also gives map references for the transport lines of the brigade and battalions (from 121 Brigade) plus the locations of the company train, the brigade post office, and the refilling point. The Order then provides comprehensive information on support services and supply arrangements. This includes the locations of ammunition dumps, medical posts, canteens, clean clothing stores and also cemeteries. Reflecting the nature of the troops' daily living routines, specific procedures are prescribed including 'trench foot preventative measures' and 'the systematic burial of excreta'. This being the army, HQ also demands 'receipts... in duplicate, for all stores and supplies'. Any damaged equipment 'however muddy or apparently useless' is to be salvaged, and 'waste paper, jam cartons, dripping, tea, biscuit and other large tins' are to be returned to base.³⁴

The arrangements and instructions referred to here would be familiar to any troops in the British Army on active duty at this time. They show the attention to detail within the organisation of the Army and its formations (including Second Army). There is an emphasis upon encouraging and maintaining the health and welfare of the men, from

³³ 31st Division was the other division based within XV Corps at that time; this assistance with supplies is an indication of the newly constituted nature of 40th Division, which had still to put in place its own supply services.

strict rules on sanitation and to prevent trench foot, through to the careful planning for the delivery of rations and the provision of clean clothing. These arrangements were also underpinned and made feasible by the supporting logistics. There are detailed systems in place, with specified locations and transport routes, to maintain effective communications and deliver or give access to supplies and provisions. Equally important is the plentiful availability of the variety of material resources to meet the needs of the soldier deployed on active service: hot food and water, baths or showers, clean clothes to put on when necessary, medical facilities, mail services, and ammunition. In addition the Army, being the Army and also a very large and complex organisation, had its regime of bureaucratic rules and requirements.

It was through such attention to detail that the British Army continued to operate efficiently and effectively after four years of war, maintaining a generally cohesive and motivated body of men. This achievement was even more important by 1918, when an increasing proportion of the troops were made up of younger men, conscripts and soldiers re-categorised as fit for front-line duty. These personnel, many with a potentially less obvious commitment than the volunteers of 1914 and 1915, needed to be inducted into an organisation that might today be described as 'still fit for purpose'. For Second Army this was particularly important due to the higher proportion of its units which had been rebuilt over the summer months or newly transferred from service in other theatres (and thus unfamiliar with the circumstances and demands of the Western Front). A well-resourced and efficiently organised support structure was crucial in the forging of a cohesive fighting force within a short space of time.

³⁴ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Administrative Order No. 207*, 10th August 1918.

This cohesion was also important for Second Army given its pending commitment within an army group alongside forces from two other nations. The ability of its troops to operate effectively would be open to close scrutiny by its allies. A key element of Plumer's future brief was to promote sufficient confidence within the Belgian Army for the latter to take the fight to the opposing German forces. The successful prosecution of Second Army's own operations was crucial.

In mid-August, XV Corps of Second Army led a well-planned and successful operation to seize Outtersteene Ridge; 'a smart little victory',³⁵ this was a good example of effective pre-planning and the application of the tactics and weaponry of the British Army in 1918. The ridge was the last remaining piece of high ground still held by the Germans in front of XV Corps, following the initial advances that month. It was therefore decided that the ridge needed to be taken in order to assist further progress.³⁶

On 18 August, 27 Brigade (9th Division) together with 9th Battalion (Scottish Rifles), Cameron Highlanders (then with the South African Brigade)³⁷ attacked Hoogenacker Ridge; 87 Brigade (29th Division) cooperating on their right. This ridge overlooked the Flanders Plain, including to the right the valley of the Meteren Beque; on the left was

³⁵ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 124.

³⁶ Appendix F summarises the key features of the plan of attack.

³⁷ The South African Brigade reported to 9th Division from 22 April 1916 to 13 September 1918. On 24 April 1918, due to heavy casualties, 1st, 2nd and 4th Battalions were amalgamated – forming the South African (Composite) Regiment; they were reformed by 1 September 1918. The 9th (Service) Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) and 2nd Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers were transferred to the Brigade in April 1918 to bring it

the village of Meteren offering a good view of the surrounding country. With the prime aim of seizing and holding the ground, the orders included arrangements for a defensive barrage to be established as soon as the objective was achieved; together with the immediate establishment of Lewis gun positions as far forward as possible, to cover the trench preparations and wiring operations. Despite a level of enemy resistance, the attack was a success – in many cases, troops were reported to have advanced beyond the line of the objectives. Consolidation began during the early afternoon, with units reported to be entering Outtersteene at 1248 hours. Although a counter-attack was anticipated this did not result, although there was some heavy enemy shelling and machine gun fire.³⁸

The next day, units of the 9th (Scottish) Division mounted an operation to capture the village of Meteren and secure the position by establishing a line approximately 400 yards to the South. 5/Cameron Highlanders and 8/Black Watch of 26 Brigade took part, together with forces from the South African Brigade which was part of the Division at this time.³⁹ Under a barrage of HE and smoke shells, together with the throwing of ‘some hundreds of drums of burning oil’ the assault was successful. Initial fire from enemy machine gun posts was tackled by taking out each post using small arms fire and bombs. The advance troops dug themselves in quickly but the expected counter-attack did not materialise. There was, however, some shelling from the Germans which continued for a number of days, including occasional gas shells, and

up to strength; 9/Scottish Rifles and 2/Royal Scots Fusiliers were restored to 28 Brigade when this was re-established in September 1918, prior to the Battle of Ypres.

³⁸ TNA WO95/1771/4, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, diary entries; *Brigade Order No.256, 15/8/18; Defence Scheme (Provisional), 22nd August 1918.*

active sniper fire. It was thought that the Germans suspected that new forces were being prepared for a further attack, and they were attempting to disrupt this. The new positions remained secure.⁴⁰

As the Army's advance continued, the defence of ground recently gained created new pressures:

...The return of relative mobility... confronted commanders with a series of new challenges.

*One of the most pressing was the exercise of command and control... [placing] a premium on rapid intelligence and speedy decision-making. However communications remained a major constraint.*⁴¹

For the newly re-established 43 Brigade, a briefing note provided on 28 July 1918 provided a full list of arrangements to try to ensure that effective communications were maintained.⁴² Methods included communications via cable or through visual displays, which might include rockets; there were also the traditional means of relaying messages via the deployment of dispatch riders or runners, and dogs and

³⁹ As described in note 102.

⁴⁰ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders .

⁴¹ J. Boff, 'Command Culture and Complexity: Third Army during the Hundred Days, August-November 1918', in G.D. Sheffield and P. Gray, ed. , *Changing War: The British Army, the Hundred Days Campaign and the Birth of the Royal Air Force, 1918* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, Birmingham War Studies, 2013), p.19.

⁴² TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade, *Provisional Instructions for the Defence of portion of WINNEZELLE-HAZEBROUCK Line*, 28/07/1918.

pigeons.⁴³ Wireless equipment was available for brigade-division links, though sets for battalions were in more limited supply; the same applied to power buzzers. Where the enemy was suspected of being able to intercept messages then codes or cyphers would be used.⁴⁴ The maintenance of effective communications was a constant challenge for the advancing troops.

Counter battery arrangements to neutralise enemy defensive artillery positions were important, and would become more so in the planning and execution of forthcoming offensives. The collection and supply of information from the front line became more problematic as the line advanced and troops were no longer in fixed positions. Hence, on 6 September 1918, XV Corps found it necessary to write to its units reminding them of the value of feeding back intelligence on enemy shelling.⁴⁵ The orders repeated the original instructions of December 1917 and April 1918, together with a

⁴³ For 87 Brigade, one or two ‘Messenger Dogs’ were allocated to each of its battalions, capable of working their way back to Brigade HQ: TNA WO95/2303, War Diary of 87 Infantry Brigade, *Brigade Communications Circular No. 7, 1st September 1918*.

⁴⁴ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade, *Provisional Instructions for the Defence of portion of WINNEZELLE-HAZEBROUCK Line, 28/07/1918*.

⁴⁵ The three extracts are to be found in TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps, No. 100/70 G. 13th December 1917; No. 100/84 G. 19/4/1918; No. 100/90 G. 6/9/1918*. The original instructions stated:

1. *The Counter Battery organization exists for the benefit of the Corps as a whole. All units, Infantry and Artillery, should understand the necessity of sending to the Counter Battery Office, at all times, such information as exists, concerning enemy Artillery fire. All shelling must be reported at its commencement or as soon after as possible. Officers should not wait to see if it becomes heavy or damaging. Reports should be made by telephone direct to the Counter Battery Office – not to the Heavy Artillery – in the following form:*
 1. *Time of first round.*
 2. *Area shelled.*
 3. *Nature of Gun or Howitzer firing.*
 4. *Rate of fire.*
 5. *Rough sound bearing of report of gun.*
 6. *Point from which sound bearing is taken.*
 7. *Code word HELP if neutralisation is required.*
Code word HARMLESS if hostile shells are doing no damage.
2. *All bearings to be Grid Bearings.*

covering note acknowledging the new circumstances created by the ongoing advance, and reminding officers of the importance of providing details of enemy artillery fire:

Attention is directed to [previous instructions]...

No doubt largely owing to difficulty of communications under existing conditions very few reports of hostile shelling are at present being forwarded by units to the Counter Battery Office. This absence of information handicaps the efforts of the Counter Battery Staff.

Additional Heavy Artillery is now being brought forward and it is of the utmost importance that shelling reports should be forwarded as regularly as possible.

Every effort should be made to keep the Counter Battery Office fully supplied with information.⁴⁶

It is probably no coincidence that this reminder was being issued only a few weeks before the new offensive opened. Knowledge of the deployment and operation of enemy artillery would inform the drawing up of the artillery fire-plan to support the opening infantry assault and subsequent attacks; and to defend ground gained. It was unlikely for an officer ducking for cover from an artillery barrage to have as his first

3. *It is important to report always when shelling has ceased.*

concern the writing up of details in his notebook; however, the central collation of such information was of crucial importance for HQ.

As the front line position became even more fluid than this intelligence gradually assumed a lower priority. The forthcoming campaign would see problems in getting artillery forward sufficiently quickly to support further attacks once the initial assault had been launched and early objectives achieved. Enemy artillery would be faced with the prospect of withdrawing or being overrun. In practice the locations of both British and German artillery batteries would become far more changeable, albeit for different reasons. The prospects for successful counter battery planning and firing would be reduced as a consequence.

With this new 'war of movement', as British forces advanced from previously established (British or captured German) defence lines, then arrangements were needed to ensure that the new front could be made secure as quickly as possible. This included operational arrangements to support the infantry in the advance trenches - small foxholes, adapted shell holes, or modified strongpoints utilising the terrain or available buildings, or the remains of the latter. The ability of a division's pioneer battalions to keep pace with an attack, and to be available for the building of communication works and temporary defences, was an important factor in the securing of captured ground.

⁴⁶ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, XV Corps, No. 100/70 G. 13th December 1917; No. 100/84 G. 19/4/1918; No. 100/90 G. 6/9/1918.

On the night of 20-21 August, 6th Battalion, South Wales Borderers, Pioneer Battalion of 30th Division, supported an operation to attack and secure the line of the Dranoutre Ridge; the pioneers were attached to 2/14th Battalion (London Scottish), London Regiment (21 Brigade, 30th Division), under the command of its CO. Reaching the objective by 0250 hours, the troops were then involved in a number of associated tasks including digging in and 'wiring' (laying out and fixing barbed wire defence lines) along the advance line; and 'consolidating the support line by digging and wiring three strong points'. During these operations the battalion sustained six casualties.⁴⁷ The war diary of 2/14 London Scottish recorded that the pioneer battalion had 'aided materially in the work of consolidation'.⁴⁸

It was also important for front line troops to be able to call for support when threatened. For example, 121 Brigade (40th Division) complied with 'Centre Sector Defence Orders' which included detailed briefings and associated orders for SOS signals. The signal could be given via one of the usual communication methods or using a light or by blasts on a strombos horn. The call could be made by any officer (infantry or artillery) or by an NCO in exceptional circumstances. Upon an enemy attack, or the immediate threat of one, being detected, the signal would automatically order the attached artillery and machine guns 'to lay a barrage in front of [the] lines, or on the enemy's lines, to assist the infantry in breaking down an enemy attack'.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 6th Battalion, South Wales Borderers, *Report on Operations carried out On the Night of 20/21st August 1918*.

⁴⁸ TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/14th Battalion (London Scottish), London Regiment .

⁴⁹ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Centre Sector Defence Orders, Appendix I*.

In this modern war when wireless signal communications remained in their infancy, such pre-planning for emergency artillery support was essential. Empowering a junior officer, or an NCO, to signal for a defensive artillery barrage, shows how important such fire support was for beating off an enemy attack. There is considerable delegation of authority to the commander on the ground, with senior command recognising the need for section leaders to exercise initiative.

In the same division, 23 August saw action by 119 and 120 Brigades, in cooperation with neighbouring units, to 'advance their line by means of strong fighting patrols' with artillery support available if any significant hold-up occurred because of enemy action.⁵⁰ The attack was only a partial success and a further attempt was quickly put together for 27 August. Artillery support was pre-planned to include a creeping barrage for the initial advance, a subsequent protective barrage (to prevent any immediate counter-attack), and a standing barrage to help secure the left flank of the attack. In the event there was heavy resistance from the German defenders, primarily in the form of machine gun fire, and it took heavy fighting over the next two days to finally take the objective. On the evening of 28 August there had been a defensive barrage from the German artillery incorporating gas shells, which forced the British troops to put on their respirators (the attack stalling as a consequence). A set-piece attack was launched on 29 August under a creeping barrage which finally secured the Bowery Cottages objective.

⁵⁰ TNAWO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade.

On 25 August, details were received by 105 Brigade (35th Division) of the arrangements for the division to relieve 36th Division in the line (St Jans Cappel Sector); the move was completed successfully four days later. That evening 'fires and explosions in rear of the German lines' were taken as signs of a likely enemy withdrawal.⁵¹ This was confirmed the following day by division HQ, reporting that a German withdrawal appeared to be taking place; 31st Division now held part of Bailleul. Wired reports later that day stated that the enemy was carrying out a measured withdrawal across the whole of what was then the X Corps front, with machine gun teams providing fire support.⁵²

On 31 August, news reached the HQ of 14th Division that the enemy was evacuating the Kemmel area. In consequence, patrols were ordered forward, operating in conjunction with 27th and 30th American Divisions on the right and 12th Belgian Division on the left. The opportunity was taken to move the division's artillery into more advanced positions. The orders were that the enemy was to be 'pressed' but not 'actually attacked'.⁵³ 43 Brigade sent forward patrols to check if the enemy was withdrawing, with orders to maintain contact if this was so. The patrols reported that 'the enemy was holding his usual positions in at least normal strength'.⁵⁴

⁵¹ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

⁵² TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

⁵³ TNA WO95/1876, War Diary of 14th Division: General Staff.

⁵⁴ TNA, WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade.

Opposite Second Army, Prince Rupprecht, Commander of the German forces from Albert through to the sea, eventually halted his line to the east of Ypres, on La Bassee. Messines Ridge was retained, plus the town of Armentieres.

By September 1918, British Second Army was holding a sixteen-mile front from west of Armentieres, at a junction with the River Lys, northwards to just beyond Ypres, where the Belgian line began. With the enemy continuing to retire,⁵⁵ the early days of September saw the British forces continue their advance. However the enemy soon started to increase the intensity of its resistance through prepared fire positions and set-piece counter-attacks.

*Opposition stiffened considerably on the 4th [September] and subsequently, and the reluctance of the enemy to suffer the dislocation of his scheme of defence found frequent expression in counter-attacks. A sturdy opposition has been offered by the troops fronting us, and they have shown no signs of yielding positions of value without fighting. It was with increasing reluctance, from 10th September onwards, that the enemy gave ground, and our rate of progress thenceforward was appreciably lessened.*⁵⁶

This classic piece of military understatement within the Army's *Operations Summary*, indicates an increased intensity in the fighting, with Second Army pushing its way

⁵⁵ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 143: the breakthrough of the Drocourt-Queant Line by British First Army with Third Army, on 2 September 1918, had resulted in a general withdrawal across the Western Front by German forces, pulling back from ground won during the March and April offensives.

⁵⁶ TNA WO158/218, Operations on the Second Army Front: 1st September to 27th September 1918.

forward from one objective to the next. The level of enemy opposition was unpredictable. As the British advanced, a unit might face no resistance or suffer harassing fire, suddenly encounter direct fire from machine gun posts or artillery, or be subject to a full counter-attack. The psychological pressure thus created, as much as the physical risk of injury and death, placed very heavy demands upon the men and their commanders. This *staccato* pattern of warfare was to be a distinctive feature of the Final Advance in Flanders.

The follow-up and harassment of the German forces as they carried out their fighting withdrawal during the latter part of August and into September, required Second Army units to proceed carefully and with due preparation. Operations by 108 Brigade (36th Division) between 1-5 September 1918 involved 'a lot of house-to-house fighting', particularly in Neuve Eglise; and a call was made for artillery assistance when the 9th Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, were caught by the enemy in an 'exposed forward position'.⁵⁷

On 30 August, 2nd Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (deployed on the right of 109 Brigade, 36th Division), passed on a report to brigade HQ that the Germans (118th Regiment) were undertaking a withdrawal. There had been some anticipation of this the previous night, following a number of fires south and east of Ballieul, sighting of an enemy working party, and defensive covering fire from German machine guns. The origin of the report was 94 Brigade (31st Division), on the right flank of the Fusiliers, which had already initiated an advance. To the left was 89 Brigade (30th

Division). Scout patrols were sent forward by 109 Brigade, each one with an attached Stokes mortar. Despite some defensive machine gun fire, there was overall progress forward during the day across the divisional fronts.⁵⁸

This was suspected to be a carefully planned operation by the Germans:

*Definite information could not be gathered regarding the intention of the enemy but from situation reports he was thought to be fighting a rearguard action according to a definite plan as his withdrawal up to the time had been methodical and not hurried.*⁵⁹

The next day saw further advances including Kemmel Hill and the village of Ravelsberg. Each of the forward battalions had a machine gun team attached plus a section of field guns deployed in support; an artillery officer was present to call for covering fire or to direct fire onto an enemy strongpoint. In the event, the poor state of the roads impeded the progress of the artillery. The resistance of the Germans increased, with light shelling of the high ground and fire from machine gun posts; the village of La Creche was particularly strongly held. The ground south of the ridges was quite open with any movement easily visible. Some limited progress along the Ravelsberg Road and, in the evening, along Waterloo Road, was achieved.⁶⁰ In accordance with orders from 36th Division, during 1-2 September, 108 Brigade moved

⁵⁷ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

⁵⁸ TNA WO95/2509, War Diary of 109 Infantry Brigade, *Summary of Operations (August 30th – September 1st)*.

⁵⁹ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September*.

through 109 Brigade, heading in the direction of Neuve Eglise, in order to continue to press the retreating enemy forces. Light mortars, machine guns and also a section of cyclists and a team from a tunnelling company, were attached to the brigade to support the operation.⁶¹

On 1 September, units of 29th Division had moved up into the space created on the right of 36th Division, with 30th Division remaining on the left. The problem of crossing open ground, once troops had occupied the various ridges, remained. A number of casualties resulted, including the Intelligence Officer of 109 Brigade killed by a shell, and the CO (Lieutenant-Colonel J Knott) of 2/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers severely wounded. Progress was made in the direction of Neuve Eglise such that a new line was established east of the village by dusk; linking north along the Neuve Eglise – Kemmel road, plus south and west of La Crèche.⁶²

On 2 September, 41 Brigade (14th Division) sent patrols forward in response to reports of a further German withdrawal having pulled back from Mount Kemmel; they found no change in the enemy positions.⁶³

Elsewhere that day, despite enemy machine gun fire, the advance battalions of 108 Brigade (36th Division) - 12/Royal Irish Rifles and 1/Royal Irish Fusiliers - moved forward in the direction of the Neuve Eglise – Nieppe road. There was some fierce

⁶⁰ TNA WO95/2509, War Diary of 109 Infantry Brigade, *Summary of Operations (August 30th – September 1st)*.

⁶¹ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September*.

⁶² TNA WO95/2509, War Diary of 109 Infantry Brigade, *Summary of Operations (August 30th – September 1st)*.

fighting for the possession of a small number of houses in the area, these only being cleared with the assistance of supporting mortar fire. Beyond this point the British troops, including forces from 89 Brigade to the south, ran into intense machine gun fire from the Germans; the advance was paused. The aim now was to clear Neuve Eglise, with 12/Royal Irish Rifles moving in from north west of the village. This led to 'stiff house-to-house fighting' and the step by step clearance of enemy machine gun positions, with fighting continuing for the next few days.⁶⁴ Soldiers faced very different challenges from the trench warfare with which they had become familiar. In its subsequent report on operations during that first week in September,⁶⁵ 108 Brigade presents the picture of the house by house, street by street progress of the British infantry – images more familiar from the street fighting of later wars. Over the course of five days the men of the brigade undertook a series of minor operations in order to make good the advance. The report refers to a range of tactics being employed, applying the principles of fire and movement and making use of Lewis guns and heavy machine guns; with platoons alternating in the roles of providing covering fire for forward movement.⁶⁶

Fierce fighting saw British troops counter-attacked and forced to withdraw temporarily. On occasion 'Artillery assistance was called and promptly given'. At times touch was lost between forward patrols, making the overall position very fluid. The

⁶³ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

⁶⁴ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September*.

⁶⁵ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September*.

⁶⁶ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September*.

relief of 108 Brigade by 107 Brigade (also from 36th Division) was completed at 1430 hours on 6 September, when the former was withdrawn into Divisional reserve. The determination of the German defenders to carry out an effective fighting withdrawal, and the resulting intensity of the fighting that the attacking forces were engaged in, is illustrated by the casualty figures. During the five day series of actions, 108 Brigade sustained over 400 casualties,⁶⁷ with 70 soldiers killed, 315 wounded, and 34 missing. The losses were spread evenly across the three battalions, reflecting the rotation of units between assault and support roles.⁶⁸

The nature of this fighting and the tactics employed by both sides, gave the troops valuable experience for the forthcoming offensive. With units pausing to allow for artillery support, the passing through of fresh troops, or for assistance from forces on the flanks, the *staccato* rhythm of the advance was sustained.

The report of 108 Brigade for 1-5 September also included, as was common practice, a commentary on the operations. This included praise for the support from the machine gun company which had been organised with the latter's OC based at

⁶⁷ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September.*

⁶⁸ The table below shows the breakdown of the 108 Brigade losses:

| 108 Brigade: Casualties 1-5 September 1918 | | | | | | |
|---|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| | Killed | | Wounded | | Missing | |
| | Officers | Other Ranks | Officers | Other Ranks | Officers | Other Ranks |
| 108 B ^{dc} | | | | 1 | | |
| 12/R I Rifles | 2 | 26 | 4 | 103 | | 6 |
| 1/R I Fusiliers | | 22 | 4 | 95 | | 9 |
| 9/R I Fusiliers | | 20 | 4 | 103 | | 19 |
| 108 T M Batt | | | | 1 | | |
| Totals | 2 | 68 | 12 | 303 | | 34 |

Brigade HQ, together with one machine gun section acting as reserve; one machine gun section had been attached to each battalion, an arrangement which had 'worked very well'. Guns had been deployed very quickly when needed and ammunition supply had been carried out efficiently.⁶⁹ An artillery liaison officer was attached to the brigade which 'proved very useful'. The delivery of a protective barrage had been arranged effectively when troops were halted for a length of time; there had also been useful harassing fire provided when called for. The report added the suggestion that a 'sniping' gun attached to each battalion 'would have proved useful' (perhaps a reflection of an infantryman's innate attraction to having direct firing artillery alongside him whenever possible). Close co-operation between the battalion CO and the artillery officer in charge of the gun was 'absolutely essential... if the gun is to prove of any use'.⁷⁰

Each battalion also had one trench mortar attached to it, deployed in the relatively new 'mobile' manner – with only the mortar tube, its body bed plate and ammunition being carried. The report noted that this was the first time that the brigade troops had operated with the trench mortar used in this way, 'and probably had teams been better trained the results would have been far better'; in conclusion, the mortar was potentially 'a very effective weapon and a valuable asset in this kind of warfare'.⁷¹

⁶⁹ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September*.

⁷⁰ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September*.

⁷¹ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September*.

A tunnelling section had also accompanied the advance, for the purpose of searching and clearing captured dug-outs. As was becoming more common, the section discovered a number of booby traps left by the retreating enemy, which were made safe and removed. The supply of rations, water and ammunition to advanced troops had been successful, though it was noted that the good conditions of the roads had been an important factor in this (which would not always be the case).

The report also referred to the problem of communications - in this operation the liaison with flanking brigades had not been good. The telephone lines had been used so frequently that there had often been difficulty in 'getting through'. Other means of communication had been 'seldom used' or not practicable. However there was no obvious solution available other than that 'flank Brigades should be 'united' where possible', while acknowledging that this was difficult 'when Divisions are operating on a one Brigade Front'.⁷²

On 4 and 5 September, 86 Brigade, with 1/Lancashire Fusiliers and 1/Royal Dublin Fusiliers leading, was part of a number of attacks undertaken by 29th Division (alongside 36th Division, attacking Neuve Eglise); the Brigade's principle targets were the village of Ploegsteert and the adjacent Ploegsteert Wood. On its left, 88 Brigade attacked the objective of Hill 63, with 2nd Battalion, The Hampshire Regiment, on the left and 2nd Battalion, The Leinster Regiment, on the right. It was a 'brilliant hot day' with an early mist providing valuable cover for the attacking troops, though it caused

⁷² TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations carried out by 108th Infantry Brigade 1st to 5th September.*

some problems for the artillery. Despite a number of German counter-attacks, the objectives were taken and held, but with a large number of casualties. On the night of 4 September, 1/Royal Dublin Fusiliers advanced east of Ploegstreet. Prisoners reported that Hill 63 was part of the enemy's main line of resistance and orders were 'to hold it at all costs'. The Acting Commander of 86 Brigade, in a letter praising the performance of the troops 'under very trying circumstances', expressed his sadness at 'the heavy losses that the Lancashire Fusiliers and Royal Dublin Fusiliers sustained'; while acknowledging that the action had led to the capture of '160 odd prisoners and many machine guns and trench mortars'.⁷³

On 6 September the GOC of 29th Division, Major-General D. Cayley, wrote to all his immediate subordinate commanders in order to 'congratulate all ranks of the division on their excellent work during the last seven days, while following up the retreating enemy'.⁷⁴ In his letter he made particular reference to the 'skilful co-operation' between the artillery and the infantry, with the assistance of the division's machine gun battalion, aided by successful communications. The work of engineer and pioneer sections, repairing and maintaining roads and bridges, had ensured the supply of the large quantities of the ammunition required.

⁷³ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *letter 86th Inf. Bde. No. 5c.C/21 from Staff Captain C. Barrington Brown*; TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Order No. 199, 3rd September 1918*; TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division.

⁷⁴ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *letter 29th Division No. G.S. 51/14 from Major-General D Cayley*.

Major-General Cayley also highlighted the good organisation of the field ambulances, crucial given the number of casualties sustained in just three days.⁷⁵ Over 100 soldiers had been killed and five times that number wounded, indicating the continuing strength of the German resistance. Having pulled back from the Lys Salient, the enemy was clearly resolute in holding its new defensive line. The preparation and tactics employed by the division (the one former Regular Army division within Second Army), while drawn up at short notice, show sensible and careful planning; the resulting casualties do not appear to have been the result of failings at command or staff level.

The orders had specified the objectives as Hill 63 and Ploegsteert village⁷⁶; prisoner statements had identified these points as part of the German army's line of resistance within its planned withdrawal. The cover of an artillery barrage was arranged for the assault, with two attacking brigades (86 and 88), each deploying two advance battalions with the remaining battalion in reserve. There were initial problems overnight when enemy forces were encountered along the roadway identified as the 'jumping off' point: only the 1/Lancashire Fusiliers (86 Brigade) managed to secure

⁷⁵ The table below shows the breakdown of the 29th Division losses:

| 29th Division: Casualties 3-5 September 1918 | | | | | | |
|--|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| | Killed | | Wounded | | Missing | |
| | Officers | Other Ranks | Officers | Other Ranks | Officers | Other Ranks |
| 86 B ^{de} | 3 | 45 | 12 | 175 | 1 | 24 |
| 88 B ^{de} | 4 | 57 | 10 | 309 | | 17 |
| 1/2 Monmouth (Pioneers) | | | | 2 | | |
| 29 th Machine Gun | | 7 | 1 | 34 | | 1 |
| Totals | 7 | 109 | 23 | 520 | 1 | 42 |

⁷⁶ The British Tommy's 'Plug Street'.

their portion of the road, and hold this despite a counter-attack before dawn. 88 Brigade withdrew 500 yards to allow for a 12 minute barrage of enemy forces along the road; then proceeded to follow the barrage, encountering only limited resistance at first. Subsequently the troops met artillery fire from the western slopes of Hill 63, plus enfilade machine gun fire from the south. The assault was pushed home by 2/Hampshires and 2/Leinsters, despite the defenders' fire and large amounts of wire. Two subsequent counter-attacks were beaten off with little difficulty.

For 86 Brigade, the artillery preparation had concentrated on predicted centres of enemy resistance, rather than providing a covering barrage. The Lancashire Fusiliers, from its starting line, had successfully advanced along the left flank of the attack. On its right, 1/Royal Dublin Fusiliers was facing heavy machine gun fire to both its front and from its right flank. It was therefore decided to delay its assault until 1500 hours, pending the cover of an artillery barrage; in the event the battalion advanced to secure a line east of Ploegsteert. It was relieved by 2/ Royal Fusiliers, who drove off a counter- attack upon their right flank at noon on the following day. The right company of the Lancashire Fusiliers was halted short of the village but by 1100 hours on 5 September it too had reached its objective.

In its concluding remarks on the operation, the division's summary notes that the success owed much to the initiative and leadership on the ground of the company and platoon commanders. The artillery barrage was delivered as 'a map shoot' without preparation (most of the guns had only moved into position on the evening of

3 September); the infantry also received valuable covering fire from machine guns and mortars (particularly important in tackling enemy machine gun posts).⁷⁷ This example of Second Army operations during September illustrates the potential strength of German resistance once committed to holding a defensive line. It also shows the art of attack adopted by the Army's units and their ability to sustain or remount assaults, successfully combining arms to achieve identified objectives.

Another good example of the developing expertise of Second Army units, particularly regarding small scale infantry tactics and infantry/artillery co-operation, is an operation carried out by 93 Brigade (31st Division) on 18 September. The attack was designed to capture Soyer Farm in the area east of Ploegsteert, thereby allowing the line to be advanced towards a stretch of the River Warnave. Two companies from each of the two battalions, 15/West Yorkshires (operating on the left) and 13/York and Lancaster (operating on the right), were involved. It subsequently transpired that, from prisoner interviews and evidence on the ground, including the presence of pioneer troops with mobile charges, the Germans had themselves been intending to carry out a raid on 93 Brigade positions. The enemy was concerned at the proximity of British advance posts and the raid had been intended to provide greater security for the defenders at the farm. The fact that the Germans in that area were planning operations to improve their defensive position, suggests that their intention at that

⁷⁷ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations by 29th Division on 4th September 1918*.

time was to resist actively any assault by the allies; and steps would be taken where possible to disrupt any preparations regarding this.⁷⁸

The attack by 93 Brigade led to the successful capture of the farm, including 59 prisoners, and heavy casualties for the enemy. The brigade suffered 75 casualties of which 30 men were killed. Soyer Farm had been protected with large concentrations of wire, and heavily defended, particularly to the north and west. Thus the aim of the plan was to get troops around the flanks and able to strike at the rear of the farm, where defences were relatively weaker. Sketch maps were drawn to show the deployment and manoeuvres of each platoon involved in the attack. Although the farm seemed 'to have been held abnormally strongly' (reflecting the Germans' intentions to attack British positions),⁷⁹ the operation appears to have been carried out with minimal problems and in accordance with the arrangements prepared by the brigade and battalion commands.

The final plan had been executed successfully,⁸⁰ with zero hour at 0530 hours and the light signal to indicate the capture of the farm subsequently observed at 0638 hours. Particular features included the incorporation of a machine gun barrage within

⁷⁸ The details of this operation and its execution are taken from: TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade: *Brief Report of Operation carried out by 93rd Infantry Brigade on Morning of September 18th, 1918; 13th York and Lancaster Regiment, [Summary of] Attack on Soyer Farm 18th September 1918; Narrative of Operations carried out by the 15th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment in the Left Battalion, Left Division, Ploegsteert Sector from the 13th to 18th September, 1918.*

⁷⁹ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, *13th York and Lancaster Regiment, [Summary of] Attack on Soyer Farm 18th September 1918.*

⁸⁰ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, *13th York and Lancaster Regiment, [Summary of] Attack on Soyer Farm 18th September 1918.*

the covering fire support, with enemy outposts to the east of the farm subject to a standing barrage throughout the operation. The creeping barrage to cover the attack,

*...instead of moving forward on parallel lines was pivoted on the farm and moved fanwise, thus ensuring that the farm and enclosures remained under fire until the attacking force had reached a position in rear of it. This barrage then lifted and joined the standing barrage whereupon the attacking troops at once rushed the farm from the rear.*⁸¹

The soldiers were equipped in full 'fighting order', so that each soldier, as well as rifle and ammunition, carried a full water bottle, one day's rations plus emergency iron rations, two rifle grenades and a signal flare. Rifle grenade sections were supplied with five grenades and twelve cartridges for each soldier. Each Lewis gun team carried 18 ammunition pans. In addition, with carriage distributed across its members, each platoon had two pairs of wire cutters, two day and two night SOS grenades, four rifle grenade discharger cups, one Very pistol and five shovels; plus additional small arms ammunition (SAA).

The attack shows the level of detailed preparation of which Second Army units were now capable. Pre-planning was crucial to enable the mix of troops (new and experienced soldiers, conscripts and men deployed from other war theatres, and re-classified men) to deploy successfully on the battlefield. There is evidence of

⁸¹ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, 13th York and Lancaster Regiment, [Summary of] Attack on Soyer Farm 18th September 1918.

innovation and creativity in the delivery of the artillery support, and the infantry demonstrated a confidence in the ability of the gunners to provide the planned barrage efficiently; this co-operation between the two arms allowed the troops on the ground to carry out their actions in an organised and effective manner. The tactics of the advancing infantry, the use of Lewis guns and rifle grenades ('employed with great effect against M.G. posts which attempted to put up a fight'), all point to a doctrine of 'fire and movement' with which the troops were becoming increasingly familiar.⁸²

One point of post-action criticism concerned the lack of photographs of the target and the surrounding area. The report on the attack pointed out that 'Most of the men and nearly all N.C.O.'s are now capable of appreciating a photograph, and explanation is much assisted by their use'.⁸³ This comment indicates the positive view which commanding officers held of the soldiers they led, and their confidence in the men's abilities; it also shows how the application of aerial photography was now considered to be an integral part of operations at all levels within the army. The increase in expectations regarding the initiative of NCOs and the private soldier is also illustrated by comments on command and control during the operation:

⁸² TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, 13th York and Lancaster Regiment, [Summary of] Attack on Soyer Farm 18th September 1918.

⁸³ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, 13th York and Lancaster Regiment, [Summary of] Attack on Soyer Farm 18th September 1918.

*The importance of practising chain of command was also made clear. One platoon lost its Officer and all senior N.C.O.'s and was commanded with success by a young Lance Corporal assisted by a Senior Private.*⁸⁴

There were three particular features of Flanders which were impacting on operations and would influence the forthcoming major offensive:

1. One was the notorious Flanders weather. This was able to produce stifling dry heat on one day, yet change to torrential rain within twenty-four hours. The consequences for the advancing forces would be considerable and these are referred to regularly in contemporary writings and in the *Official History*.⁸⁵
2. The variable weather exacerbated the transport problems created by the poor quality of the roads in the area. Sustaining supply lines and in particular the bringing forward of artillery support, for advancing forces, had been a major factor throughout the war. This undermined the ability of troops on either side, to maintain the momentum of an attack; to convert a *breakthrough* into a *breakout*. This would be the main challenge facing the coalition forces.

⁸⁴ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, 13th York and Lancaster Regiment, [Summary of] Attack on Soyer Farm 18th September 1918. The success of the operation was acknowledged in a manner recognisable to past and future soldiers: *A rum ration for each Platoon was sent forward in water bottles and issued to the men when consolidation was well advanced. This was much appreciated by the men and did them good.*

⁸⁵ War diaries are full of references to the weather, of which the following are typical: (27 July 1918) 'Inspection by Divisional Commander cancelled owing to rain' (Rearranged for, and carried out on 29 July); (6 August 1918) 'Rain fell continuously until Dawn, and trenches are very muddy and uncomfortable' - TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

3. The Flanders terrain was divided by a series of rivers, generally running north to south, which created a succession of natural defensive lines.

The partially canalised River Lys bisected the area, running west then south-west from Ghent to Armentieres via Menin some 15-20 yards wide and 5-6 feet deep and passable only by bridges. There was also a network of other canals originally constructed both for communication and defence, while numerous streams like the Steenbeck, Stroombeek and Kornebeek, and willow-lined dykes intersected the plain, fed by springs at the junction of the permeable sands and the impermeable clay. The Yser Canal connected to the Lys at Comines.⁸⁶

These were important planning considerations for the advancing forces, impacting on transport, communications and logistics. Mitchinson, writing about the experiences of the pioneer battalions on the Western Front, has pointed out the additional problems within the region of Flanders for building railways and laying roads.⁸⁷

As Second Army advanced there were changes in the nature of the terrain. Much of the initial ground regained was pitted by the detritus of battles previously fought and the pock marks of no man's land. As new ground was reached then different challenges could present themselves. On 5 July 1918 the following order had been issued to units of 121 Brigade:

⁸⁶ Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle*, p. 43; also reference TNA WO95/668, 'Notes on the River Lys'.

*No.2 of each Lewis Gun will go forward with two sandbags tucked into the belt. When necessary these sandbags are to be filled and used to raise the tripod so as to enable the guns to be fired over standing crops.*⁸⁸

While this statement may seem self-evident, it illustrates two important points. The obvious nature of the instruction is a likely reflection of the inexperience of many of the brigade's troops, such that orders are required to ensure small levels of detail in weapon handling are known and complied with. There is also the reference to 'standing crops' – it is likely that many of the troops on the Western Front in 1918 would not have had cause to manoeuvre or fight in terrain covered with crops, whether standing or otherwise, for some considerable time, if at all. The new environment for the fighting to come would include cultivated farmland (and the people responsible for the cultivation).

The Commander

Second Army had been formed in France in December 1914, initially commanded by Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien. Sir Herbert Plumer assumed command of V Corps at Christmas 1914, subsequently replacing Smith-Dorrien as GOC of Second Army in May 1915.

⁸⁷ K. W. Mitchinson, *Pioneer Battalions in the Great War: Organized and Intelligent Labour* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2014; first published by Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1997), pp. 116-7 (railways) and 130-2 (roads).

⁸⁸ *Amendment No. 4 to 121st Infantry Brigade Instructions No. 2*: TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade.

From the start Plumer developed a reputation for success via careful planning, preparation and support, of which there was strong evidence during the Final Advance in Flanders.⁸⁹ The regular availability of drinking water, and the ready provision of food and supplies for units in action, are examples of the importance he attached to the delivery of effective support for the front-line troops; organisation and logistics were always a high priority. His emphasis on planning included the co-ordination of artillery fire-plans, the preparation of defensive positions, and the drawing-up of operational orders to respond to emergencies. Liaison officers were attached to each corps, charged with getting to know each of the corps battalions and spending time in the trenches. Training was seen as a vital tool and troops were released as often as opportunity would allow. The initiative for much of this has been put down to his chief of staff (and subsequent biographer) Major-General 'Tim' Harington, who served with Plumer for most of the war. Summarising Plumer's career, Simkins has written that Harington had a 'special bond' with Plumer which 'was an indispensable ingredient in Second Army's success in 1917'.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ The sources for this section on Plumer include G. Powell, *Plumer: The Soldiers' General: a Biography of Field-Marshal Viscount Plumer of Messines* (Pen & Sword, 2004); T. Harington, *Plumer of Messines* (John Murray, 1935); J. Terraine, *The Western Front 1914-1918* (Hutchinson, 1964) (Pen & Sword, 2003); P. Simkins, 'Herbert Plumer' in I. F. W. Beckett & S. J. Corvi, ed., *Haig's Generals* (Pen & Sword, 2006), pp. 141-163 – the chapter includes a short chronology of Plumer's career plus an excellent bibliography; websites: The Long, Long Trail www.1914-1918.net; The Trench www.worldwar1.com. Joseph E. Persico summarises the outward appearance of Plumer as suggestive of

...a caricature of the British armchair officer, an early incarnation of Colonel Blimp. The sixty-year-old was squat, pot-bellied, jowly, chinless, with a veinous red face, snow-white hair, and a matching mustache. The comic appearance, however, belied the man. Plumer's manner lacked fire, but he was a meticulous planner, not without imagination, and unflappable under the severest pressure. His men trusted him implicitly and felt genuine affection for their commander, calling him 'Daddy'. (J. E. Persico, *11th Month, 11th Day, 11th Hour: Armistice day, 1918 – World War I and its Violent Climax* (London: Hutchinson, 2004), pp. 168-9.

An early example of Plumer's considered approach to command is his response to the creation of pioneer battalions in 1915. He disagreed with the simple expedient of identifying one existing unit to be converted to a division's pioneer battalion,

*... preferring instead the idea that divisional commanders should be allowed to build up a Pioneer unit. Such a formation should, he suggested, begin with a small establishment and then be gradually expanded by the transfer of officers and men within their divisions.*⁹¹

Second Army held part of the front in Flanders and Plumer became directly associated with the area. During winter 1916, his staff produced four training manuals, looking to take account of the lessons from Arras and the Somme. He achieved the success for which he is most noted on 7 June 1917 with the attack on Messines, 'one of the completest victories of the war'.⁹² Although overlooked initially for the 3rd Ypres (Passchendaele) offensive, despite commanding continuously in the area since 1915, he took over responsibility after the August failures. Applying the concept of 'bite and hold' he planned, fought and won three battles – Menin Road Ridge, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde. The results of two subsequent actions with II Anzac Corps at the start of October 1917, Poelcappelle and First Passchendaele, were less successful and more controversial.⁹³ Following the taking of

⁹⁰ Simkins, 'Herbert Plumer', p. 148.

⁹¹ K. W. Mitchinson, *Pioneer Battalions in the Great War: Organized and Intelligent Labour* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2014; first published by Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1997), pp. 58-9; the author points out that Plumer's advice was not always heeded.

⁹² Terraine, *The Western Front*.

⁹³ Prior and Wilson, in their assessment of Third Ypres (R. Prior and T. Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (Yale University Press, 1996)) are more critical of Plumer than has usually been the case. They argue that

Passchendaele Ridge by Canadian forces in November, the infamous Flanders' weather led to Haig calling a halt to the actions. The Second Army staff moved with their General to Italy between November 1917 and March 1918, as part of allied moves to bolster the Italian Army.

Plumer arrived back in Flanders on 13 March 1918 (his sixty-first birthday), together with most of his staff; his return negotiated as part of Haig's long-running attrition with the British government over issues of BEF command and troop supply.⁹⁴

In response to the crisis caused by the German offensive, which opened on 21 March, it was Plumer who made the offer of a transfer of additional troops to the threatened areas from the Second Army front.⁹⁵ Haig recorded in his diary on 23 March 1918:

his achievements were more in line with Gough's results and that he benefited greatly from improved weather conditions; this view contrasts sharply with Terraine's praise of Plumer and with the conclusions drawn by Simkins. Steel and Hart refer to Plumer's 'gradual, painstaking approach' with methods which gave the troops 'the best possible chance of success in capturing and retaining their objectives'; they conclude that 'for a short period at least, [Plumer] changed the overall character of the Ypres offensive': N. Steel and P. Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground* (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2007; first published 2000), p. 233.

⁹⁴ Plumer's transfer back to the Western Front was agreed by the Prime Minister Lloyd George in return for Haig agreeing to release General Sir Henry Rawlinson, then GOC of Fourth Army (formerly Second Army) as British representative to Versailles (17 February 1918); Haig also obtained two British divisions from their deployment in Italy.

⁹⁵ The troops transferred included four Australian divisions and the New Zealand division, plus a full strength British division.

*I arranged with Plumer to thin down his front; then I shall be glad to see the divisions thus set free near the Somme! It is most satisfactory to have a Commander of Plumer's temperament at a time of crisis like the present.*⁹⁶

This comment shows the major reappraisal of Plumer by Haig over time, given the latter's initial criticism when he first assumed full command of the BEF.⁹⁷

In return it was agreed with the Belgians that they would slightly extend their front; plus exhausted BEF divisions from the southern fighting were to be transferred north as an opportunity to recuperate on a quieter front. This would have further repercussions as events unfolded. All but three of Second Army's divisions were redeployed in the south, replaced by divisions who had suffered up to 70 per cent or more casualties. Replacements were made up of 19-year olds with a minimum of training, soldiers previously considered short of the A1 frontline requirements, plus returnees recovered from wounds. New command teams were being hastily put together alongside the gradual replacement of equipment and weapons.

On 9 April the German 'Georgette' offensive was launched against Horne's Third Army to the right of Second Army. Plumer's willingness to put the overall strategic priorities ahead of his own circumstances saw him immediately agree to move two of his three remaining full strength divisions to cover Third Army.

⁹⁶ Sheffield, G. D. and Bourne, J., eds., *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 391.

⁹⁷ On 18 February 1916, Haig had criticised Second Army defences and Plumer had offered his resignation - see Haig's diary note in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries and Letters*, pp. 180.

The following day, 10 April, the Germans extended their attack northwards in a drive towards the railway interchange of Hazebrouck, and around the Ypres salient. The bitter rearguard defensive actions are well documented.⁹⁸ The gravity of the position was evidenced by Haig's 'Backs to the Wall' order issued on 11 April. Plumer's actions as commander included daily visits to every divisional HQ and also some brigade HQs – a clear sign of his desire to provide visible leadership and support to his officers. He also had charge of additional French troops sent as reinforcements. As part of a planned withdrawal to create a shorter and more defensible line, ground was conceded within the Ypres Salient.⁹⁹ Around this time Harington is reported to have informed his commander that his Second Army was broken into three pieces; 'Well that is better than being in four' was Plumer's phlegmatic reply.¹⁰⁰

In his biography of Plumer, Powell makes the firm assertion:

*If Plumer's depleted divisions had failed to prevent that German breakthrough to the Channel ports, the war would almost certainly have been lost.*¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ For a recent summary of the German offensives including 'Georgette' see Stevenson, *With Our Backs To The Wall*, chapter 1 and particularly pp. 68-78.

⁹⁹ Harington has described the extreme anguish felt by himself and Plumer in making this decision (crucial for maintaining the defence of the British line in front of Ypres), given the sacrifice made by Second Army troops in 1917 to capture the ground: quoted in Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, pp. 305-7.

¹⁰⁰ Powell, *Plumer*, p. 264.

¹⁰¹ Powell, *Plumer*, p. 266.

David Stevenson, referring to the defensive battles of April 1918, states that 'The British were... fortunate in their Second Army commander, Sir Herbert Plumer [who] ran an efficient headquarters'.¹⁰²

As described earlier, Plumer was subsequently to take advantage of local German withdrawals in August to begin to take back the conceded territory. Through a series of small actions, the Second Army had slowly advanced forward, and the Lys Salient had been cleared by 7 September.

Much of Plumer's success has been attributed to the excellence of his Chief of Staff since June 1916, 'Tim' Harington. It was a successful partnership, perhaps the most effective of the war on the allied side, between GOC and MGGS.¹⁰³ Yet it ended before the final phase of the war. After the stalling of the German offensives in Flanders, Harington had received promotion to become deputy to Wilson at the War Office. For the final phases of the war, Plumer had Jocelyn Percy as MGGS, who proved an effective replacement. A man of Harington's undoubted ability and intellect, and who had an uncanny ability to interpret his chief's thinking, was impossible to replicate; it would have been difficult for Plumer to have had the same confidence in Percy. Harington was adamant that Plumer was always the man in command - it was his ability to lead, to attend to detail, to grasp the key points of plans and react decisively when engaged in action, which shaped the direction of Second Army.

¹⁰² Stevenson, *Backs To The Wall*, p.74.

With Second Army in 1918, Plumer's central approach when issuing orders to his corps commanders was to produce an initial written draft (complete with crossings out and amendments), probably following discussion with Percy and senior commanders, informed by intelligence reports and briefings. From September 1918, he had also to take account of the orders produced by the Flanders Army Group.¹⁰⁴ It was Percy's role to then arrange the final typed set of orders, including administrative numbering and circulation list, which he would sign off as MGGS.¹⁰⁵

Terraine has praised Plumer as a forward-looking general in a war in which such persons were in short supply. In particular, in Plumer's emphasis on planning and preparation, and the high level of organisation he demanded, Terraine sees a precedent for the requirements of World War II and beyond:

*[Plumer was] one of the most modern soldiers of his generation.... many of [his] methods became the standard procedure of the Second World War... Plumer's sense of organisation was therefore a cardinal principle, a sine qua non of modern war.*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Harington had the sincerest respect and admiration for Plumer, evidenced most strongly by the praise contained within his 1935 biography: *Plumer of Messines* (John Murray, 1935).

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter Two.

¹⁰⁵ An example is Second Army Order G452, issued 24th September 1918, which summarises the main objectives for each Corps in Second Army for the pending Battle of Ypres: there is an initial draft, a handwritten sheet of A4 incorporating ink stains and corrections and initialled 'HP' ('Herbert Plumer') – then the final typed order with the order number and Corps commander circulation list, signed off by 'J Percy'. These papers are located within 29th Division records: TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division. The significance of these particular orders is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁶ Terraine, *Western Front*, pp. 200/201.

It is said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.¹⁰⁷ Plumer's emphasis on the planned, set-piece attack has been described as the fore-runner to the methods that Montgomery applied when winning victory at El Alamein in 1942.¹⁰⁸

*His [Montgomery's] models for future operations were the meticulously planned battles of Sir Herbert Plumer – arguably the best British general of the First World War – particularly Messines Ridge in 1917, when artillery preparation was at its most thorough and well coordinated.*¹⁰⁹

Montgomery's biographer, Nigel Hamilton, wrote:

*The lessons he would draw from [the First World War] were... those fundamental lessons implanted by General Plumer: namely that if offensives are planned on a sound tactical understanding; if the troops are well trained and have limited, realistic and identifiable objectives; and if the full weight of modern artillery is intelligently brought to bear on a concentrated front, there is almost nothing the enemy can do except withdraw.*¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Charles Caleb Colton, quoted in R. Hyman, compiler, *A Dictionary of Famous Quotations* (London: Bell & Hyman Limited, 1979 edition), p. 88.

¹⁰⁸ J. Latimer, *Alamein* (London: John Murray, 2002), p. 96; N. Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General 1887-1942* (London: Coronet, 1984), pp. 117-18. It is not for this study to enter the on-going debate about Montgomery's abilities and achievements – however he remains the Second World War British commander best known amongst the general public, derived in large part from his success at the Battle of El Alamein in 1942.

¹⁰⁹ J. Latimer, *Alamein* (London: John Murray, 2002), p. 96.

¹¹⁰ N. Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General 1887-1942* (London: Coronet, 1984), pp. 125-6. David Reynolds also draws a comparison between Montgomery's victory and the successes of the British armies during the Hundred Days: *Alamein featured concentrated firepower, in a battle plan that had distinct echoes of Haig's victories of 1918. The irony is that Haig's sixty-division army was the biggest that the British Army ever put into the field, yet its achievements were largely forgotten by the 1940s and remain so today...*; he then proceeds to summarise why the public remember The Battle of El Alamein and Bernard Montgomery, and know nothing of the final battles of the First World War - *Alamein was an unequivocal victory occurring at the midpoint of the*

Plumer's realism and attention to planning are echoed in other assessments of his performance. Peter Simkins concludes that Plumer, owing to his instincts for promoting teamwork and practical approaches to problems, alongside a sound feel for tactics, 'did as much as anyone, and more than most, to encourage and develop the type of all-arms attack that proved the key to victory in 1918'. Such qualities also encouraged the sort of lower level command and initiative which was to prove essential during the more open warfare of autumn 1918.¹¹¹

Gas

A notable feature of the war diaries from Second Army formations is the commonplace reference to the use of gas warfare. More than half of the recorded use of gas occurred during the final year of the war, and around half of the fatalities resulting from exposure to gas on the Western Front occurred in 1918.¹¹² In a lecture to troops, a divisional gas officer is recorded as '... reminding his audience that the YPRES Sector has always been the enemy's gas experimental ground'.¹¹³

conflict, whereas Haig's 'Hundred Days' of surging advance came near the end of the Great War and were obscured by the breathtaking internal collapse of the Kaiser's Germany. D. Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), pp. 270-1.

¹¹¹ Simkins, 'Herbert Plumer', p. 154 and p. 159.

¹¹² Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 200; the section pp. 200-205 gives a useful summary of gas usage by both sides in 1918.

¹¹³ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 17 September 1918.

In a chapter on the application of chemical warfare,¹¹⁴ Michael Freemantle discusses the development of the weapon and its effectiveness. He quotes the conclusion of Albert Palazzo that 'gas [became] 'the most effective method' of neutralising the enemy's guns and achieving fire supremacy. It also lowered the morale of the enemy and reduced their ability to resist.¹¹⁵

Lloyd describes how the deployment of gas as a weapon had become commonplace in 1918:

... The allied armies had to operate in a terrible and dangerous chemical environment... gas evoked a fear that was unlike any other weapon and had a significant effect on how the war was fought...

By 1918 all sides had incorporated gas into their battle tactics, with both front and rear sectors regularly being deluged with gas, which poisoned the ground and caused a constant trickle of casualties.

...Mustard gas... was used in increasing amounts by the German artillery. As the retreat [by the German forces] gathered momentum, German gunners fired

¹¹⁴ M. Freemantle, *Gas! Gas! Quick Boys! How Chemistry Changed the First World War* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, Spellmount, 2012), Chapter 6, pp. 115-120.

¹¹⁵ A. Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front: The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War I* (Lincoln, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p.2; quoted in Freemantle, *Gas!*, p. 120.

*thousands of these shells at their pursuers, using it as an area denial weapon, through which the Allies could not advance, or at least not without difficulty.*¹¹⁶

He quotes the findings of Tim Cook:

*German gunners simply blocked out map grids and fired shells to saturate the whole sector, thereby eliminating that area from the front.*¹¹⁷

Despite its dangers, the references within the war diaries of Second Army units indicate that gas was dealt with as part of the routine of the front line. Given the relative inexperience of many units making up Second Army, from their first time in the front line, men had to be able to cope with the gas shells delivered as part of enemy bombardments. On 17 August 1918 (on the first morning of only the second spell on front line duty for the battalion), the war diary of 11/Cameron Highlanders records that 'In the early morning Lt. G.S. Young and four men were gassed and two men wounded'.¹¹⁸ On 24 September, 104 Brigade records that 'Gas, especially Blue Cross, being used very extensively by the enemy'.¹¹⁹

War diaries make regular mention of the use of gas shells by the German artillery,¹²⁰ directed at both front and support lines. There is no particular significance attached to

¹¹⁶ Lloyd, *Hundred Days*, p. 102.

¹¹⁷ T. Cook, *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), p. 200; quoted in Lloyd, *Hundred Days*, p. 102.

¹¹⁸ TNA WO95/2611/4, War Diary of 11th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

¹¹⁹ TNA WO95/2483, War Diary of 104 Infantry Brigade, 24 September 1918.

¹²⁰ For example, these are extracts from TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders:
18 August, Meteren, Heavy gas concentration put down over our whole front line.

these references – it was obviously viewed as part and parcel of the ongoing harassment by the enemy when on active duty.¹²¹

Precautions were necessary when men came into contact with materials present during a gas attack; for instance, the use of sandbags which had previously been in an area fired on by a German barrage including gas shells.¹²² As well as concern for their immediate health, the men's clothing could also be contaminated by gas; in such cases fresh clothing was issued.¹²³ Contact with other soldiers who had themselves been subject to a gas attack, was another threat, requiring suitable guidance to be issued to troops. The aim was to ensure all possible steps were taken to minimise the risk of injury through exposure to the after-effects of gas shelling, and to put in place arrangements for disinfection.¹²⁴

By this time in the war the British Army was also making regular use of gas as part of its artillery fire plans; arguably outpacing its enemy:

22 August, Meteren, Enemy threw over a few Gas shells during Night.

¹²¹ For example, see TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Intelligence Summaries*, 22-29 August 1918; diary entries 18/19 September, 6, 10/11 October 1918.

¹²² TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade; the sandbags had subsequently been used in a dugout.

¹²³ For example: *Gassed Clothing- Such men as have been affected with Yellow Cross gas will be sent to the Divisional Main Dressing Station with a certificate signed by an officer stating that their clothing has been affected, when fresh clothing will be issued.* TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Administrative Instructions No. 215*, 23 August 1918.

¹²⁴ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *40th Div. No. 10/61 (G)*, 18/9/18.

*Chemical warfare developed from a novelty in 1915 to an approved component of the British method of waging war by 1916... it made a significant contribution to the eventual British victory in 1918.*¹²⁵

Army and Corps HQ had the position of chemical adviser on their staff; information on the use of gas by British forces and its effects was an important part of intelligence gathering. Prisoner interviews were the most common source, with questions designed to assess the impact of British gas shells and gas operations on enemy troops. Air photographs could show areas of bleached or contaminated ground.¹²⁶

There are various references within Second Army records to the use of gas by its forces in 1918. This applied during periods of relative inactivity, as well as in support of an offensive.¹²⁷ Gas operations by Second Army were part of normal routine and where these were noted in war diaries they were not afforded any particular emphasis; it was part of the regular exchanges of artillery fire.¹²⁸ The Army's use of gas as an offensive weapon also meant that British troops needed guidance when approaching ground which had been subject to a gas bombardment by their own artillery; although much of the general advice and training provided on anti-gas measures also applied.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Palazzo, *Seeking Victory*, p.2.

¹²⁶ For examples see TNA WO158/294, (Second Army) Effects of our Gas and Gas Shells, 11 October 1915 – 17 October 1918.

¹²⁷ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Order No. 30, 5th August 1918*.

¹²⁸ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade.

It was an essential part of front line routine for troops to issue warnings as early as possible of a forthcoming gas attack and to take steps to protect themselves. At the beginning of August, 121 Brigade was issued with three closely typed pages of 'Anti-Gas Instructions', which also referred the reader to SS534 (March, 1918) where 'full details of Gas Defence' could be found.¹³⁰

On 14 August, while out of the line, the troops of 5/Cameron Highlanders had experience in the 'Gas Chamber' – an arrangement designed to provide soldiers with first-hand experience of being gassed. The intention of the Army was for all units to spend a session in the chamber as part of their training and preparation for front line operations.¹³¹

Despite such measures, there was ongoing concern at the number of casualties resulting from enemy gas attacks. Second Army wrote to its corps commanders at the start of September 1918 to stress the importance of gas discipline.¹³² Officers were to be regularly reminded of their responsibility for gas casualties in their units where these resulted from a lack of training in appropriate defensive measures. These instructions show the concern of Second Army at the scale of the ongoing threat posed by the German use of gas on a regular basis. The result is a commitment to

¹²⁹ For example, instructions on *OUR OWN GAS SHELL BOMBARDMENTS* were issued by XV Corps in October 1918: TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/145 G. 28th October 1918*.

¹³⁰ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Centre Sector Defence Orders, Appendix III*.

¹³¹ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

¹³² TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *Second Army G.T. 420, 9th Sept. 1918; XV Corps No. 89/137 G. 11th September 1918; 40th Div. No. 10/56 G. 13-9-18*.

manage the consequences of this through actions designed to minimise the resulting number of casualties by attaching a very high importance to anti-gas measures.

Subsequent amendments were made to anti-gas instructions, reflecting a perceived casual approach by troops to gas shelling, perhaps a result of over familiarity with this type of artillery fire, or the reaction of 'old hands' believing in their own ability to decide how to respond following a gas attack. Troops also disliked wearing the respirators which were uncomfortable and restricted visibility, and therefore the movement, of the wearer.¹³³ As the advance in Flanders gathered pace, soldiers faced the new danger of gas contained in booby traps left behind by the German soldiers as they withdrew.¹³⁴

Gas remained a prime concern for Second Army throughout the Hundred Days. In instructions issued after the Battle of Courtrai, the command of XV Corps stated that it was considered probable that the Germans would 'make considerable use of gas' during the retreat. Cloud gas attacks were considered unlikely and the main threat would be from gas shells delivered using HE. It was acknowledged that with the ongoing advance causing 'frequent changes of positions' then units would not be able to receive the same amount of supervision from senior anti-gas personnel and would have to rely principally upon their own trained soldiers. Frequent inspections of

¹³³ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/141 G. 21-9-18.*

¹³⁴ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/145 G. 28th October 1918.*

respirators were to be carried out together with the maintenance of anti-gas appliances such as respirators, containers and rattles.¹³⁵

A background paper on gas warfare in Flanders is attached as Appendix G.

The War in the Air

The growth in importance of air power and the ability to defend against it is illustrated by the post of *Anti-Aircraft Defence Commander* on the Army general staff. The rank of the officer, lieutenant-colonel, reflects both the newness of the role and that the available technology meant the full potential of air power was yet to be realised. Nevertheless, ground troops could expect to be observed and, of greater immediate concern to them, to be attacked by enemy aircraft. Air bombing raids upon troops and key strategic points were also increasingly common, although by the final phase of the war the allied aircraft outnumbered their German counterparts. While it was in reconnaissance that the aeroplane continued to make its most important contribution, Plumer had come to realise the potential of air power in the new warfare.

Referring to the battles of April 1918, Sir John Lessor, a future Marshall of the Royal Air Force, wrote that Plumer 'pressed urgently for concentrated bombing of vital points of the German supply system to help slow down the enemy advance... [he] was emphatic that an essential condition of success was the concentration of all

¹³⁵ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/145 G. 28th October 1918.*

available aircraft continuously on the minimum number of points where the greatest dislocation could be produced'.¹³⁶

Such an approach was regularly evident during the Flanders Offensive. Appendix H includes a table recording RAF activity during this period, compiled from weekly operations reports produced by Second Army HQ.¹³⁷ The returns show the number of enemy aircraft destroyed and the RAF expenditure of ammunition and bombs. The figures illustrate the large increase in activity during Army operations.

Even during quieter periods, the war in the air was a common feature of the daily routine for the soldiers at the front, and for the aircrews:

*One enemy aeroplane dropped a few light bombs on our front line doing little damage. Considerable aerial activity on part of the enemy. Two of our planes brought down by enemy squadron behind our lines.*¹³⁸

The control of the air space above the opposing forces was an important factor in the allied advance. The RAF, together with its French and Belgian counterparts, enjoyed a numerical superiority during the campaign; the success that this led to is shown by the high number of enemy aircraft destroyed in this period. This control of the skies – when the weather permitted – gave a significant advantage to coalition troops. It

¹³⁶ Sir J. Slessor, *The Great Deterrent* (London: Constable, 1957), pp.51-2.

¹³⁷ The table has been produced through an analysis of the Second Army weekly operations reports: TNA WO158/218.

allowed effective reconnaissance of German troop activity and positions, including artillery, plus the crucial details of the new terrain over which the troops would be advancing. French and RAF planes also carried out regular bombing of enemy communications, headquarters and transport, thereby disrupting German command and movement. A further feature of air operations was the dangerous task of direct attacks at low level upon German troops.

The much smaller Belgian Air Corps, around 150 craft, also played its part; primarily in observation and reconnaissance, but also via its fighter squadrons, which had been reorganised at the start of the year.¹³⁹ On 17 October pilots of the Groupe de Chasse Jacquet (Fighter Group Jacquet) landed in Oostende to become the first members of the Belgian armed forces to enter the town after German occupation.

Communications with aircraft by advancing troops relied almost entirely upon visual aids. The normal practice was an agreed system of coloured flares. For example, during an action by advance platoons of 31st Division on 18 September 1918 (described earlier)¹⁴⁰, a 'Contact Aeroplane' was identified to 'co-operate with the attack'. Troops carried SOS flares: red smoke by day, green over green over red by night; plus white Very lights: three to be fired when a platoon reached its objective.

¹³⁸ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 2nd July 1918, *Stoic Farm, nr. Fletre (Meteren Sector)*.

¹³⁹ This paragraph is based upon information from the website www.wwiaviation/ww1_belgium1918.

¹⁴⁰ TNA WO95/2361, War Diary of 15/17th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment, *Narrative of Operations 13-18 September 1918*.

The RAF was also a regular feature in the advance planning by Second Army. Orders issued by 89 Brigade in August 1918 included reference to the RAF dropping supplies to forward troops.¹⁴¹ An attack on 19 July to capture the village of Meteren, by 26 Brigade and the South African Brigade (9th Division) was given air cover by six RAF planes circling the front before the attack and preventing enemy observation.¹⁴²

The preparations for the forthcoming Battle of Ypres give a good example of requirements for the various units of the RAF to undertake specific missions in support of the attacking infantry. The priority, through the use of 'contact aeroplanes', was to track the progress of the attack in order to inform HQ.¹⁴³ Another important role was that of the 'counter attack aeroplane', used to identify possible counter-attacks by the enemy and to signal for a defensive barrage by artillery.¹⁴⁴

The reference to 'wireless' in such orders would most likely be through a code signal; for example, the arrangements for 88 Brigade refer to an 'LL' or 'GF' call.¹⁴⁵ These arrangements also illustrate the increasing importance of wireless communications; while the existing equipment was too heavy and bulky for advancing units to utilise, it could be fitted to an aircraft with suitable adaptations.¹⁴⁶ The main HQ of Corps, Division, and increasingly Brigade, would have access to wireless receivers. It was

¹⁴¹ TNA WO95/2332, War Diary of 89 Infantry Brigade, *89th Infantry Brigade Order No. 180, 18 August 1918.*

¹⁴² TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

¹⁴³ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 2. CONTACT AEROPLANES.*

¹⁴⁴ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 3. COUNTER ATTACK AEROPLANE.*

¹⁴⁵ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 3, Contact and Counter- Attack Patrols, 25th September 1918.*

crucial for the forward infantry to be able to indicate that an objective has been taken and, as required, to signal for the necessary materiel or other forms of support in order to protect the gains made; reconnaissance aircraft made an important contribution to the various means of communication employed by advance formations. However there was concern at the ability of the enemy to intercept wireless communications.

The initial planning for the Battle of Ypres, arranged at divisional and brigade levels, also included what at the time was the novel proposal to use aircraft to deliver supplies, principally ammunition, to forward troops. The system depended upon the ability of the advance troops to display the required layout of strips of white cloth, along with the firing of a white flare. Parachutes (to be collected and returned to division) were employed to prevent the weighty packages from just falling directly to the ground (with unfortunate consequences for any nearby troops).¹⁴⁷

For the Battle of Courtrai, the scope of such operations had been extended to include the dropping of food and rations (plus messenger pigeons) as well as small arms and machine gun ammunition. Each of these had a different arrangement of ground sheets by which advance units could indicate the type of supplies required; with the

¹⁴⁶ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 3, Contact and Counter- Attack Patrols, 25th September 1918.*

¹⁴⁷ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 4. DROPPING OF AMMUNITION FROM AEROPLANES.* The orders also directed that the parachutes were to be collected and returned to division, which was probably not the first priority of the men on the ground.

attention of the contact aeroplane attracted by the firing of a white very light or the lighting of a white flare.¹⁴⁸

All units were now required to take the necessary steps to protect themselves from attack from the air, normally co-ordinated at brigade level. In the front line the main emphasis was upon the deployment of Lewis guns.¹⁴⁹ By 1918 defence against attack from the air had become an important component of operations, offensive and defensive. In November 1918, British Second Army had five anti-aircraft batteries and two sections of 13-pounder guns for anti-aircraft defence.¹⁵⁰

A more detailed background paper on aspects of air warfare in Flanders is attached as Appendix H.

¹⁴⁸ For an example see TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 2, 12th October 1918*.

¹⁴⁹ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Centre Sector Defence Orders, Appendix II*; TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *N. 120/415, 120th, Defence Orders*.

¹⁵⁰ A. F. Becke, *Official Orders of Battle: Part 4: The Army Council, GHQs, Armies and Corps 1914-1918* (HMSO, 1945); in total this represented 12 x 3-inch anti-aircraft guns and 42 x 13-pdr guns.

Chapter Two

Groupe d'Armées des Flandres

To turn the present situation to account, the most resolute offensive is everywhere desirable. Risks, which a month ago would have been criminal to incur, ought now to be incurred as a duty. It is no longer necessary to advance in regular lines and step by step. On the contrary, each division should be given a distant objective which must be reached independently of its neighbour, and even if one's flank is thereby exposed for the time being. Reinforcements must be directed on the points where our troops are gaining ground, not where they are checked. A vigorous offensive against the sectors where the enemy is weak will cause hostile strongpoints to fall, and in due course our whole army will be able to continue its advance. The situation is most favourable; let each one of us act energetically and without hesitation push forward to our objective.¹

Douglas Haig, 22 August, 1918.

By Sunday 11 August, the last day of the Battle of Amiens, Haig had conceived the possibility of bringing the war to an end that autumn....From mid-August a

¹ Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Headquarters, BEF, 22 August 1918 (Day 2 of the Battle of Albert), quoted in Edmonds, *Official History Vol. IV*, p. 588.

scheme for a general offensive [by all allied armies] was gradually developed...²

Under Foch's direction as generalissimo, a scheme was worked out for a series of coordinated offensives along the Western Front, designed to stretch the resources of the enemy to the maximum extent. It became clear to both Foch and Haig that an attack in Flanders must be included in their scheme, and that the Belgian Army had to be party to these operations.³

... Foch proposed to Haig and to the Belgian CGS, Cyraique Gillain, a new attack in Flanders... Foch had been approached by Belgium's King Albert, who had nursed his army since 1914 but now wished it to participate in the final act. By abandoning the Lys salient the Germans had exposed their railways running north to the sea. The chance presented itself to over-run the heights east of Ypres that the British had assaulted in the previous year, and to establish a base for operations against the trunk line running through Roulers.⁴

Map 1 shows the overall position on the Western Front before the start of the Hundred Days, and the key deployment of Second Army in front of Ypres and holding the right flank of the Belgian line.

² Harris with Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice*, p. 182.

³ W. J. Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', in Bond, B. et al, '*Look to your Front*' *Studies in the First World War by The British Commission for Military History* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), pp. 130-1; Philpott also points out that Petain had argued that the Belgian Army could improve its offensive capability through a reduction in its number of battalions and a corresponding increase in the number of divisions and artillery units.

⁴ Stevenson, *With Our Backs To The Wall*, p. 131; with reference to Powell, *Plumer*, p. 272.

The disillusionment with the strategic policies of the allies that had grown in King Albert as the war ground on, and his despair that victory remained ever-distant, had begun to dissipate during 1918. His insistence on maintaining the Belgian Army's freedom of action, and his resistance to offensive action in Belgium, given the potential devastation that could result, was now less marked.⁵ The King's 'growing appreciation of Foch's leadership of the allied forces and the recent battlefield successes' led to an 'ingenious compromise' to allow Albert to cooperate with the proposed joint offensive.⁶

Following a positive meeting between French Premier Clemenceau and Albert on 7 September, Clemenceau prompted Foch to meet the King as he believed that the latter 'would not sit idly by as the British and French advanced'.⁷ With the coming together of Foch and Albert, the idea of the GAF was born; also involved in a round of meetings were the Belgian Chief of Staff, Gillain, Haig (and Henry Wilson,⁸ at Haig's request) and Plumer. On 9 September, at Cassel, an agreement was reached on the establishment of a new Army Group: the *Groupe d'Armées des Flandres* (Army Group, Flanders - GAF). This would comprise the Belgian Army, the British Second

⁵ W. J. Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', in Bond, B. et al, *'Look to your Front' Studies in the First World War by The British Commission for Military History* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), pp. 123, 128, 130-1.

⁶ E. Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 439. It should be noted that the Belgian Army never came within the formal ambit of Foch as Generalissimo, not least because of constitutional obligations because the Commander of the Army was also the country's sovereign; however Albert became 'more amenable' to working in cooperation with Foch's authority. See also W. J. Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', in Bond, B. et al, *'Look to your Front' Studies in the First World War by The British Commission for Military History* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), pp. 130-1.

⁷ Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, p. 439.

⁸ General Sir Henry Wilson was CIGS (Chief of the Imperial General Staff) at the War Office in London.

Army and two French Corps. The GAF would be led by King Albert with the French General Jean Marie Joseph Degoutte as Chief of Staff.⁹

This represented a major shift in Albert's position regarding the army. In the past he had always wanted to see his army as independent of the allied forces, and, whilst stating his willingness to work cooperatively, was single-mindedly committed to maintaining the neutrality of Belgium.¹⁰ Wishing to avoid further devastation to his country, he had even been prepared to consider a unilateral negotiated peace with Germany during the winter of 1915-16. The views of his cabinet prevented any such manoeuvre and the influence of the Foreign Minister, Paul Hyams (former ambassador to Britain), together with the attractive prospect of leading Belgian troops in the liberation of the country, persuaded him to finally agree to cooperation with the allies in the final push in 1918.

Haig had therefore offered, in the interests of the overall campaign to defeat the main German field armies on the Western Front, to relinquish operational control of Plumer and Second Army; British Second Army would operate within the Army Group, under the overall command of the Belgian King.¹¹

⁹ Degoutte, who with his staff would have responsibility 'pour assurer la direction des operations', was not happy with his new role and complained at the equipment shortages in the Belgian Army. Foch subsequently overrode the views of Petain, commander of the French armies, to ensure that Degoutte received his extra supplies (see E. Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, pp. 400, 445).

¹⁰ Following the German victories in 1914, Albert had initially feared that his troops could be absorbed into the French Army with implications for the relationship of Belgium with France after the war. For a broader discussion of King Albert's considerations see P. Van Pul, *In Flanders' Flooded Fields: Before Ypres there was Yser* (Pen & Sword, 2006), including pp. 39/40.

¹¹ Sheffield summarises this event in his biography of Haig, G.D. Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum Press Limited, 2011), p. 316; see also Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, pp. 439-440, and Terraine, *To Win A War*, pp. 153-4; for an outline of the relationship between King Albert and the

Subsequently, when a dispute arose over the return of Second Army to his command, Haig summarised his original view of this arrangement in a letter to Foch as follows:

[At Cassel on 9 September] it was agreed by me that two divisions of the Second Army should be employed under the command of His Majesty the King of the Belgians for the purpose of covering the flank of the Army of Flanders operating in an easterly direction. It was further agreed that the whole of the Second Army should be used in the event of the enemy retiring from the MESSINES Ridge, and to exploit any success which might be obtained by following and pressing the German forces... The Second Army was not to be committed to any other operation than that of clearing the ground up to the LYS River. The whole scope of the operation had as its objective the 'clearing of the Belgian coast and the country between the coast and the River LYS'.¹²

As will be seen, in practice there were no two specified British divisions placed under King Albert's direct command; Second Army as a whole acted in concert with its army group partners. It is not clear whether Haig subsequently chose to reinterpret the agreement in this way or if Plumer perceived that the achievement of the overall objective was most likely if the whole of Second Army co-operated with the allied forces in the GAF. It was the latter course which Plumer followed, though he was to

Belgian Army at the outset of the war, see B. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (London: Penguin Books, 2014; first published MacMillan, 1962), pp. 113-122.

carry it out in single-minded fashion: the operations of Second Army would be determined by its GOC albeit in accordance with the strategic aims of the army group. The performance of Second Army would go well beyond the limited role outlined here by Haig.

At the same time as he wrote the above letter to Foch, Haig also wrote to the War Office on the same subject. In this more detailed letter he emphasises that his original agreement was for a 'temporary detachment of the Second Army under the King of the Belgians', and that Second Army 'was to be returned on the completion of the specific operation in hand'.¹³ It is not clear if this is an example of Haig seeking to add limited objectives to the arrangement with the benefit of hindsight, or whether he had been satisfied from the outset that the agreement with Foch was explicitly short term and limited in nature. The resulting successes of Second Army and its increasing importance within the army group would lead to repercussions however, not least in terms of the relationship between Haig and Foch. What is clear, from the resulting actions of both Haig and Plumer, is that the former had agreed to the transfer of the command of Second Army to King Albert and the structures of the GAF, for the purposes of an assault on German forces in Belgium. This arrangement and the circumstances of its subsequent ending are considered in detail in Chapter Seven.

¹² TNA WO32/5102, (General, Code 86(A)), *Field Marshal Haig requests return of 2nd British Army to his command from the King of the Belgians*, letter from Haig to Foch, 25 October 1918. See Appendix E1 for the full text.

¹³ TNA WO32/5102, *Haig requests return of 2nd British Army*, letter from Haig to the War Cabinet, 25 October 1918. See Appendix E2 for the full text.

In his 2011 biography of Haig, Gary Sheffield points out that 'Haig had already discussed with Plumer the possibility of co-operating with the Belgians and joint operations with the Royal Navy'.¹⁴ However, a suggestion by Plumer on 5 September for an assault to recapture Messines (conceded to the enemy following withdrawal during the fighting earlier in the year), was rejected as not sufficiently ambitious. Stevenson attributes these decisions by Haig to the importance he attached to the need for the Belgian Army to also take part in the forthcoming attacks:

*Plumer had wanted to by-pass the [Ypres] Salient and attack towards Wytschaete and Messines, but Haig refused to press the case, as his main concern was to get the Belgians into action.*¹⁵

With agreement that the general offensive would include action on the northern stretch of the Western Front, the aims of this particular operation would include the clearing of ground between the River Lys and the coast; the clearance of the Flanders coast; and the establishment of a line through Ghent to the Dutch frontier. Haig subsequently told Plumer that he should 'be prepared to move a Division by sea to Ostend and occupy Bruges with left on the Dutch frontier, and connecting with Anglo-Belgian Army on the line Thourout-Roulers'.¹⁶ Judging from subsequent events this advice appears to have been treated by Plumer with the same degree of importance as the guidance from GAF Chief of Staff Degoutte; that is, noted with respect, but not deflecting Plumer from what he considered to be the correct course of action.

¹⁴ Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 316.

¹⁵ Stevenson, *With Our Backs To The Wall*, p. 135.

Plumer had good experience of working with allied forces and commanders. As well as the experiences early in his career of commanding colonial and volunteer troops, there was his more recent time in Italy. Here he had made a good impression upon the Italian leaders despite his reservations about the lack of concern for their troops shown by some Italian officers. During the Spring 1918 fighting he maintained positive relations with both Belgian and French allies, despite some frustration with the latter. Haig had remarked that 'The French have been very trying and poor old Plumer has had a most anxious time'.¹⁷ The evidence is that the Belgians had particular respect for Plumer. The Earl of Athlone, Head of the British Military Mission to King Albert's HQ, writing to his brother-in-law King George V in April 1918, is quoted as stating that the Belgians 'would do anything for General Plumer'; the same source also claims that the Belgians did not have the same liking for the French.¹⁸

During June-August 1918 two American Divisions had served under Second Army. The commander of American 27th Division wrote how Plumer '... became a very good friend of the 27th Division... [all who met him] will always remember his kindness of heart and his interest and confidence in American troops'.¹⁹ The *Ypres Times* reports how one officer was on the receiving end of Plumer's methodological approach. Over tea Plumer made the casual remark 'Oh, by the way, O'Ryan [27th Division commander], how would you like to have a go at our friends on the ridge?' Major-

¹⁶ Reported in Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 316; reference *Douglas Haig Manuscript Diary*, 9 September 1918.

¹⁷ Quoted by Powell, *Plumer*, p. 266, from Edmonds, *Official History Vol. IV*, p. 484.

¹⁸ Powell, *Plumer*, p. 267.

¹⁹ Major-General John F O'Ryan, *The Story of the 27th Division* (New York, 1920), p.196.

General O’Ryan, having agreed to consider the operation, found that the details of the plan and the draft orders had already been drawn up for discussion.²⁰

Peter Simkins views Second Army’s flank role for the GAF, within a coalition force under foreign command, as Haig failing to give Plumer ‘a leading part in the final Allied offensive’.²¹ There is a more positive interpretation of Haig’s decision and the arrangements with King Albert. While the setting up of the GAF was certainly a political compromise negotiated through Foch as generalissimo, responding to pressure from King Albert for a visible role in the liberation of Belgium, it provided for the Belgian Army to be directly engaged in the final series of offensives,.

The British position, influencing Haig’s thinking, reflected a concern to ensure that France and French troops did not claim the credit for a liberation of Belgium fought for by British soldiers. Haig both wanted and needed to keep Plumer in situ because of his proven ability to manage his way successfully through the political complexities of coalition warfare. In his diary for 5 September 1918, Haig reports his meeting with Plumer regarding ‘the instructions I sent him for co-operating with [the] Belgian Army... I told [Plumer] the most important object was to get the Belgians to advance!’.²²

²⁰ Quoted by Powell, *Plumer*, p. 271; from the Plumer Papers, an extract for the *Ypres Times*, quoted by the Rev ‘Tubby’ Clayton in an unnamed Toc H publication.

²¹ Simkins, ‘Herbert Plumer’, p.148.

²² Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries*, pp. 456-7.

Haig was anxious to ensure that the Belgian Army would actively commit to the forthcoming series of attacks. At the same time he was also sceptical of the potential fighting value of the Belgian forces, so Plumer and Second Army would 'stiffen the Belgian Army with two British divisions on [the Belgian Army's] right flank'.²³ One can see that only the presence of a full British Army together with a commander possessing a thorough knowledge of the area, as well as being known and respected by the Belgians, had the potential to provide the necessary reassurance to Albert and his troops.

Another consideration for Haig should have been the combat readiness of Second Army at this time. This was a weakened force, comprising ten divisions, many depleted through the demands of the fighting in the spring. It is likely that Haig feared the Army was not capable of a role much beyond that of securing the flank of the Belgians; his prime concern was to give the Belgian Army the confidence to advance. As well as Plumer's diplomatic abilities, Haig also needed an experienced commander who could nurse a weakened British Army through the fighting to come.

Plumer, perhaps showing understandable apprehension regarding the capability of Second Army to carry out a major offensive, and given the unproven potential of the Belgians, showed initial caution regarding whether the GAF could meet the expectations placed upon it. He was wary of the pressure for Second Army to provide the necessary support for its army group allies. On 13 September, Plumer told General Sir Herbert Lawrence (Haig's Chief of Staff) 'that he doubted that he

²³ Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 316.

would be able to advance towards Menin and Courtrai unless the German defenders suffered a major collapse'.²⁴

Map 2 shows the allied front line in Flanders on 28 September, the date set for the GAF to commence its attack, as part of the allied grand offensive conceived by Haig and Foch.

The German Army

Its Intelligence Summary at the start of September had identified eleven German divisions in line facing Second Army, but only one in reserve,²⁵ following the enemy's withdrawal from the Lys Salient. These belonged to the German Fourth Army under General von Armin. Appendix A9 provides details of the German forces opposing Second Army in the forthcoming battles.

In 1918 a German Division normally comprised three regiments (battalions). By this period of the war, the average fighting strength of a battalion was three companies, each of between 70-80 men.²⁶

The quality of the troops, in terms of experience and ability, was mixed. Most had been able to undertake a period of rest following the fighting earlier in the year, which

²⁴ Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 316, reference *Australian War Memorial* (unpublished primary source), pp. 51/56, 'Record of a meeting... between... Plumer and... the CGS'.

²⁵ TNA WO157/128, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 4 September 1918.

²⁶ TNA WO157/128, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 28 September 1918.

should have helped improve their capability and morale. For instance, on 10 August 1918, the War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade (40th Division) notes information received that there was now a fresh German Division (52nd Infantry) on the opposite side of no man's land:

As their moral [sic] and fighting qualities were probably high... patrols to be more vigilant than when the 207th German Division was in the line.²⁷

Though troop numbers meant that Second Army enjoyed a 2:1 majority at the start of the Battle of Ypres, the German positions were well-organised. Pill-boxes, dug-outs and wire from earlier fighting were made maximum use of, in order to provide for effective defence in depth. Machine gun positions were carefully concealed, and the wide deployment of snipers provided further problems for the British. The enemy was defending higher ground giving clear lines of sight onto the advancing British forces. The battlefield was another factor in favour of the defenders. The shell-torn terrain, pock-marked by craters and former trenches, was littered with the debris of previous conflict – ‘.... wire, wood and broken war material and equipment....’²⁸ – impeding the movement of men, animals and machines.

²⁷ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade.

²⁸ Edmonds, *Official History*, Vol. V.

The Belgian Army

In August 1914 the Belgian Army had comprised a main army of 120,500 troops with 18,000 volunteers, organised into six divisions of either two or three brigades; together with around 130,000 garrison troops.²⁹ This, as Ian Beckett has noted, was 'a conscript army though one of only recent creation', conscription only being introduced from 1909.³⁰ Each brigade included one machine gun company (Maxim or Hotchkiss guns). There was also a small aeronautical section.

Following the initial resistance to the German invasion, and the Battle of the Yser, by the end of 1914 the Belgian army was an exhausted and demoralised force: only 85,000 of the original field army and the 80,000 Troupes de Forteresse reached the River Yser. Regiments that had been split on mobilisation to form a second unit had to be merged to maintain their strength; the army was desperately in need of new recruits. In a first appeal (26 October 1914) King Albert asked every Belgian male between the ages of 18 and 30 to volunteer. The government in exile decided on 1 March 1915, that every male between the ages of 18 and 25 and living in Belgium, France or England was obliged to enlist (although there were also volunteers from Belgians living abroad); on 21 July 1916 this was extended up to the age of 40.

²⁹ The majority of the material in this section describing the Belgian Army is drawn from: Haythornthwaite, *World War One Source Book*, pp. 149-153; R. Pawley & P. Lierneux *The Belgian Army in World War I* (Osprey Publishing, 2009); W. J. Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', in Bond, B. et al, *'Look to your Front' Studies in the First World War by The British Commission for Military History* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), pp. 121-135; and the website *Brave Little Belgium* – a website of summary information on the Belgian Army in WW1 <http://www.belgianarmy.freeservers.com/> (other useful websites are included in the bibliography). While Belgium had colonial troops, these were not deployed on the Western Front.

As a boost to numbers, many Belgians living in occupied territory made the risky journey across the Belgian-Dutch border to enlist. This was an extremely dangerous task, and many who tried were shot by German patrols. Eventually the Germans erected electrified fences along the entire length of the border, although many Belgians still made the attempt. From Holland they went to England and then to training camps in France.

Lacking a strategic reserve, the extent of the front held by the Belgian Army meant that none of its divisions could be wholly relieved. From 1915 onwards the army maintained its 'Watch on the Yser', where the most frequent enemy was the water undermining the defence works. Although enemy sniping was a constant feature, there was little other action beyond occasional raids.

Further south towards Ypres the flooded area between the lines became less intense and the terrain was more typical of the rest of the Western Front.

The German Spring offensives of 1918 involved the reconstituted Belgian Army in direct action, notably the fighting near Merkem in April. Despite the initial German attack breaking through to the Belgian support line, the advancing troops were halted by artillery fire directed at them and their reserves. Under the cover of a moving barrage the Belgian infantry then counter-attacked. Gradually the German forces were pushed back – 'Battalions broke, and the fighting degenerated into a number of smaller local battles' – and by the evening all of the lost ground had been

³⁰ I.F.W. Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2004), pp. 40-41.

recovered.³¹ The action demonstrated that the Belgians had the potential to take the offensive as well as defend ground. Terraine states that 'the well-rested and up-to-strength Belgian Army had a good day north of Ypres on 17 April'.³²

In January 1918 the Belgian Army had been reorganised: the initial brigades were abolished and each of the six *divisions d'armée* was to consist of two *divisions d'infanterie* (each comprising 3 regiments). The cavalry division had three brigades with two regiments each, one group *d'auto-canons mitrailleuses*, two battalions of cyclists, three batteries of 7.5 cm guns, one company of engineers, and a platoon of *télégraphistes sur cycles*.

By the time of the Final Advance in Flanders, the Belgian army, under its commander General Gillain, comprised:

170,000 soldiers

5,700 officers

38,000 horses

850 artillery pieces (not including trench mortars).³³

Appendix A8 provides the Orders of Battle for the Belgian Army in September 1918.

Belgian troops had undertaken little action since the retreat in 1914. They had experience of trench warfare to the extent of maintaining and defending their

³¹ Pawley & Lierneux, *The Belgian Army*, p. 35.

³² Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 67.

³³ A further 30,000 troops were employed in factories, hospitals etc.

positions,³⁴ but were composed predominantly of fresh soldiers. Their preparation and readiness for action in 1918 can be most closely compared with the American troops arriving in France at this time: they offered enthusiasm and energy, but lacked the experience of the modern warfare of 1918. The Belgians did, however, have the added incentive of fighting to liberate their country from German occupation.

The appearance of the troops had also changed from the 19th century uniform worn in 1914. The revised uniform was a curious hybrid of French and British influence: a French Adrian helmet, a greatcoat, a uniform of khaki serge procured from Britain, and equipment made by the Mills company and similar to the British 1908 pattern.

*... At any distance [the Belgian soldier] resembled a soldier of the French Colonial and Moroccan divisions... M1915 Adrian helmets with cloth covers [and] M2 gasmasks.*³⁵

Control of most of Belgium by Germany meant that the army had no large pool available for new recruits or replacements; Belgian units, while relatively fresh, were often below their paper strength. Conscription now operated for all Belgians aged 18-40 years, living in the retained part of the country, France, Britain and, from the middle of 1916, in allied or neutral countries.

³⁴ In the build-up to the Battle of Ypres, one British Battalion noted: *Heavy barrage on the Belgian line on our immediate left, previous to enemy attempting a raid on Belgian posts.* TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 23rd September 1918.

³⁵ Pawley & Lierneux, *Belgian Army*, p. 36.

The French Army

Though the French Army had mostly recovered from the mutinies and discord of the previous year it faced serious manpower problems in 1918, exacerbated by the casualty rates during the earlier battles in 1918. Despite such steps as bringing forward the 1919 draft to April 1918, the recall of certain categories of reservists, and the enlistment and deployment of foreign recruits, considerable deficiencies remained: 'Some front line units were composed almost entirely of men in their forties, some as old as forty-eight'.³⁶ Many divisions were under strength and there were ongoing issues regarding supplies, replacements and casualty rates. Morale remained brittle and it was all too clear to the French soldier that he lacked the material support which the British and in particular the Americans enjoyed.³⁷

Appendix A7 includes the Orders of Battle for the French formations attached to the GAF: the original Detachment d'Armee du Nord (General de Mitry); and French Sixth Army (General de Boissoudy) from 19 October 1918.

British Second Army

At the beginning of May 1918 [following the German Spring offensives]... of the sixty British infantry divisions then in France, ten were marked with a red

³⁶ A. Clayton, *Paths of Glory: The French Army 1914-1918* (London: Orion Publishing, 2007; first published London: Cassell, 2003), p. 181.

³⁷ This summary is considered in more detail in Clayton, *Paths of Glory*, pp. 180-196.

*circle, indicating they had been reduced to cadre divisions and could not be made up to strength, at least not for some considerable period of time.*³⁸

This position was exacerbated when subsequent German attacks led to additional British casualties, as Haig deployed British units in support and reserve roles to aid the French Army.

John Terraine has described a retained cadre as follows:

*In effect, the infantry ceased to exist, the battalions being reduced to mere 'caretaker' companies of ten officers and forty-five other ranks; artillery, machine-gunners and engineers remained available for action with other divisions.*³⁹

Following representations made by Foch to the Prime Minister Lloyd George at a meeting on 1 June, there were improvements in the reinforcement programme such that nine of the divisions were reconstituted.⁴⁰ Five of these 'reduced to cadre' divisions (14th, 30th, 31st, 34th, and 40th) would in due course make up half the fighting strength of Second Army for the Flanders Offensive.⁴¹

³⁸ A.B.D. Dewar, assisted by Lt.-Col. J.H. Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig's Command: December 19, 1915, to November 11, 1918* (Two volumes) (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1922), Vol. II, p. 277.

³⁹ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Terraine, *To Win A War*, pp. 79-80.

⁴¹ The other five divisions marked with a red circle in May 1918 were the 16th, 39th, 59th, 61st, and 66th.

By this time there had been further changes to the composition of Second Army, including the withdrawal of the American 27th and 30th Divisions. The Army comprised four Corps: II, X, XV and XIX; there were now just ten divisions in total, nine of which had been with the army during the summer, plus 14th (Light) Division (initially attached to II Corps). 29th Division was a Regular Army Division; all the rest: 9th (Scottish), 14th (Light), 30th, 31st, 34th, 35th, 36th (Ulster), 40th, and 41st, were New Army Divisions.⁴²

A comprehensive listing of the Orders of Battle for British Second Army throughout 1918, focusing in particular on the period September-November 1918, is contained in Appendix A.

Second Army was made up completely of British troops – there were no colonial or dominion units. The Canadian and Anzac troops, who have often been presented as the most effective formations within the BEF, were all deployed in other armies. There was no obvious ‘elite’ or similar formation within Second Army;⁴³ a British division was also smaller in size than its Dominion equivalent.⁴⁴

⁴² New Army Division: created initially from Kitchener’s volunteers and then sustained through conscription.

⁴³ However it has been argued by P. Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack 1916-18* (USA, Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 80-1, that 9th and 29th Divisions can be described as possible ‘elite’ or ‘highly regarded’ divisions; this assessment however takes account of their performance during the final months of the war, rather than their reputation at the start of the Flanders Offensive.

⁴⁴ Terraine has summarised the position as follows:

Following the reduction of the B.E.F. by 141 battalions [at the start of 1918], in view of the alleged manpower shortage, British divisions were reduced to 9 battalions, 3 to a brigade. This reduction did not apply to the Dominion divisions, which partly accounts for the great part played by those formations in the subsequent fighting [during 1918].

From an editor’s note in J. Terraine, ed., *General Jack’s Diary: War on the Western Front 1914-1918 – The Trench Diary of Brigadier-General J. L. Jack, D.S.O.* (London, Cassell & Co., 2000 edition), p. 244.

With Second Army wholly comprised of British divisions, and containing a number of reformed, rehabilitated or potentially less effective units, it was potentially the weakest of the BEF armies in September 1918.

During this final year of the war, the British Army faced an increasing manpower challenge. While the reduction in the size of British divisions was justified by reference to the increased firepower available to the infantry, there were other consequences for the troops involved. Any assessment of the performance of British units during the Spring 1918 German offensives and afterwards must take these changes into consideration. Implementing the reorganisation meant the breaking up of certain units and the dispersal of troops into unfamiliar groupings. It also reduced the ability of divisions to provide reliefs and to release troops for training and refreshment.

Many divisions which had faced the Michael offensive in March had subsequently been redeployed to the north in order to recuperate; instead they found themselves repeating their experience in response to the Georgette offensive in northern France and Flanders. Battalions and brigades saw their surviving troops pulled together in composite formations, to allow for some continuing cohesion in command and control. Subsequently a number of units were formally reduced to cadre status, from which some were rebuilt to be restored to active duty.

The experiences of certain units and divisions prior to joining Second Army during the summer of 1918 tell us much about the potential readiness or otherwise of the Army's operational formations, and the condition and combat effectiveness of many of the troops, prior to the commencement of the major offensives from the end of September.

2/15th Battalion (County of London) (Prince of Wales' Own Civil Service Rifles), London Regiment, only joined 90 Brigade ('The Grey Brigade'), 30th Division, at the start of July 1918; prior to that it had been part of 60th Division in the Middle East, travelling from Egypt in June.⁴⁵ Its soldiers had no experience of the demands of warfare on the Western Front.

34th Division was reconstructed in June 1918, taking in units from India and the Middle East. 'They had no experience of the war as waged in France' complained the divisional history.⁴⁶ The division was soon placed under French XXX Corps and took a major part in the Battle of the Soissonais and the Ourcq, and the Capture of Beugneux Ridge. One of its battalions, 2/Loyal North Lancs, had entrained to Alexandria, en route to France, on 23 April 1918 with 33 officers and 941 ORs. By 1 August it had been reduced to 7 officers and 380 ORs. The division was not ready for the intensity of the fighting into which it was plunged. It had

⁴⁵ TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/15th Battalion, London Regiment.

⁴⁶ Lieut.-Colonel J. Shakespear, *The Thirty-Fourth Division, 1915-1919* (London, 1921), p. 253.

*... no experience of war as waged in France, except in one respect, this was no great drawback, as open warfare was expected. The one exception was that they knew nothing of gas. So they were slow to recognise gas shelling. This caused casualties which troops accustomed to gas would have avoided.*⁴⁷

The divisional history lists the various challenges facing this newly re-built formation, prior to its first action. Its troops had no previous experience of action on the Western front, the country was entirely new to them; they had only just completed a long journey by rail, bus and march. Although there were no organised trench systems, no time was available for reconnaissance (the positions of the enemy were only fully known once captured). The division was to co-operate for the first time with allied troops.⁴⁸

Thus Second Army, to which 34th Division was subsequently transferred, was not receiving an up-to-strength division, or one experienced in fighting on the Western Front. The arrangements for its reconstitution 'as a first line division in the Second Army area and under arrangements to be made by Second Army' were set out in a memo from GHQ on 24 June 1918.⁴⁹ This detailed the constituent battalions for the division and also its supporting units,⁵⁰ together with the initial steps for bringing these

⁴⁷ A. Crookenden, *The History of the Cheshire Regiment in the Great War* (Chester: W H Evans Sons and Co., 1938).

⁴⁸ Shakespear, *Thirty-Fourth Division*.

⁴⁹ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *memo O.B./2231, 24th June 1918*.

⁵⁰ Three of the battalions already posted to the Division, all of them of Irish origin, 6th Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 5th Battalion, Connaught Rangers, and 6th Battalion, Leinster Regiment, were now withdrawn 'for medical reasons'.

together. Second Army was required to distribute the battalions to brigades and nominate one for conversion to pioneers.⁵¹

The battalion selected for the latter attachment to the division was 2/4 Somerset Light Infantry, which had been one of the first units attached to the newly re-established division.⁵² This decision was not without its problems, as shown in the following extracts from a report, filed on 25 June 1918, on the health of the battalion's troops:

This Battalion is not at the moment suffering from a high Malarial incidence, but a few cases are occurring daily, and there are known to be 182 Malarial Subjects in the Battalion, of whom 50 are at present unfit for duty...

There is a large number of men in the Battalion who have not had leave for periods varying from 18 months to before 1914.

The general standard of health is rather low, rendering men more susceptible to any form of disease, and at the present time a large number of influenza cases are occurring.

To render the Battalion fit for Active Duties in the field, I would recommend that they be removed to a seaside camp; that the training be of a very light nature, not lasting after mid-day, and that men who in the opinion of the Medical Officer are unfit for training, be excused.

⁵¹ The final composition of 34th Division is contained in the relevant entry in Appendix A.

*I would further recommend that a liberal leave allotment be granted as this would benefit the health of the men and improve morale.*⁵³

This report shows the practical consequences for Second Army of having a unit reconstituted from cadre and incorporating large numbers of replacement troops. The incidence of the symptoms of malaria is an ongoing concern of the medical authorities. The reference to cases of influenza is an early indication of the impending flu epidemic – itself a result in part of the poor health of soldiers and civilians; it was also starting to become a concern for the Army's medical staff with implications for maintaining unit strength. The lack of leave taken by these troops challenges the oft-referred to commitment by the BEF to ensuring its soldiers are regularly rotated out of the line and allowed opportunities for leave, as an important part of maintaining morale. The recommendations by the division's medical officer, made during a period of high activity for the Army, for an increase in leave entitlement, light training and a period experiencing sea air, are suggestive of a sympathetic and concerned approach to the welfare of the troops.

The medical officer's recommendations were accepted by the division and referred up the chain of command to Second Army HQ for authorisation – reflecting the Army's

⁵² The Battalion was attached initially to 101 Brigade for training and administrative purposes, prior to taking on attachment to the Division (TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Brigade, *Order No. 205, 29 June 1918*).

⁵³ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *memo 25th June 1918, REPORT ON THE HEALTH OF THE 2/4TH BATTALION OF THE SOMERSET LIGHT INFANTRY*, Division HQ, (signed) G. W. Bliss, Colonel, A.M.S., A.D.M.S. 34th Division.

commitment to maintaining, and where possible improving, the health of its soldiers.⁵⁴

This action does not support the common perception in current times of a heartless and disinterested top brass.

35th Division, originally formed as a New Army Bantam Division,⁵⁵ had a chequered history prior to this final campaign, with concerns regarding its performance in combat at various points during the past two years. In the defensive battles along the Ancre at the end of March 1918, it had sustained more than 3,000 casualties. Despite its poor record, this latter action probably saved the 35th from reduction to cadre, showing it had potential fighting qualities.⁵⁶

40th Division had also been intended as a New Army Bantam Division, although a number of its original units were non-Bantam. In 1918 it saw action during the German Spring Offensives, at the Battles of The Lys, the Battle of Estaires and the Battle of Hazebrouck. Following the scale of its losses in the fighting at Hazebrouck, the division was reduced to a training cadre. It then was subject to a major reorganisation, bringing together former Garrison Guard units which were converted to fighting units. On 10 June, Garrison Guard Battalions 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 were allotted to the division, initially as a Brigade ‘... for work, and to man the line in case

⁵⁴ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *initial memo 25th June 1918, and subsequent memos 1st July and 2nd July.*

⁵⁵ The term ‘Bantam’ was used to describe specifically formed Battalions comprising men of short stature who did not meet the regulations regarding height and chest measurements. For further reference see S. Allinson, *The Bantams: The Untold Story of World War I* (London: Howard Baker, 1981).

⁵⁶ This summary is based upon P. Simkins, ‘Each One A Pocket Hercules: The Bantam Experiment and the Case of the 35th Division’, in Sanders Marble, ed., *Scraping The Barrel: The Military Use of Substandard Manpower 1860-1960* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 79-104.

of necessity’;⁵⁷ from 12 June, each battalion was allotted a permanent designation.⁵⁸ Two days later, orders were issued for 40th Division to be reorganised as a ‘Garrison Division’ (semi-mobile) with support arms formed through Second Army and GHQ. As such, the division would be required ‘to hold a quiet sector of the line’ with training organised to support this role.⁵⁹ Via a divisional order, 13 July 1918, each battalion had the word ‘Garrison’ deleted from its title.

9th Garrison Battalion, the King’s Own Scottish Borderers had been brought together at Buyssechre during the period 10-14 June 1918, many men being drafts from labour companies; the war diary refers to other ranks being equipped with ‘1914 equipment’ at this stage. It began its battalion training on 15 June, when it was also renumbered as 10/KOSB. On 24 June, an inspection by the Inspector of Medical Services led to forty soldiers being classified as lower than B1 status, with the result that they were returned to labour companies.⁶⁰

In the same 120 Brigade was 11/Cameron Highlanders. Originally 6th Garrison Guard Battalion, it had been established at Etaples in June 1918. The battalion HQ was formed on 9-10 June; the following day, officers and four companies arrived, most of

⁵⁷ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

⁵⁸ Nos. 6-11 GGBs were designated as Garrison Battalions (GB) 11/Cameron Highlanders, 13/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 13/East Lancs, 10/ KOSB, 15/KOYLI and 12/North Staffs, respectively.

⁵⁹ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division. Four GBs transferred in from 59th Division, First Army on 15 June: the organisation of brigades (with deletion of the term ‘Garrison’ from 13 July) was:

| 119 Brigade | 120 Brigade | 121 Brigade |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 13/ Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers | 11/Cameron Highlanders | 8/Royal Irish (originally 2/) |
| 13/East Lancs | 10/ KOSB | 23/Cheshires |
| 12/North Staffs | 15/KOYLI | 23/Lancs Fusiliers |

*Each Brigade also created one Light Trench Mortar Battery (3 officers, 47 other ranks).

*On 28 June, 17/Worcesters absorbed 12/Yorkshires (Pioneers) to become the division’s pioneer battalion .

the men being category B1 and drawn from 29 different labour companies. On 14 June training commenced.

Two weeks later, the GOC, 40th Division, 'decided to transfer Scotchmen to this unit' – with the result that there were 250 new transfers in, with 221 Englishmen and Irishmen transferred to other units in the division (119, 120 and 121 Brigades). This action was no doubt designed to assist in building a shared commitment to the battalion and a close bond between the new troops; given the fresh composition of the unit and the combat operations pending, this can be viewed as a positive move, at least as far as 11/Cameron Highlanders was concerned. A new cadre of Scottish officers was received from the Black Watch the next day.

On 7 July the battalion commenced a four day tour of duty in the West Hazebrouck line. Three officers and six NCOs from 31st Division were attached to the battalion in order to provide instruction on trench duties. One month later the battalion was inspected by the Army Commander, General Plumer. On 17 August, less than six weeks after the HQ was formed, the battalion took up front line duty.⁶¹

This experience shows the steep learning curve which many of the soldiers making up Second Army had to climb.⁶² The new troops were not, in the main, keen volunteers with a long period of training behind them; they were young conscripts, or

⁶⁰ TNA WO95/2611/4, War Diary of 10th Battalion, Kings Own Scottish Borderers.

⁶¹ TNA WO95/2611/4, War Diary of 11th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

⁶² Appendix J contains a short paper describing aspects of training undertaken by Second Army units, in the build up to the Battle of Ypres.

re-classified men transferred from former garrison battalions and labour companies. The evidence indicates that senior commanders were aware of this and there was a heavy emphasis on induction and training throughout June, July and August. The mentoring role described above, using experienced soldiers from a neighbouring division, is indicative of the need to support these newly (re)formed groupings. Units with a more established pedigree were willing and able to provide such support. Insofar as service demands and the actions of the enemy allowed, units were introduced to front line duty on a gradual basis, making full use of the Army's policy for the regular rotation of troops between front line, reserve and support positions.

As has been noted above, 120 Brigade was newly constituted as part of the re-built 40th Division, and its comprehensive programme of training reflected this. During the first week in July the troops practised all aspects of musketry, bombing, and the Lewis light machine gun (120 selected soldiers). Routine PT classes designed to improve fitness led to the conclusion that 'A number of the men however are unlikely to reach the standard of agility required for Recreational Training'.⁶³ Junior officers received lectures on map reading, platoon organization and on 'simple tactical schemes'.

This record makes clear that the troops were in need of training across the range of skills and experiences which a soldier required in 1918. Basic rifle shooting including care and reloading was a fundamental part of the programme. Alongside this there was the essential need for a trained core of Lewis gun teams to provide the mobile firepower to support advancing infantry. In subsequent weeks there would be training

for a second team per gun as well as AA (anti-aircraft) shooting. Training in bombing had however only just commenced and there was much to do in terms of supporting skills such as signalling. There remained some concerns regarding the overall health and fitness of the men; a report later that month stated that there had been an improvement in marching with a reduction in the number of men falling out because of 'the worst cases having been evacuated to Base by A.D.M.S'.⁶⁴

Improving the leadership abilities of the officers and NCOs was also a priority, indicative of the overall shortfall in the initial capabilities of these units. The 19 July report for 120 Brigade, under the heading 'Drill', concludes that 'There is still considerable room for improvement one of the chief weaknesses being the lack of power of command on the part of both junior Officers and N.C.O.s'. The training reports include reference to lectures 'to impress upon all Platoon Commanders the importance of handling their own platoon and the need of cultivating the power of command' as well as instruction in basic elements such as the writing of messages, saluting and march discipline.⁶⁵

The following week saw the three battalions commencing four days occupation of the main trench line for 'training in trench duties', on a rotating basis. Troops from affiliated units – Labour, Tunnelling, Royal Engineers (RE) – were also involved. The

⁶³ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *Training Progress Report 6-7-18*.

⁶⁴ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *Training Progress Report 19th July 1918*.

⁶⁵ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *Training Progress Reports 12-7-18, 19th July 1918, 26/7/1918*.

exercise was supported by experienced officers and NCOs from the neighbouring 31st Division, which was also under XV Corps command:

*Valuable experience was gained during these tours of duty in a Trench System: but the standard of knowledge of actual trench routine as displayed by some companies was poor while there is also considerable room for improvement in trench discipline.*⁶⁶

The experience was also used to provide instruction for specialist roles including those of sniper, scout and observer; as well as lectures for officers on 'Trench Routine'. In the following weeks the troops also received basic training on anti-gas measures. Officers received lectures 'on the platoon in the assault',⁶⁷ although as late as 5-6 September 1918, 120 Brigade records that its units were 'practising' outpost and advanced guard operations, at battalion and brigade levels.⁶⁸ 40th Division orders include frequent references to an 'Advanced Guard Brigade' which comprised infantry units with attached field artillery and machine gun teams, under the command of a brigade CO; a practical illustration of preparation for the forthcoming offensive.

In common with the rest of the BEF, Second Army was increasingly composed of conscripted men:

⁶⁶ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *Training Progress Report 12-7-18*; *Brigade Order No. 204 8-7-18*.

⁶⁷ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Training Progress Reports 19th July 1918, 26/7/1918*.

⁶⁸ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade.

*By the allied summer advance of 1918 a majority of the men fighting in the [BEF] were conscripts, and it was this force which won the war.*⁶⁹

On 7 July 1918 7/Seaforth Highlanders received reinforcements of 28 other ranks from 3/Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders; the average age was 18-19 years - none would have had previous service abroad.⁷⁰ In common with many other battalions, the Seaforth Highlanders continued to receive new drafts of men at various intervals.

Following the original introduction of conscription through the Military Service Act of January 1916, there had been a further series of revisions which had widened the net from which new drafts were drawn. The changes in 1918 are indicative of the manpower problems faced by the BEF and demonstrate the very wide range of calibre of conscript who would make up the replacement drafts for units.⁷¹ The Military Service Act (II) in February 1918 raised the age limit to 50 years, revised the schedules of reserved occupations, and gave the Ministry of National Service the power to cancel exemptions granted on occupational grounds. In July 1918 the Act was amended to raise the minimum age for exemption due to working in a protected occupation, to 23 years. While there had been developments in the medical inspection of recruits and revisions in the resulting classification system, there was also consistent pressure to supply the army with new troops.

⁶⁹ I. R. Bet-El, *Conscripts: Forgotten Men of the Great War* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2009), p. 2.

⁷⁰ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 7th July 1918,

⁷¹ For an overview of conscription see Bet-El, *Conscripts*, Introduction pp. 1-24; from which the main information in this section is drawn.

... *Ultimately, fitness remained a relative term: such were the demands of war that military considerations nearly always overrode medical ones.*⁷²

Appendix I has a table setting out the medical categories applied to recruits and conscripts, noting the major change in October 1917 which removed Category C ('fit for home service only') and transferred all men so listed to the equivalent subdivision of Category B ('fit for service abroad, but not general service'). The potential pool of those who could serve on the Western Front, in labour or garrison units, or in 'sedentary' work (such as clerks, orderlies, or storemen), was therefore significantly increased.⁷³

The new drafts into units were not always of the best quality. 14th Division had been reduced to a training cadre the end of April 1918. The division was subsequently reconstituted during June 1918, being 'mobilized with 'B' men'.⁷⁴ An administrative note on 5 July 1918 lists the infantry and specialist units which have arrived in the 'Concentration Area'; and confirms the arrival of the remaining units, including 43 Brigade, its constituent battalions and the division's pioneer battalion, on the following day. The various supply arrangements are described – the note then ends with the following important commitment:

⁷² Bet-El, *Conscripts*, p. 37; however, while this was a prime consideration for the authorities in Britain, the evidence suggests a more sympathetic and pragmatic approach closer to the front line – for example the approach adopted towards the soldiers in 2/4th Somerset Light Infantry (34th Division) described earlier.

⁷³ This information is taken from C. Messenger, *Call to Arms: The British Army 1914-18* (London: Cassell, 2006), Appendix Two, pp. 521-2; which quotes the sources: *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War 1914-1920* (War Office, 1922; reprinted by Naval & Military Press, 1999); TNA WO32/5093, Lawson Report, *The Number and Physical Categories of Men Employed out of the Fighting Area in France*.

*Arrangements are being made to deliver S.A.A. and Grenades and the attendance of the Field Cashier as soon as possible.*⁷⁵

The new arrivals were therefore reassured that they would have ammunition and also be paid before becoming fully operational.

The importance of the rebuilding process for such units – and the pride to be gained in due course through achievements in the field – is shown by a subsequent note in the diary of 42 Brigade:

[7th September 1918]

The 14th [Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders] captured 1 NCO & 7 O.R. 12th Bavarian Division in a patrol encounter. These were the first prisoners captured by the reorganised 14th Division.⁷⁶ [My emphasis].

15/Loyal North Lancs (attached to the division as its pioneer battalion), from an initial cadre of about ten officers and forty ORs, was boosted by new drafts during June to

⁷⁴ TNA WO95/1880, War Diary of 14th Division, Administration Section, statement alongside period dated 17th to 30th June 1918.

⁷⁵ TNA WO95/1880, War Diary of 14th Division, Administration Section, *O.C.1 'A' and 'Q' NOTES* 5.7.18.

⁷⁶ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade.

43 officers and 937 ORs – but on 2 July, 254 of the new arrivals were then ‘boarded’ as medically unfit and returned to Britain.⁷⁷

The process of rebuilding the brigades which would make up 30th Division shows the amount of work which parts of Second Army had to undertake. For 21 Brigade it began during June 1918, when the brigade HQ was involved in overseeing cadre battalions and also delivering training to American units. On 17 June its first battalion joined the brigade: 5/Royal Irish Fusiliers. However, just over a week later, the battalion left the brigade, ‘having been found medically unfit for service’.⁷⁸ The brigade received (and kept) its three new battalions at the beginning of July: 7/Royal Irish Regiment (4 July), 6/Cheshires and 2/23 London Regiment (7 July).

The different experience of each of these three battalions prior to joining 21 Brigade demonstrates the variable make-up of formations within Second Army. 7/Royal Irish had only been rebuilt as a battalion at the end of June 1918:

[26 June 1918]

The training staff of the 7th (SIH) [South Irish Horse] Royal Irish Regiment arrived to take over Irish Reinforcements composed of 500 Royal Dublin Fusiliers, 250 Royal Munster Fusiliers, 85 Royal Irish Regt.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ War Diary of 15th Battalion, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment (Pioneers).

⁷⁸ TNA WO95/2328, War Diary of 21 Infantry Brigade; 5/Royal Irish Fusiliers joined the Brigade on 17 June and left on 26 June 1918.

⁷⁹ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment.

A period of organisation and training followed, with the battalion allocated to 21 Brigade of 30th Division on 4 July. Symbolism can be all in building and maintaining the morale and spirit of a unit. Three days later the war diary records that 'Drums and fifes having been received, the Drums were organised and practice commenced'.⁸⁰

Like a number of other battalions in Second Army, 2/23 London Regiment had been based previously in the Middle East. It formally joined 21 Brigade on 8 July, spending the rest of the month on training and inspections. On 31 July it carried out 'a practice attack'.⁸¹

While part of the 25th Division, 6/Cheshires had suffered significant losses earlier in the year as had another battalion from the same regiment, 11/Cheshires. During June 1918 the two were put together as a composite battalion. On 17 June the 11th Battalion was formally absorbed into the 6th; 6/Cheshires began its new life with 16 officers and 492 other ranks.⁸²

Just two months later, 1-2 September 1918, 21 Brigade with its three transferred or rebuilt battalions took part in the action to capture Wulverghem.⁸³

⁸⁰ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment.

⁸¹ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 2/23rd Battalion, London Regiment.

⁸² TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 1/6th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment.

⁸³ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment.

The 30th Division also included two other 'new' brigades. On 6 June 1918, the records of 89 Brigade note that '... officers of the British Cadre Battalions carried out tactical exercises without troops'.⁸⁴ One week later an order was issued by the new 30th Division HQ stating that:

*[It has been decided] to reconstitute the 30th Division as a first line Division with Battalions due to arrive from Egypt about the end of this month. In the meantime the Division will continue to supervise the training of American Divisions in the Fourth Army area.*⁸⁵

After a further week the battalion training cadres under 89 Brigade HQ were transferred across to the 66th Division. The brigade was then put together with three battalions joining: 2/17 London Regiment and 2/South Lancashire Regiment (30 June); 7/8 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (3 July 1918).⁸⁶

Preparations had been made in May 1918 for 90 Brigade to become a cadre brigade and to play a part in the training of American troops. The brigade consisted of a HQ establishment; by 19 May it had responsibility for five cadre battalions, each of which contained ten officers and 49 other ranks.⁸⁷ In July the brigade was formed with the addition of its three battalions from the London Regiment, all transferred from Egypt:

⁸⁴ TNA WO95/2332, War Diary of 89 Infantry Brigade.

⁸⁵ TNA WO95/2332, War Diary of 89 Infantry Brigade, 13th June 1918.

⁸⁶ TNA WO95/2332, War Diary of 89 Infantry Brigade, 19th June, 30th June, 3rd July 1918.

⁸⁷ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade; the orders are included in 2nd Army O.B. 1851/A.

2/14 London Scottish (1 July); 2/15 Civil Service Rifles and 2/16 Queen's Westminster Rifles (2 July 1918).⁸⁸

Individual battalions each had their own tales of rebuilding. The losses of 25th Division had led to it being broken up and a cadre sent to the UK. 2nd Battalion, Prince of Wales' Volunteers (South Lancashire Regiment), which had been part of a composite unit following the Battle of the Aisne, stayed in France and received new drafts to bring it back up to strength. It was deployed to 89 Brigade, 30th Division, under X Corps of Second Army, where it was quickly brought into action and played a full part in the subsequent advance.⁸⁹

Despite the success of British forces, the casualty list remained high overall during the final months of the war. David Bilton has drawn attention to the manpower shortage in the British Army generally and its impact upon the quality and quantity of available replacements for the units of the 31st Division. He refers to 'the extreme youth of the replacements' and that 'many men of less than perfect health were being sent to the front line'.⁹⁰ The practical consequences are illustrated in this reference from his history of the 10th Battalion (Hull Pals), East Yorkshire Regiment (10/East Yorkshires): 'On the 13th [August 1918] we were unexpectedly relieved by the 15th

⁸⁸ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade; TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/14th Battalion, London Regiment; TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/16th Battalion, London Regiment; all three battalions had been together since mobilisation at the start of the war (their popular titles are suggestive of the volunteer arrangements during the early part of the war), together with 2/13 London Regiment prior to the reduction of brigades from four to three battalions..

⁸⁹ Captain H. Whalley-Kelly, *Ich Dien - the Prince of Wales's Volunteers (South Lancashire), 1914-1934* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1935), pp. 61-2.

KOYLI so that we could move to the left to replace some B1 men of the 8th Royal Irish Regiment.... They had only done four days trench duty altogether, while their signallers had had but six weeks training, and the whole battalion had but six weeks training, and the whole battalion seemed amazed to find themselves actually in the fighting area'.⁹¹

This problem existed across the British armies and while Second Army was not unique, it had a greater proportion of its formations requiring replacements as a result of the rebuilding of units. On 2 August 1918 Major-General Nicholson of 34th Division noted '.... all Battalions were down to an average strength of less than 250, short of officers and very tired.... though quite willing to advance, I did not think the men were in a condition to go more than about 3 miles'.⁹²

15/KOYLI was attached to 40th Division from June 1918. The battalion, initially designated as a Garrison battalion, was composed of mainly B1 and B2 classified soldiers, many transferred from labour battalions. The first CO, Lt-Col F C McCordick remarked with pleasure (though I suspect this was not shared by the troops), that the men marched six miles from Watten to Buyscheure in full kit even though B2 men were technically certified as medically unfit to march more than five miles.⁹³

⁹⁰ D. Bilton, *Hull Pals*, p.156; such reinforcements were initially sent to France as Garrison troops (designated Category B1) in order to release existing troops for the front line – however the demand for replacements could and did lead to their B1 status and ‘Garrison’ designation being removed, and their deployment in the front line.

⁹¹ D. Bilton, *Hull Pals*, p. 156.

⁹² IWM, 01/14/1, From the papers of Major-General Sir Cecil Lothian Nicholson KGB CMG, *34th Division July 1916 – March 1919*.

⁹³ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade.

By the time of the Final Advance it would have been very unusual for any battalion to be at full strength. As such the need to avoid unnecessary casualties was a very important consideration. On 6 September, 40th Division wrote to its units for the specific purpose of instructing officers to take care in this regard:

1. *The situation as regards Reinforcements for the Division, particularly Infantry Reinforcements, is not, at the moment, entirely satisfactory. Hence it becomes more than ever necessary to conserve, as far as possible, Officers and men.*

The Divisional Commander looks to Unit Commanders for their whole hearted co-operation in this.

He feels that much can be done in saving Officers and men unnecessary fatigue and exposure; in ensuring that they are well and regularly fed; in taking precautions about drinking water used, etc.

2. *In the forward area there is not always sufficient attention paid to the avoidance of unnecessary movement, nor when movement is necessary is cover intelligently made use of.*

The necessity of wearing steel helmets and box respirators in the defined zones must be insisted on.

3. *All matters of this sort which tend to prevent wastage must receive the attention of all Commanders.*

*It is appreciated that much has been done already but it is felt that there is still more to do.*⁹⁴

Training was always of crucial importance given the number of reconstituted units within Second Army and the large number of new conscripts and re-designated men. The arrangements represented practical implementation of the British Army's principal operational doctrine, *SS 135 The Training and Employment of Divisions* (issued in January 1918).

Tactically there was a move away from the bayonet to the use of controlled fire, a major shift in doctrine. Field artillery was increasingly expected to keep pace with the advancing infantry; a challenge, particularly in the early stages of the Flanders' campaign given the problems of weather and terrain. The increasing emphasis upon troops deploying in open order when assaulting, adopting a looser formation than even that represented by the 'snake' profile, reflects a greater confidence in the initiative and ability of the individual soldiers (as it was more difficult for NCOs and officers to maintain command and control when men were dispersed). There was a growing trust in the commitment of the troops to continue to manoeuvre forward, making maximum use of covering fire and available ground cover.⁹⁵

Maintaining the men in healthy condition was another constant challenge. The war diary of 7/Seaforth Highlanders notes on 8 July 1918 that, after a long spell of trench

⁹⁴ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *40th Division No. 23 (A)*, 6th September 1918.

duties (33 days), the men had a bath and were issued with clean underclothing; the Medical Officer, following inspection and acknowledging the length of time spent in front and support positions, 'remarked on the clean condition [of the troops]'.⁹⁶ In the trenches the risk of infection was ever-present; a later note from the same source records that 'the prevalence of diarrhoea was very marked during this tour and was attributed largely to the water supply'.⁹⁷

Recreation was a feature of time out of the lines, officers making arrangements to promote sports competitions between units, with men taking part or as spectators. This was a means of ensuring healthy activity as well as providing entertainment for the troops. On 7 September 1918, 120 Brigade held its Sports Day; events included athletic races, horse jumping, tug-of-war, sack race, and mule race ('no saddlery, spurs or stick').⁹⁸

On 9 July 1918 the 7/Seaforth Highlanders held a battalion football tournament with inter-company matches; the following day its division (9th) held a football match with a team from 31st Division.⁹⁹ Football also brought allies together; on the evening of 17

⁹⁵ For example, refer to the training report in TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 7th September 1918.

⁹⁶ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 8th July 1918.

⁹⁷ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 10th August 1918.

⁹⁸ Appended to the war diary of 120 Brigade there is the programme, with cover page cartoon, for the Brigade's Sports Day, 7 September 1918; an entrance fee of 10 francs is to go to the General Fund. TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, 120th Brigade Sports, 7th September 1918.

⁹⁹ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 9th and 10th July 1918; the result is not recorded – perhaps the officer writing up the diary was not a soccer fan.

September, C Company of 7/Seaforth Highlanders played a football match against a Belgian team with the latter winning by two goals to one.¹⁰⁰

There is other evidence of sport bringing together Belgian and British troops. 'Belgian Fete Day' is recorded as taking place on 21 July 1918 – at this event there were two sporting competitions for teams from the Belgian Army and British Second Army, with prizes provided by Princess Philippa of Caraman-Chimay.¹⁰¹ On 3 July, 36th Division held its Horse Show at Proven, guests from the neighbouring Belgian Cavalry Division.¹⁰²

As late as 10 September, just two weeks before the Battle of Ypres began, a football match took place between British and Belgian teams, from 18/York & Lancaster and 2nd Belgian Grenadier Regiment; the latter winning by two goals to one, 'the Belgians being slightly the better team'.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders; the battalion belonged to 9th (Scottish) Division, the northernmost of the Second Army divisions, and deployed next to the Belgian Army.

¹⁰¹ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Administrative Order, 29th Division, No. 160/136, 1st July, 1918*. The briefing note from 29th Division continues:

The CARAMAN-CHIMAY CUP, to be competed [for] annually, and 11 medals, for the winning Divisional Association Football Team, from the two Armies.

8 Medals for a Cross Country Run of 10 kilometres. Open to 8 runners from each of the [Belgian and British Second] Armies. Further information is being asked for, as to whether this is a team or individual event...

It is thought that the best way of selecting a Divisional Team, as time is so short, will be to find out the best Battalion or other Unit team by an eliminating tournament and then give that Unit the choice of playing in the Corps tournament with the team as then constituted, or of selecting one or more men from any other Unit for inclusion in their team... Brigades and Divisional Artillery will select 8 men and all other Divisional Units... 4 men to represent them in a race to be arranged by Divisional H.Q.s over a 10 Kilometre course. The first 8 men in will represent the Division...

¹⁰² C. Falls, *A History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (London: Constable, 1996; first published Belfast: McCraw, Stevenson, 1922). The Belgians proved to be proficient horsemen: '... the officers of the neighbouring Belgian Cavalry Division, including an Olympic competitor, descended like wolves on the fold, giving a remarkable display of skill and horsemanship, and taking practically all the prizes for jumping events'.

¹⁰³ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

Chapter Three

The Battle of Ypres 1918

Breakthrough: The First Day - 28 September 1918

*... The Western Front was crumbling. Ludendorff might be able to hold the centre, but he could not hold the flanks. On... 28 September, the Allies attacked at Ypres, and finally, this time, they broke through.*¹

In his book on the First Battle of Ypres, Ian Beckett makes reference to the concept of the 'immortal salient', associating this primarily with the fighting by the original BEF in the autumn of 1914, together with the subsequent battles in 1915 and 1917 and the adding of 'yet more British blood to the salient'.² He also draws attention to the major roles played by French and Belgian forces in 1914; it was fitting that all three countries would be involved in the breakthrough at the Battle of Ypres 1918.³

¹ Lloyd, *Hundred Days*, pp. 175-6.

² I.F.W. Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2004), pp. 5-6.

³ The *Official History* names the battle as *The Battle of Ypres 1918*. It has also been described as *The Fifth Battle of Ypres* ('Fifth Ypres') – the most recent example of this is in W. Philpott, *Attrition: Fighting the First World War* (London: Little, Brown, 2014), p. 333; this approach is based upon describing *The Battles of the Lys* (as named by the *Official History*) in the spring of 1918 as *The Fourth Battle of Ypres* ('Fourth Ypres').

Throughout September, Second Army had concentrated on occupying the ground conceded by the enemy as it withdrew to improved defensive positions. Increasingly, as the month progressed, attention was focused on the forthcoming major offensive. There were regular efforts by Second Army to disrupt the German withdrawal through the use of artillery, frequent probing advances and small raids to capture and consolidate small pieces of ground. The seizing of enemy prisoners was also encouraged; for instance, on 17 September a forward patrol of 17/Cheshires (105 Brigade, 35th Division) captured an NCO of the 40th Saxon Division, who gave valuable information on the nature and quality of the German defenders in the opposing lines.⁴

Training remained a high priority, particularly for the units more recently reconstituted, though the Flanders' weather continued to cause problems. During September, 41 Brigade (14th Division) prioritised close order drill and patrol formations, but rain hampered a number of the exercises and forced cancellation of outdoor training on at least one occasion.⁵

The RAF was active, recording a weekly outscoring of the enemy. During 10–30 August, 75 German aircraft were destroyed for the loss of 14 RAF planes. The four weeks leading up to the Battle of Ypres brought an increase in enemy air activity,

Confusingly, *The Battle of Ypres 1918* has also been described as *The Fourth Battle of Ypres*, drawing upon the nomenclature of the *Official History*.

⁴ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

⁵ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *entries for September 1918*.

indicating anticipation of the pending attack, though poor weather between 7-13 September prevented either side from flying.⁶ As well as attacking enemy planes the RAF was engaged in bombing German targets such as aerodromes, roads, railway lines and bridges. The Second Army Operations Report for the week 21–27 September lists RAF raids on stations, (ammunition) dumps, aerodromes and docks, with 2,374 bombs dropped⁷. However, high winds and low levels of cloud had restricted the RAF work on counter-battery observation, although 232 ‘flashes’ were located. The Report noted that German air activity was ‘above normal’.

In the week before the battle, both sides’ artillery maintained their regular duelling. Second Army artillery fired 93 HE (High Explosive) concentrations, nine gas concentrations and 535 ‘neutralisations’. There are two recorded uses of gas: 10/11 September, from 379 projectors in the Ypres sector; 23 September, from 197 projectors in the Ploegsteert sector. In response, the Germans continued their harassing fire, including neutralising fire on field and forward siege batteries. The British line was advanced via minor operations in the sectors of Steenwerek, Wulverghem, Vierstraat and Ypres, in readiness for the pending attack.⁸

This was becoming a war of movement much different from the trench-bound experience of many of the troops. On 21 September, Sergeant Miles of 15/KOYLI noted:

⁶ For the period 31 August – 27 September, the RAF lost 32 aircraft for 53 German planes destroyed; nine of the RAF planes were lost over the British First Army front – information compiled from TNA WO158/218, Second Army, *Weekly Operations Reports*.

⁷ Information compiled from TNA WO158/218, Second Army, *Weekly Operations Report 21 – 27 September*.

.... Jerry's blown the bridges up. As soon as the Engineers have repaired the bridge we move forward again.... He comes over bombing at night.... trying to get our supply columns. On the move at last...⁹

Commanders were aware of the need to ensure British units could operate effectively in the new environment of advance and assault. For example, at the end of August, the GOC of 34th Division was aware that his troops had not been '.... up to standard required for a war of movement and manoeuvring'.¹⁰ He issued orders to all soldiers in the division reminding them of the need to be able to operate as 'a mobile formation, not... one whose raison d'être is to settle down in a trench system'.¹¹ Action followed to address these shortcomings, including additional training, a revised organisation for supporting advancing units (plus the removal of 'surplus baggage'), and a new 'mobile system' for ammunition supply. To help ensure that senior commanders could deliver effective command and control, he introduced arrangements for an advanced divisional HQ with different 'echelons of support' to allow for speedy communication between the front line and HQ staff.

There is continuing evidence of the inexperience of many of the British infantry. For instance, the instructions issued by 41 Brigade (14th Division) a few days prior to the attack included such elementary points as:

⁸ TNA WO158/218, Second Army, *Weekly Operations Reports*.

⁹ IWM, 83/6/1, E. Miles, Sergeant and Company QM, 15th Battalion Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, 40th Division.

The attack will not be carried out in a series of rigid extended lines but platoons and sections will be kept under the control of their Commanders for as long as possible, in small column and group formations.

Various roads and light railways lend themselves to the maintenance of direction, but in addition each Company will be given its direction by at least one compass.

Troops will be warned that the majority of our field gun barrage will be shrapnel, and that though the shells will burst just over their heads they are not directed at them, and are not short, but that the bullets will strike the ground in front of them.

Troops will similarly be warned that our machine guns will be firing over their heads, which may be disconcerting unless accustomed to it.¹²

There were also reminders regarding such essential actions as distinguishing and communicating with RAF contact aeroplanes, sending back regular messages with times and locations clearly marked (my emphasis), and the potential for enemy dugouts to contain mines or traps.

¹⁰ IWM, 01/14/1, from the papers of Major-General Sir Cecil Lothian Nicholson KGB CMG, 34th Division July 1916 – March 1919.

¹¹ Nicholson, *private papers* (IWM).

¹² TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *Instruction No. 1*, 23/9/18.

Signs of nervousness can be detected as the deadline for the attack grew nearer. A joint operation had been ordered between 41 Brigade and its neighbouring Belgian Regiment, to seize a number of small farms on the night of 15-16 September, in order to improve observation lines. Although the planning for the operation led to it being subsequently much reduced in scope, it was then directed to be cancelled 'owing to pressure from a senior authority'.¹³

The launch of the allies' grand offensive would follow the timetable agreed by Haig and Foch:¹⁴

| | | |
|---------------------|---|--|
| 26 September | American First Army} French Fourth Army} | {to attack between the Meuse and {Reims, towards Mezieres |
| 27 September | British First Army} British Third Army} | to attack in the Cambrai area |
| 28 September | GAF | to gain a line from the Ypres- Commines Canal to Clerken (ten miles north of Ypres) |

¹³ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *entries 14th-16th September 1918; Order No. 15, 14th September 1918.*

| | | |
|--------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| 29 September | British Fourth Army} | {to attack the Main Hindenburg |
| | French First Army} | {Position |

The deployment of the GAF at the commencement of the attack was as follows:

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| British Second Army | holding a front of 14 miles |
| (Ten Divisions | Armentieres – Ypres |
| in four Corps) | |

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Belgian Army | holding a front of 23 miles |
| (Twelve Divisions | Ypres to the coast |
| Plus Belgian Cavalry Division) | |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| French forces | echeloned in reserve |
| (VII Corps (Three Divisions) | |
| XXXIV Corps (Three Divisions) | |
| II Cavalry Corps (Three Divisions)) | |

The disposition of the four Corps of Second Army, north-to-south, was as follows:

¹⁴ Map 1 (Appendix B) shows the overall disposition of the allied armies.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| II Corps | 9 th Division 29 th Division 36 th Division |
| XIX Corps | 14 th Division 35 th Division 41 st Division |
| X Corps | 30 th Division 34 th Division |
| XV Corps | 31 st Division 40 th Division |

The start line for the GAF is shown in Appendix B, Map 3.

Unlike the other British armies, Second Army had no tanks of its own, though some subsequent operations included co-operation with Belgian or French tanks or armoured cars.¹⁵ Second Army also had no cavalry formation but there are subsequent examples of support from French cavalry units.¹⁶

The Army deployed at least 400 heavy guns and howitzers (one per 70 yards of front), and 20 brigades of field artillery (about 480 field guns, giving one per 60 yards

¹⁵ The French deployed 181 tanks in Flanders during October 1918: Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 218.

¹⁶ Jonathan Boff has pointed out the important distinction between a *combined arms* as against an *all arms* attack: 'By this stage of the war [September 1918], the British army had, in addition to infantry, six arms available: artillery; ... gas; cavalry; medium machine guns; aeroplanes; and tanks' (J. Boff, 'Combined Arms During the Hundred Days Campaign, August-November 1918', *War in History*, 2010, 17(4), pp. 459-477, online at <http://wih.sagepub.com/content/17/4/459>, p. 464); as pointed out, Second Army had no cavalry or tank units of its own – its attacks would require the successful application of the *combined arms* available to it.

of front). In addition there were the 16 squadrons of the RAF's II Brigade to secure and maintain air superiority. Despite rain and low cloud on the night of 27/28 September, reconnaissance missions were flown and bombing raids carried out on supply dumps and the main road, water and railway communications. During the next week 28 September – 4 October, the RAF would drop almost 7,000 bombs on German sectors, including over 50 heavy (230 pound) bombs. Despite increased German efforts which saw 30 RAF aircraft brought down, the RAF recorded 51 enemy aircraft destroyed.¹⁷

The GAF received its first set of orders from the King of the Belgians on 19 September, signed 'au nom du roi' by General Degoutte as Chief of Staff. The GAF was to attack between Dixmude and St Eloi, to break through the enemy's lines and then use these as the base for further exploitation. This was followed by further orders on 21 September which provided for exploitation of the attack by the French and Belgian cavalry, plus clarification of the key roles for Second Army. These were to provide flanking cover to the Belgian forces to the north, and to establish a bridgehead south of the River Lys.

Plumer had issued his main operations order at 0900 on 19 September, before receipt of Degoutte's instructions, in line with the GHQ briefing he had received three days previously. The implication in the Official History is that the thoughts and actions

¹⁷ TNA WO158/218, *Operations Reports*.

of Degoutte did not impress Plumer or the writer of the History.¹⁸ Harris and Barr comment that 'Plumer and his staff seem, however, to have regarded Degoutte as officious and inefficient and to have thought that he did little to co-ordinate planning between themselves and the Belgians'.¹⁹ Powell, in his biography of Plumer, comments: 'It now fell to Plumer to remedy faulty staff work in the GAF and to carry out much of the essential co-ordination necessary between his own Army and the Belgians, especially the scope and details of the artillery programme'.²⁰

*From the 18th to 23rd [September] constant modifications of the [plan of attack], of the rate of barrage, pauses in the barrage in order to suit the Belgians, etc. were made and the date of the attack was altered on the 22nd September to the 27th and then to the 28th.*²¹

Plumer saw no need to amend his orders to Second Army. These took into account intelligence collated at Army HQ which suggested that the Germans were making ready to undertake a planned withdrawal in order to shorten their line. This could offer a window of opportunity with a period of disruption to enemy defences, offering some advantage to the attackers.

¹⁸ For example, the text of the *Official History* (J. Edmonds, *Vol. V*) includes '....going dead against the expressed opinion of General Plumer, it was laid down that 'it is not necessary in the first instance to attack the Wytshaete-Messines area...'' (p. 58) and 'General Degoutte made no attempt to co-ordinate action at the junction of the Belgian and British Second Armies, and it was discovered by General Plumer that several points of difference required adjustment' (p. 60).

¹⁹ Harris with Barr, *Amiens*.

²⁰ Powell, *Plumer*.

²¹ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division Headquarters General Staff: *Narrative of Operations from 28th September to end of October, 1918*.

On the northern sector of the British line, II Corps (9th and 29th Divisions, with 36th in reserve) and XIX Corps (14th and 35th Divisions, with 41st in reserve) would attack at Zero hour. To the south, X Corps and XV Corps were to await the initial outcomes and to advance should opportunity permit ‘... and take every advantage of the enemy weakening on their front to press their advantage’.²²

In accordance with Second Army’s reputation for thorough preparation, a large-scale model of the positions to be attacked was constructed at Army HQ. Officers from each attacking division were brought in to be briefed on the overall attack and their role within it. For example, the ‘Narrative of Operations’ by 35th Division records:

On the 25th and 26th September the G.O.C. [of 35th Division] took large parties of Officers, about 60 each day, to CASSEL and with the help of Major General PERCY (M.G.G.S. Second Army), and Captain HEYWOOD (G.3) explained the ground they were going to attack over on the large scale model at Second Army Headquarters, pointing out the marshy places, cuttings, land marks, dug-outs, etc., which all three Officers knew intimately from previous experiences. Afterwards the various Commanders of Battalions and Companies discussed their mutual co-operation and practically played a war-game of their portion of the attack. It is certain that this was responsible in a great degree for the smoothness with which the operations were subsequently carried out.²³

²² Second Army Order No 35, 19th September 1918, signed by Major-General J Percy, CGS of Second Army – from J. Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*.

On 24 September a joint conference took place between leaders of the Belgian Army and British Second Army in order to finalise the practical arrangements for the attack. Most notably, the discussion focused upon the use of artillery, with the British favouring a surprise attack without a preliminary bombardment. The Belgians were concerned at the ability of their forces to breach the German defences without an initial bombardment and so it was agreed that they would commence a barrage three hours before Z-hour. Both forces were to apply a creeping barrage but with lifts of 100 metres for the Belgians and 100 yards for the British.²⁴

That same day, Plumer issued a summary set of orders to his four Corps commanders which show the initial caution in his interpretation of the directions being issued by the GAF. The Second Army commander makes clear that Corps will make no attempt to 'exploit' or take any further action once the initial agreed objectives have been achieved; and this will happen only once further orders have been given by him. Although making clear his 'grip' of the situation, Plumer does demonstrate his appreciation of the potential for Second Army to make a strategic breakthrough; and outlines how each Corps can contribute to a broadening of the offensive:

If the first phase of the operation is carried out as planned the Second Army will have as their next task the capture of the ground west of the YPRES-COMINES CANAL and west of the [RIVER] LYS north of ARMENTIERES.

²³ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

²⁴ An arrangement preserving the integrity of the British Imperial unit!

... II Corps will have to keep touch with the Belgian Army on its left and the XIX Corps on its right and to prepare for a further advance eastward.

The XIX Corps will have to move along the CANAL to HOUTHEM and COMINES.

The XV Corps will have to secure the crossings over the LYS and move on COMINES.

The X Corps will have to move forward via WYTSCHAETE and MESSINES to join up with the XV and XIX Corps.²⁵

As will be seen, this prediction of how operations could proceed is reflected very closely in the development of the campaign and Second Army's advance.

There is evidence that Second Army orders below Army HQ and Corps levels were being shared with the allied forces within the GAF: copies of divisional orders being copied to the 'French Mission' and the 'Belgian Mission'. The source is from within 29th Division which came under II Corps, the latter bordering the Belgian Army during the battle.²⁶

²⁵ These orders, G452, 24th September 1918, are located within TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division. It is important to note the stress placed upon maintaining touch with the Belgian Army, reflecting the flank protection that Second Army was charged to provide.

²⁶ TNA WO95/2303, War Diary of 87 Infantry Brigade (29th Division).

Some units of Second Army were already used to co-operating with their Belgian allies at tactical and operational levels, having spent time alongside each other at the boundary of the two armies. For example, during the latter part of August, 41 Brigade had spent time deployed on the extreme left flank of Second Army. Its orders give specific details on the practical arrangements to be made for liaison by its battalions with the adjacent Belgian formation:²⁷

The 2nd Belgian Grenadier Regt. is on the left of this Brigade front. Officers and O.Rs. for liaison are required as follows:

- 1) 1 Senior Officer and 2 runners for duty with H.Qs., 2nd Belgian Grenadier Regt. will be found by 33rd London Regt...*
- 2) 1 Officer and 2 runners for duty with H.Qs. Right Battn., 2nd Belgian Grenadier Regt. will be found by 29th D.L.I....*
- 3) 2 runners for duty with Right Front Coy., Belgians, will be found by 18th Y. & L.*
- 4) 2 runners for duty with Support Battn. H.Qs., 2nd Belgian Regt., to be detailed by 29th D.L.I.*

The above personnel will report to H.Qs., 103rd Inf. Bde. [the Brigade being relieved].

²⁷ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *Order No. 10, 26th August, 1918; Amendments & addenda to... Order No. 10, 27th July [27th August] 1918.*

The detail of these arrangements was repeated in the orders for relieving brigades during subsequent deployment along the boundary of the two armies.²⁸

The covering barrages for the infantry would be delivered without prior registration. Both smoke and gas barrages would be included in the artillery preparation, in order to neutralise defensive positions and reduce the defenders' visibility, thus offering some further protection for the advancing troops. In addition to the field artillery creeping barrage, a proportion of the heavy artillery would fire a rolling barrage ahead of the 'creeper'. This would help to prevent the defenders in the front-line from carrying out an orderly withdrawal and also discourage the bringing up of reserves. The rest of the heavy artillery would engage in counter-battery fire and bombardment of specified targets. Certain batteries were to select and camouflage forward positions to which they could move once the infantry advanced, thus allowing them to extend the time and distance over which they could offer support to the advancing troops. Time limits were set for the indirect barrage fire, after which this would cease west of certain pre-determined lines. The exception was observed direct fire from field guns attached to attacking infantry. These arrangements would allow ground troops to exploit any successes without being hindered by gunfire from their own side. Heavy machine gun batteries contributed to the creeping barrage and delivered concentrated fire on specified objectives; in addition '... certain [machine] guns were detailed to work forward with the infantry to act as a Battery of opportunity'.²⁹

²⁸ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *Order No. 11, 3rd September, 1918; Order No. 13, 11th September, 1918.*

Troops of the assaulting units would wear 'fighting order' of 170 rounds SAA, two bombs and two flares per soldier, plus smoke bombs for 'dealing with hostile Machine Guns and Dug-outs'.³⁰ Units moving up in reserve would bring five sandbags per soldier plus a variety of picks and shovels.³¹

The orders for 2/15 London Regiment (90 Brigade, 30th Division) included handwritten instructions, issued on the day before the battle, referring to the wide range of materiel to support the attacking infantry. Each rifleman carried one extra bandolier of ammunition plus two Mills grenades; sixteen magazines were provided for each Lewis gun; rifle grenadiers were each issued with five grenades and five smoke bombs. Other equipment issued at platoon or company level included wire cutters, aeroplane flares, Very pistols and lights, and message rockets; support and reserve companies would each bring forward 24 pickaxes and 48 shovels (for entrenching). Every soldier had a full water bottle at zero hour and carried an extra two days' rations plus his 'iron ration'.³²

Reading the preparatory orders and plans leading up to the Battle of Ypres, one can detect an inner confidence within the level of detail and organisation. This is not just the benefit of hindsight, from knowing of the subsequent success of the initial attack. There is an overwhelming sense of men and commanders who had begun to believe that their time had come – they were finally going to make that breakthrough which

²⁹ TNA WO95/1876, War Diary of 14th Division: General Staff, *Report on Operations, 28th September 1918*.

³⁰ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade, Order No. 267, 24th September 1918.

³¹ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade, Order No. 267, 24th September 1918.

³² TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/15th Battalion, London Regiment, *Admin Instructions to Order LXVI*.

had for so long eluded them. There is a confidence amongst the soldiers - confidence in their mates, in the range of materiel available, in the success of recent small actions and raids, in the status of the opposition, in their leaders, in their own abilities - showing a conviction that success lies ahead.

For an example of the artillery plans below corps level, the orders for 35th Division (attacking on the left flank of XIX Corps in the direction of Zandvoorde) included a creeping barrage at the rate of 100 yards in three minutes, double pauses in the barrage at 500, 1000 and 1500 yards; and (following fine-tuning of the attack plans) after 1500 yards the rate of lift to slow to 100 yards in five minutes. Designated 'special points' would be 'dealt with by Field Howitzers' or, for more distant points, by corps heavy artillery. As the advance proceeded beyond the line of the first objective then the two forward brigades would each have access to one battery of 18 pounder field guns and one section of 4.5" howitzers, under the direction of the brigade-general. The division would also have two additional brigades of field artillery available.³³

The division's orders provided for the immediate repair of certain roads once the attack commenced – reflecting the concerns of commanders regarding their ability to maintain supplies and support for the advance troops.

The extent of the forward planning and the cooperation between service arms is demonstrated in the orders of 14th Division, which included details on signalling to the

RAF for additional supplies of ammunition.³⁴ Further evidence of the careful preparation undertaken is the mapping of current and proposed supply arrangements. The orders of 29th Division included map overlays to show roads ready, or to be opened up now or later, for field artillery; plus mule tracks and tramlines.³⁵

Within 14th Division, the orders prior to the attack stressed the importance of capturing and retaining the key objectives (in this case, craters termed 'The Bluff' and 'Saint Eloi'), and for these to be recovered by counter-attack if necessary.³⁶ The orders also made clear that while strong defence was expected from the Germans, every opportunity to maximise the advance should be explored. There was a firm emphasis on driving home the assault:

The general principle guiding the attack is that it is to be pushed most at the points where resistance is least and is consequently most successful. Portions of the line held up are to be relieved by the flanks being pushed forward and enveloping the enemy centre of resistance.

*Reserves will be used to accentuate success and not to reinforce portions of the line in difficulties.*³⁷

³³ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

³⁴ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade, *42nd Inf Bde Instructions for the Offensive No.4*. It is ironic that, following these arrangements for this innovative operation, another side of the Army is reflected in the instruction, 'The parachute on which the [small arms ammunition] is suspended must be returned to Brigade H.Qs. at once'. I suspect this was not an immediate priority for the men on the ground.

³⁵ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *CGS 67/123, Operations Instructions No. 4*.

³⁶ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *Instruction No. 1, 23/9/18*.

³⁷ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *Instruction No. 1, 23/9/18*.

Despite the strong belief that the Germans were on the defensive and the attack was being made at an opportune time, Second Army could not anticipate a clear breakthrough. The orders issued by 14th Division include clear instructions for consolidating the capture of enemy positions and for units to be prepared as soon as possible to repel any counter-attack. A minimum of two defensive lines were to be established with pack transport to bring forward supplies of barbed wire and sandbags.³⁸ Second Army was determined that by the end of the first day it would be a case of 'what we have we hold'.

The Belgian right wing would receive creeping barrage support from II Corps heavy artillery.³⁹ The Belgian forces had also been allocated air support from the eight squadrons of the 5th Group RAF. During the battle, '200 hostile artillery positions were kept under fire during the operations and very little hostile shelling was reported'.⁴⁰

The ground over which the attacks would be launched had been the site of Third Ypres ('Passchendaele'):

... a battlefield of bitter memories. In 1917, it had taken the British Army four and a half months to reach Passchendaele, meanwhile suffering grievous

³⁸ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade, *Instructions for the Offensive No. 2, 24th SEPT. 1918.*

³⁹ The *Official History Vol V* also records that six field artillery brigades and ten trench mortar batteries were lent to the Belgian Army, p. 61, note 1.

⁴⁰ TNA WO 158/218, *Operations Reports.*

*casualties in appalling conditions... Now the same ground had to be crossed again.*⁴¹

During the build-up, the commander of 28 Brigade (9th Division) wrote in his diary:

... How familiar the place-names of today were 14 months ago: the Menin and Lille gates, Bellewaarde and Westhoek ridges, Zonnebeke Redoubt. We shall presently assault the identical positions then attacked by the 8th Division, containing the 2/West Yorks under my command. The bones of most of my officers and many of the other ranks lie between here and Zonnebeke. I hope the 28th Brigade will have better luck...

*All is ready for the battle; we can think of nothing left to chance...*⁴²

The physical consequences of the previous fighting were all too real. British troops would have to advance across a barren landscape scarred by warfare:

*The fearsome artillery bombardments of 1917 had destroyed the fragile drainage system and left a wilderness of water-filled shell craters, decaying trenches, rusting wire entanglements and all the debris of a war that had passed by.*⁴³

⁴¹ J. H. Johnson, *1918: The Unexpected Victory* (London: Cassell & Co, 2000 edition), p. 141.

⁴² Terraine, *General Jack's Diary*, p. 269 (25 September, 1918); 28 Brigade, with Brigadier-General J. L. Jack as its commander, was only reformed at the start of September 1918.

⁴³ Johnson, *Unexpected Victory*, p. 141.

The cratered ground would subsequently prevent the hoped-for deployment of the GAF cavalry reserve, intended to exploit the anticipated early gains to be made by the infantry.

The line of the first objective was the crest of a ridge overlooking Ypres from the east. South of this lay the Wytschaete-Messines ridge which the British had gained in 1917 but been forced to retire from during the April 1918 German offensive. The British line extended south to Ploegsteert Wood and Armentieres; during 30 August - 6 September, the Germans had withdrawn from the area west of this in order to shorten their lines.

Various steps had been taken to ensure that the British units were in the most advantageous positions from which to mount the forthcoming attack. For example at 2223 hours on 15 September, 103 and 104 Brigades (35th Division) carried out a minor operation which established a line of posts up to 500 yards in front of the Division's line. The objectives included the creation of more room for deployment of the attack brigades, and to enable machine guns to be brought within effective range for barrage purposes.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division Headquarters General Staff: *Narrative of Operations from 28th September to end of October, 1918*. The action also saw the capture of 49 prisoners and 4 machine guns (two more prisoners were taken and two of the enemy killed the next day); total casualties for the two brigades were 3 killed and 8 wounded. Its success shortened the distance for the pending attack by 14th Division on the Bluff and St. Eloi.

The importance of such operations for the Army's preparations saw General Plumer first wiring congratulations on the success of the raid, and then visiting the Division personally on 16 September;⁴⁵ a reflection of his particular style of leadership.

Typical of preparations at battalion level, on 26 September the officers of 7/Seaforth Highlanders (26 Brigade, 9th Division), on the left of the Second Army front, studied the ground for the assault; with a conference the following day to agree final details.⁴⁶

There was a confident approach in evidence towards a German army that was now very clearly on the defensive. On 20 September a member of an enemy (Bavarian) patrol had entered British lines and promptly given himself up.⁴⁷ This single incident was just a snap-shot of a perceived change in the enemy's thinking:

Information has been obtained pointing to the probability of the enemy withdrawing in the near future from his present front to positions beyond the MESSINES-WHYSCHAETE ridge or still further back. It is possible that a bold & aggressive approach on our part may bring about this withdrawal...

*It is the intention of the Commanding Officer to press close on the tails of the retreating enemy but avoiding casualties as far as possible.*⁴⁸

⁴⁵ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

⁴⁶ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

⁴⁷ TNA WO95/1766, War Diary of 8th Battalion, The Black Watch.

⁴⁸ TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/15th Battalion, London Regiment, *Order No. LXVI by Major A.C.H. Banks (commanding) 2/15 London Regiment*, p. 1.

The final reference to 'avoiding casualties as far as possible' reflects the continued concern at command level regarding troop numbers, and a common commitment to reassuring soldiers that no casualties would be caused unnecessarily. Covering artillery fire to support infantry attacks was seen as a major way of reducing casualties. 86 Brigade, reporting on operations carried out 4-5 September, concluded that 'the front of the attack not supported by barrage fire was held up and heavy casualties occurred, whereas the front supported by artillery fire suffered comparatively slight losses'.⁴⁹

An example of practical steps taken by infantry commanders to minimise unnecessary casualties included the deployment, at the head of the advance and on the flanks, of 'fighting patrols'; these were intended to probe the enemy lines and provide intelligence which would inform decisions on the bringing forward and deployment of supporting units.⁵⁰

The ten divisions of the Second Army faced up to an initial six divisions of the German Fourth Army; the latter a mix of experienced and new troops, some rested and others recovering from recent fighting.⁵¹ Second Army Intelligence reported on 28

⁴⁹ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Notes On Minor Operations 4th and 5th September, 7/9/18.*

⁵⁰ TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/15th Battalion, London Regiment, *Order No. LXVI by Major A.C.H. Banks (commanding) 2/15 London Regiment*, pp. 1-3.

⁵¹ Please refer to Appendix A9 for the Order of Battle of the German forces involved in the Battle of Ypres. **Maps 13A and 13B** show the disposition of the German forces, and the assessment by Second Army Intelligence of their combat readiness, at the start of the battle.

September that most of the enemy divisions were ‘... of good quality having had from 3-4 weeks rest after heavy fighting’.⁵²

The defenders were largely deployed well-forward, utilising prepared defences of dug-outs, wire and pillboxes, as their numbers precluded the adoption of the strength-in-depth arrangements used in 1917. These positions offered excellent observation of the slippery, shell-marked and generally open ground over which the British troops would be advancing. Second Army Intelligence had developed a series of maps which showed the location of the German defensive lines and the disposition of the supporting supply lines and assets immediately prior to the battle.⁵³

An attack had been anticipated, and the Germans had fired counter-preparation bombardments at dawn for several mornings leading up to and including 28 September. There had however been limited disruption caused for the attacking forces. Despite the problems created by the condition of the ground for communications, transport and supply, the outcomes of the attack were to be very different from previous allied offensives in the area.⁵⁴

The disposition of British Second Army, and the progress achieved on the first day of the attack, is shown in **Map 4**. The first objectives for the British were listed as:

⁵² TNA WO157/128, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 28 September 1918.

⁵³ **Map 11** shows the series of German defensive lines, as mapped by Second Army Intelligence, facing the British forces: TNA WO157/128 *Second Army Intelligence Summaries: September 1918*. **Maps 12A and 12B** illustrate Second Army’s assessment of the German supply lines and assets immediately prior to the battle: TNA WO153/508 *Second Army: Enemy Organisation 1918*.

⁵⁴ TNA WO157/128, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 29 September 1918.

Molenaarelsthoek – Stirling Castle – Observatory Ridge – Hill 60 – ‘The Bluff’; forming a line from which a further advance could be made.⁵⁵

II Corps

Securing the right flank of the Belgian Army was the responsibility of II Corps; the Belgians were to attack in the direction of Passchendaele and to secure the ridge overlooking the area. On the first day of the battle, II Corps committed two divisions to front the attack, 9th (left) and 29th (right), with 36th Division in support. Attacking companies each had two attached machine guns; supporting companies were each strengthened by one Stokes mortar. The signals officer of each battalion was to accompany the support companies and be responsible for the establishment of message stations at appropriate stages of the assault; a temporary station at a specified point on the line of advance and a more permanent station once the first objective was achieved. Troops were advised to remain ‘alert’ at all times given ‘the broken nature of the ground and the long grass’. Maintaining the momentum of the attack was paramount:

In the event of a unit on either flank of the [29th] Division or within the Division being held up, adjoining units will not check their advance but will carry on and if necessary detail a party to watch their exposed flank.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ TNA WO158/218, *Operations Reports*: 28th September to 13th October 1918.

⁵⁶ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 1*, 24/25.9.1918.

9th Division, which occupied the extreme left of Second Army along the boundary with the Belgian Army, had the crucial task of maintaining touch with its allies. It was crucial that both the assault by the division was successful, and the right flank of the Belgians was held securely; to provide the Belgian troops and commanders with the confidence to drive home their attack. Plumer knew the importance of meeting this primary aim of Foch and Haig when they placed Second Army under King Albert's authority.

26 Brigade was on the left of 9th Division, operating in co-operation with Belgian forces. 8/Black Watch was deployed on the left flank of 26 Brigade and therefore held the immediate responsibility of liaison with the advance troops of the Belgians. Its diary recorded:

Conferences with Commanders of Battalions of 17th Belgian Regiment on left and Liaison assured. Lieut. H.F. Calder and 4 runners with Belgian Bⁿ HQ. Lieut. B.M. Laing in charge of International Platoon to attack along the International Boundary...

[0800-0900]

Liaison established on left and right with Belgians and 7th Seaforth Hrs. respectively.⁵⁷

The nature of the ground was 'soft, boggy and pitted with shell holes'.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ TNA WO95/1766, War Diary of 8th Battalion, The Black Watch.

⁵⁸ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

*The enemy appeared to have been completely surprised by our attack making no show of resistance, surrendered freely.*⁵⁹

Acknowledging the issues of command and control when carrying out an assault, one unit emphasised the importance of soldiers maintaining contact with their immediate leaders as the attack progressed and casualties resulted. Expressing concern at men becoming separated from their NCOs and officers, 7/Seaforth Highlanders had noted that ‘...all men should be thoroughly trained to follow their section commander or, if he becomes a casualty, his understudy’.⁶⁰

The important question of whether, once the fighting started, there could be effective co-operation between the forces of the two different nations, British and Belgian, was answered in the affirmative:

*[The] Belgian Army co-operated with the 2nd British Army in the operation, which was completely successful.*⁶¹

[0900]

Advance resumed – The Belgians had some difficulty with MOORSELEDE and to assist them, 26th Brigade was ordered to bear slightly N of line of advance.

⁵⁹ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

⁶⁰ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

[1000-1500]

... 5th Camerons [26 Brigade] coming into line between Belgians and 28th Bde.
8th Black Watch and 7th Seaforths continuing in support.⁶²

These extracts from battalion war diaries demonstrate how Second Army, through the actions of the troops on the ground, delivered on its responsibility to support the Belgian Army.

The first objective of the Freiberg⁶³ Ridge was gained by 26 Brigade with limited resistance, other than the problems caused by heavy rain and mist. 5/Cameron Highlanders then moved through its partner battalions (8/Black Watch and 7/Seaforth Highlanders), following the creeping barrage, and over Anzac Ridge where an enemy strong point was taken out. The next obstacle was the Glasgow Spur which needed a flanking movement to capture a defended pill box. The southern stretch of the Passchendaele Ridge was also 'carried without much trouble' whereupon the line achieved was consolidated and touch confirmed with the Belgian forces to the left. 'Battle patrols' were sent out at regular intervals to check for the presence of the enemy.⁶⁴ 27 Brigade, in divisional reserve, was charged with exploiting the breakthrough towards Becelaere and then to Terhand; the brigade was also tasked to move northwards if necessary to reinforce the Belgian attack on Passchendaele. The brigade began its advance at 1500 hours and two hours later the troops of the 11/

⁶¹ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

⁶² TNA WO95/1766, War Diary of 8th Battalion, The Black Watch.

⁶³ This is spelt as 'Frezenberg' on the Official History map for 28 September.

⁶⁴ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

and 12/Royal Scots were involved in 'heavy fighting' to capture Becelaere; by dusk the village was taken. Enemy reinforcements east of the village were driven back by small arms fire. The flanks of the advance troops were unsecured for a time but the locations of the Belgians and 29th Division were known and touch was re-established in due course.⁶⁵

For 29th Division, 86 and 87 Brigades took the lead, with 88 Brigade in support; the initial objectives included Hooze and Chateau Wood on the left, down to Sanctuary Wood. In common with similar preparations across the Second Army front:

*Every effort was made to get the attacking troops into their Concentration Areas as soon after dark as possible, so that directly after a hot meal was served, as much rest as possible could be obtained before the Assembly...*⁶⁶

The brigades adopted the now orthodox arrangement of leading initially with one battalion and then, once the first objective was achieved, the following battalion passed through and moved towards the second objective. Battalions attacked on a two company front with two companies in support. In this case, for 86 Brigade, the plan proceeded with 1/Lancashire Fusiliers as the leading Battalion. 1/Royal Dublin Fusiliers was in support, subsequently passing through the Lancashire Fusiliers when the latter was on the line of the first objective, to maintain the attack and exploit this

⁶⁵ TNA WO95/1771/4, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, diary entries; *Preliminary Instructions 23rd September 1918; Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918.*

⁶⁶ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918.*

first success. 2/Royal Fusiliers, initially in reserve, then moved up and through the Dublin Fusiliers, to make the final push towards the target line of Polderhoek Spur and Cameron House. At the appointed time, subject to the progress of the attack, 88 Brigade would move through the two forward Brigades to continue the advance.⁶⁷

The attack went in under a creeping barrage of smoke and HE shells, and corps artillery was retained to provide covering fire up to the final target line. Reflecting the fresh composition of many of Second Army's units, the report of 86 Brigade points out that 'Troops of this Brigade had never previously advanced under an H.E. barrage and owing to the intense enthusiasm of all ranks and the fact that one battery fired very short throughout the barrage – the greater number of casualties suffered throughout the day was caused by our own barrage'; those casualties very nearly included the brigade commander and his deputy. On the division's front there was limited defence from the Germans in the face of the infantry's attack, 'but wherever the enemy offered any opposition he was immediately killed'. The GOC, 86 Brigade, is recorded as having brought down an enemy aircraft (these had been active during the afternoon) with rifle fire.⁶⁸

Resistance from the enemy was not sustained and the advance by 29th Division proceeded as planned, with initial objectives secured by 0900 hours; the reserve battalions of each brigade (2/Royal Fusiliers for 86 Brigade, 1/KOSB for 87 Brigade)

⁶⁷ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918.*

⁶⁸ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918.*

moved through to exploit the gains.⁶⁹ Within the hour, 88 Brigade began its move up and through the front troops, to maintain the momentum of the attack. Rain during the morning had cleared away and the weather proved to be fine for the afternoon and evening. 1100 hours saw the capture of Gheluvelt and 88 Brigade, its flanks secured by troops of 86 and 87 Brigades, advanced up high ground above the Menin Road until checked by machine gun and artillery fire in the vicinity of Kruissecke.⁷⁰ Reference is made in the official records of using ('driving forward') prisoners to identify enemy strong-points and pill-boxes.⁷¹ By dusk the advance troops were well to the east of Gheluvelt and close to the Kruiseecke-Cabaret cross-roads; here the attacking units halted, facing considerable defensive fire from enemy machine guns.⁷² The leading troops were also attacked at 1700 hours by four enemy aircraft; these were met by Lewis gun and rifle fire, resulting in the downing of one plane, at which point its companions withdrew.⁷³

During the evening, 36th Division moved up in readiness to move on Terhand the next day.

⁶⁹ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918.*

⁷⁰ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918.*

⁷¹ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Battle September 28th to October 1st 1918.*

⁷² TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918.*

XIX Corps

The two attacking divisions of XIX Corps, 14th and 35th, had the objective of capturing and holding the general line: St Eloi Mound – The Bluff – Zandvoorde – Alaska Houses – Kruiseecke – Gheluvelt; operating along an east then south-east axis, in conjunction with 29th Division (II Corps) on the left.⁷⁴ 41st Division stood in reserve, ready to exploit the anticipated breakthrough.

On the left of XIX Corps was 35th Division which, with 14th Division, had transferred from II Corps, on 12 and 20 September respectively; these arrangements being linked to the plans for the forthcoming offensive. Army command agreed to the proposal by 35th Division for all three of its brigades to take part in the attack (rather than the more common arrangement of two attacking brigades with one in reserve), due to the frontage of the advance expanding from 1700 yards at the jumping off point to 3800 yards at the line of the third objective. The right and centre brigades, 105 and 104 respectively, each had two battalions in line and one in reserve. Machine gun sections were deployed to be ready to move forward as soon as their involvement was sought. 106 Brigade on the left attacked with one battalion (12/Highland Light Infantry) through a company of another battalion; 18/Highland Light Infantry, in

⁷³ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918*.

⁷⁴ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade, *Order No. 267, 24th September 1918*.

support for the first objective, had an attached platoon from 19th Cyclists Corps to assist in the advance to the second objective.⁷⁵

The attack commenced at 0530 hours.⁷⁶ A creeping barrage began at a rate of 100 yards per three minutes, with a first lift four minutes after zero; after 1500 yards, the rate changed to 100 yards per five minutes. An initial 'Line of Pause' was identified, during which time the artillery would 'search backwards and forwards';⁷⁷ after which four companies held in reserve (two per attacking battalion) would resume the advance. The priority was to seize and hold 'at all costs' the first objective around the Triangular Bluff and Buff's Bank - the line to be arranged for defence as quickly as possible. This action was necessary to secure the flank of the corps and the corps boundary, thereby protecting the next stage of the attack. 105 Brigade, supported by 35th Division Machine Gun Corps, was responsible for holding this line, acting at that point as division reserve; available to pursue a retreating enemy or to make a flank attack should the Germans attempt a counter-attack through Zandvoorde.⁷⁸ 104 Brigade noted that the field artillery had experienced '... great difficulty in getting their guns forward owing to the extremely bad state of the ground'.⁷⁹ This delay meant that the German machine guns were able to put up a considerable resistance to the attack. Pack transport was used to bring rations, water and ammunition up to the advance troops.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, *Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th-October 2nd, 4th October 1918*.

⁷⁶ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

⁷⁷ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade, *Order No. 267, 24th September 1918*.

⁷⁸ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade, *Order No. 267, 24th September 1918*.

⁷⁹ TNA WO95/2483, War Diary of 104 Infantry Brigade.

⁸⁰ TNA WO95/2483, War Diary of 104 Infantry Brigade.

For 106 Brigade, 12/Highland Light Infantry achieved the first objective within two hours and pushed on for a further 500 yards, subsequently capturing a section of German field guns which had been firing on the supporting advance by 18/Highland Infantry. Further progress was generally steady during the day despite ongoing problems in bringing forward the field artillery designated to provide fire support ('the road was extremely bad and mined'); it was evening before these guns could be brought into action, in the vicinity of Hedge Trench Tunnels. The problems with the ground conditions also held up the cyclists' section. The brigade secured and made good its final objective Alaska Houses by around 1230 hours. Communication was established with 29th Division on the left.⁸¹

41st Division stood in the centre of XIX Corps; it would advance in support of the two other divisions in the Corps at the opening of the battle, initially on a one brigade front via 124 Brigade. The Division moved forward at 1430 hours, with its right flank against the east bank of the Comines canal, experiencing limited enemy resistance.⁸² The Brigade was deployed in order to exploit the enemy's retreat from Zandvoorde towards Wervicq, following the success of 35th Division; pushing forward through Kortewilde to the canal bridge. A holding line was set up on a ridge north of the village

⁸¹ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, *Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th-October 2nd, 4th October 1918*.

⁸² Note: **Map 4**, Second Army: 28th September 1918, from the Official Record, does not show 41st Division/124 Brigade as part of the attacking force, which is an omission; the Division and the Brigade, and the Division's subsequent part in the attack, are shown on **Map 5**.

of Houthem, securing crossings over Ypres-Comines canal. The intended attack to seize the bridge at Houthem was deferred until dawn the following day.⁸³

14th Division attacked in cooperation with 34th Division (X Corps, to its right) and 41st and 35th Divisions (left). 42 Brigade led on the right with the objective of the St Eloi Craters; 43 Brigade advanced on the left, with the objective of The Bluff; 41 Brigade started as reserve. Orders stated that 'these objectives will be gained and held at all costs'.⁸⁴

Careful plans were in place for communications within the division and its subsidiary units, and with corps HQ. The subsequent report on the operation referred to telephone wiring between brigade and division HQ, with trench wireless sets and loop sets for brigade forward centres as back up. Pigeon, dog and rocket communication was also arranged. Five mounted orderlies were attached to each brigade and to division HQ, together with despatch riders from the corps cyclist battalion.⁸⁵

The attack started successfully with a limited reply from the German artillery to the opening British barrage (there being no preliminary bombardment). The first objective was achieved on schedule despite an advance 'over very rough ground, pitted with shell-holes and covered with debris',⁸⁶ with large numbers of prisoners reported. For example, 35th Division had processed 750 German soldiers through the divisional

⁸³ TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division; TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations Commencing Sept. 28th 1918*.

⁸⁴ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade, *14th Divisional Artillery Operation Order No.162. 24th September 1918*.

'cage' by 1200 hours. More prisoners and a large amount of materiel (guns, trench mortars and machine guns) continued to be captured throughout the day. The first objective (the Triangular Bluff and Buff's Bank) together with the adjacent railway embankment, was secured with little opposition.⁸⁷ A German counter-attack against Zandvoorde at 1830 hours was easily beaten off, resulting in a further haul of prisoners. Pioneers and Royal Engineers were employed immediately following the start of the attack in carrying out repairs to roads; this allowed artillery to move forward in support of the advance in spite of the poor terrain. At 1605 hours the division issued orders for brigades to secure the ground gained, to establish outposts and push forward patrols. All steps were to be taken to bring forward attached artillery and machine guns, supplies and ammunition; with a view to being in a position to resume the attack at short notice. Pack trains were used to deliver rations and ammunition, a means of supply which the division noted 'worked admirably during this and succeeding days'.⁸⁸ Such arrangements were reflected across the Army front.

43 Brigade advanced along the Ypres-Comines Canal; 12/Suffolks on the northern bank, 20/Middlesex on the southern bank (with 10/Highland Light Infantry as reserve). This water divide proved troublesome regarding communications between the two battalions. A further problem was the condition of the ground, pitted with shell holes and amounts of broken wire. The brigade's report on the day's action notes that all the men's helmets, brasses and bayonets had been dulled to assist in keeping

⁸⁵ TNA WO95/1876 War Diary of 14th Division: General Staff.

⁸⁶ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

⁸⁷ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

⁸⁸ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

assembly preparations secret from the enemy (successfully so as it turned out). Attacking troops formed 'worms' i.e. section columns in single file. The most notable terrain feature was high ground on the north side of the canal described as 'The Bluff', with an approach containing a large amount of marshy ground. On the south side the ground rose gradually up to the 'White Chateau', essentially a large mound offering clear views of the surrounding area. The report describes the attacking battalions as 'weak' and made up of men who 'belonged almost entirely to 'B' category'; nevertheless their attack proved successful. The Bluff was captured by 12/Suffolks through a flanking move allied to a frontal attack that 'pinned' the defenders. The capture of this key point prevented the Germans from being in a position to enfilade fire on the attacks north of the canal by 35th Division. 20/Middlesex gained the White Chateau and was able to secure the right flank of the advance towards that feature. 43 Brigade's operations report made special mention of 184th Tunnelling Company which supported the attack: this unit cleared fourteen tunnels and dugouts, of which at least four had been mined.⁸⁹

On the left, 42 Brigade concentrated on capturing the St. Eloi Craters. The objectives were achieved in the face of limited opposition, and the front battalions were consolidating the line within two hours of the start of the attack. In the event the advance units went beyond the final objective, finally reaching the line of the Dammstrasse; unfortunately, due to the prearranged artillery fire plan, the troops had to pull back to the consolidated line. The following day saw the brigade 'pinched out'

⁸⁹ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade, Brigadier-General, 43 Brigade, *Report on Operations September 28th 1918*.

of the line by 34th Division extending across its front in the direction of the Ypres-Comines Canal; as a consequence 42 Brigade moved into reserve.⁹⁰

X Corps

For the opening day of the battle, with the main attacks being conducted by II and XIX Corps, it fell to X Corps and its southern neighbour XV Corps to ensure that the right flank of Second Army (and the GAF) was securely held; plus to pin the German defenders to prevent the transfer of enemy units north.

On 23 September, 34th Division and the line it held had been transferred from XIX Corps to X Corps; whereupon it was directly engaged in the preparations for the forthcoming battle.⁹¹ On the first day 34th Division, with 101 and 103 Brigades in the lead, was successful in capturing the Wytschaete Ridge.⁹² Its commander had been reliant upon the successes of Second Army to its north: '... As we had very little artillery [the capture of Wytschaete Ridge] was impracticable until at least the Northern flank had been turned by the capture of the line of the Ypres-Comines canal'.⁹³ He subsequently concluded that 'On the whole it was not a brilliant performance, progress being much too slow and information very bad'.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade.

⁹¹ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division.

⁹² TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division; TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Infantry Brigade.

⁹³ Nicholson, *private papers* (IWM).

⁹⁴ Nicholson, *private papers* (IWM).

The immediate objective for 30th Division was Messines and from there to advance in the direction of Houthem on the Ypres-Comines Canal. For the opening day of the battle the main priority was to conduct a 'strong reconnaissance' linked to and in support of the principal assault further north by XIX and II Corps. The task was to widen the overall frontage of the Second Army's assault and be prepared to take advantage of any withdrawal by the enemy (in response to reverses to the north).⁹⁵ For 30th Division, its machine gun battalion supported the attacks on Messines Ridge, subsequently being involved in consolidating the forward slopes; eight teams moved forward to provide cover across the Douve Valley.⁹⁶ Over the next two days the division would be called on to show that, despite its relatively recent genesis, it could match its Second Army comrades.

XV Corps

31st and 40th Divisions formed the right (southern) flank of Second Army, with the latter deployed at the junction with British Fifth Army.

The immediate prospect facing 31st Division was Ploegsteert Wood. The planning by the division for the early stages of the battle was linked to the outcomes from the Second Army attack further north:

⁹⁵ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

⁹⁶ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps.

It was expected that this attack, if successful, would compel the enemy to withdraw from the MESSINES RIDGE and also from our front.

In the event of definite information being received that the enemy was retiring on our front, an attack was to be launched against his rearguards, and his retreat north of the WARNAVE Stream pressed.

The role of [31st] Division was:

- a) To cover the Right Flank of the advance.*
- b) To press the enemy's retreat towards WARNETON [a village lying north-east of Ploegsteert Wood].⁹⁷*

The division's plan called for an attack by 92 Brigade on Ploegsteert Wood from the north, aiming to gain and consolidate a line on the eastern side of the wood, based on the River Warnave. 93 Brigade would then move through and maintain the pursuit of the Germans; initially towards the River Lys south of Warneton, then north along the line of the River Warnave (in the direction of Warneton). On 27 September 18/Durham Light Infantry was transferred temporarily to 92 Brigade, and took over the right of that Brigade's line in place of 11/East Yorkshires.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations September 26th to October 1st 1918.*

⁹⁸ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations September 26th to October 1st 1918.*

The attack by 92 Brigade began at 1500 hours, with the advance troops approaching the wood from the north, then looking to work their way southwards. Despite heavy enemy shellfire the attack made good progress initially with the high ground being:

*... defiladed from the Wood and screened from Messines Hill by smoke barrage. But the going is appallingly bad – a tangle of old shell holes, wire, trench systems and concrete emplacements.*⁹⁹

The intensity of the defensive fire is shown by the killing of the artillery observation officer based on Hill 63. The brigade was also concerned that 30th Division to the left had still not cleared Petite Douve Farm and Donnington Hall. The day saw fierce fighting to try and push the enemy out of its positions in the Wood, including the beating back of a counter-attack at 1746 hours. Overnight the brigade held the northern part of the wood, although it considered its position to be precarious due to a gap between the positions held by 11/East Lancs and 10/East Yorkshires.¹⁰⁰

The successful progress to the north, specifically the capture of Zandvoorde by II Corps forces and their subsequent drive towards Houthem, led to changes in the initial plans of XV Corps. Having awaited instructions to commence action for most of the day, at 1700 hours 93 Brigade was told that its original orders were cancelled and it was to advance as quickly as possible towards objectives north-west of Comines

⁹⁹ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations... 27th September to 4th Oct. 1918.*

¹⁰⁰ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations... 27th September to 4th Oct. 1918.*

(thereby trapping any German troops remaining on the Messines Ridge). By the time the new arrangements had been made it was dark, and the two battalions leading for the brigade were only south of Neuve Eglise by 2230 hours. Enemy shell fire caused the advance to pause for an hour in extended order around Hill 63. 11/East Yorkshires (92 Brigade) was now attached to 93 Brigade, as 18/Durham Light Infantry was already committed (with 92 Brigade) in line, and the East Yorkshires took on the position of advance guard. Enemy machine guns were encountered at Ash Crater, and although the defenders were being pushed back by the attacking troops, the advance was slow. The brigade halted on Tilleul Farm, with 15/West Yorkshires now taking on the front position. The circumstances were not ideal as touch had been lost with neighbouring British forces; both of the brigade's flanks were in the air. Lewis gun teams were placed around the position, the priority being to be able to resist an attack from north or south. Losses overall had been low, most of these the result of the shelling around Hill 63.¹⁰¹

40th Division had been originally re-formed as 'semi-mobile' and deployed to 'hold a quiet sector of the line'. During September, 121 Brigade had operated as its advance guard, moving forward in the wake of enemy withdrawals; over the space of 23-24 September, 23/Cheshires established four advance posts north of the village of Nieppe and along the River Lys. The division was now charged with securing the right flank of Second Army, focusing on the line of the River Lys, running west and north of the town of Armentières. 121 Brigade occupied the junction with Fifth Army, 119

¹⁰¹ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations September 26th to October 1st 1918*.

Brigade on its left. On 27 September, having taken over the front line from the Cheshires, 23/Lancashire Fusiliers attacked in the direction of the Lys.¹⁰² The instructions for the assault give a valuable insight into the main elements of operational planning within Second Army during the battle, at brigade and battalion levels. That the action failed to achieve its objectives at this first attempt, illustrates the scale of the challenges facing Second Army, and its rebuilt formations, during these early stages of the campaign.

The initial plan for 121 Brigade, 'a minor operation... to clear the West Bank of the Lys...',¹⁰³ was issued on 23 September. 23/Lancashire Fusiliers would carry out the attack; two companies to lead the assault, two companies to support with mopping up activities. Posts were to be established on the line of the River Lys. The attack would be supported by a field artillery creeping barrage: sixteen 18-pounder batteries, to move forward at a rate of 100 yards per three minutes; to fire one final round of smoke, to make the infantry aware that the final barrage line (and the objective) had been reached. A smoke screen would be fired by the trench mortar battery to protect the right flank of the attack; two mortars were placed under the command of 23/Cheshires¹⁰⁴ in order 'to assist the advance and cover the consolidation'. Heavy artillery fire was concentrated on specified areas (buildings) in the direction of Armentières, and hostile batteries. There was also a machine gun creeping barrage moving forward at a rate of 100 yards per five minutes, keeping 200 yards ahead of

¹⁰² TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁰³ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *121st Infantry Brigade Order No. 54*.

the field artillery barrage. Three hours after the commencement of the attack a contact aeroplane would seek for flares over the objective, to be lit by the most advanced troops.

There were subsequent minor changes and corrections to these arrangements, the most important being that six (not sixteen) 18-pounder batteries would fire the creeping barrage, with an additional smoke screen to be fired by a group of 4.5 inch howitzers. The machine gun creeping barrage would now move forward at the same rate as the field gun barrage.¹⁰⁵

In the event the Lancashire Fusiliers made limited progress, eventually establishing a small number of advance posts to the east of Pont de Nieppe. The preliminary report by 121 Brigade on the operation, which did not include a report from the CO of 23/Lancashire Fusiliers, described how the two supporting companies had come under heavy enemy fire: the company on the left fell back to the line of the River Warnave; the right company became split with some men retreating to the start line and others becoming mixed up with troops in the assaulting company. In the circumstances it was not possible to secure the original objectives. The reasons presented for this setback included the strength of the German forces, and the effectiveness of their enfilade fire into the supporting companies. There had been a consequent loss of contact between the support and advance companies on the left

¹⁰⁴ This was an error – the orders were subsequently corrected so that the mortars were correctly placed under the command of 23/Lancashire Fusiliers who were leading the attack: TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Amendments and Addendum to 121st Infantry Brigade Order No. 57 dated 25th September 1918.*

of the attack. Although the smoke screen was effective, the supporting barrage was considered 'thin'.¹⁰⁶

While the original orders had been set for 28 September, this initial attack actually took place the day before, no doubt intended to strengthen the hold on Second Army's right flank. On the evening of 27 September, 23/Lancashire Fusiliers were relieved by 23/Cheshires, who would in due course move forward to maintain contact with a retreating enemy – a consequence of the pending actions by 31st Division. The following day a party of 10/KOSB deployed with 'L' Special Company RE to launch timed smoke screens as cover for advancing troops.¹⁰⁷

On the first day of the battle Second Army captured over 2,000 prisoners, plus considerable arms and materials. In what might be termed a return to the battles of a previous century, 'Field batteries moved forward with the advance and engaged enemy troops and machine gun nests over open sights'.¹⁰⁸

The achievements of the day can be attributed to a number of factors. Overall the artillery fire-plan proved successful with limited response from the German artillery, a consequence of effective counter-battery fire. In addition, as noted by 42 Brigade,

¹⁰⁵ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Amendments and Addendum to 121st Infantry Brigade Order No. 57 dated 25th September 1918.*

¹⁰⁶ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Preliminary Report on Operations 27th September, 1918.*

¹⁰⁷ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division; smoke was launched 0525-0730, 0930-1130, and 1400-1700 hours.

¹⁰⁸ TNA WO158/218, *Operations Reports.*

*The creeping barrage was good and the indirect [machine gun] barrage was excellent.*¹⁰⁹

The effectiveness of the weight and direction of the different fire-plans on particular areas of the front had varied; the resistance met by 121 Brigade in an initial operation on 27 September (described earlier) was attributed in part to the limited barrage in support of the attacking battalion.¹¹⁰ The resistance of the German defenders was found to be weak overall although defence had stiffened in pockets as attackers moved further forward.

The early morning mist combined with the use of smoke and gas from artillery shells, allowed 'machine-gun nests and pill-boxes [to be] isolated and overcome with less difficulty than had been expected'.¹¹¹ There were alternative conclusions however:

*The smoke made it extremely difficult to keep direction but undoubtedly saved a considerable number of casualties.*¹¹²

In general the bringing forward of covering artillery, machine guns and mortars had assisted further advances and the exploitation of early gains; this was complemented by support from the air through ground attack operations. There had been flexible

¹⁰⁹ 42 Brigade, *Summary of Attack on September 28th 1918* (from TNA WO95/1876, War Diary of 14th Division: General Staff).

¹¹⁰ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Preliminary Report on Operations 27th September 1918*.

deployment of the troops, making effective use of advance squads, and the carrying out of flanking and encircling attacks as circumstances required. Lewis gun teams within advancing units had provided immediate fire support.

The troops involved, contrary to fears that many would not be of the right quality or have received sufficient training, proved fully capable of undertaking offensive operations. This applied even when the men had been re-classified as fit for active service:

Although battalions were very weak and the men belonged almost entirely to 'B' category, yet they were filled with keenness and confident of success. They moved across the ground with energy keeping close to the barrage...

*...They showed all the energy, keenness and fighting spirit of 'A' men, and though they may not be physically capable of undergoing the same hardships for a long strain, I feel the utmost confidence in them...*¹¹³

The successful breakthrough of the enemy lines is illustrated by the reports from RAF planes undertaking reconnaissance of the front on the following day. The HQ of 11th Wing, RAF, had telephoned orders through to 206 Squadron, requiring a special low-level reconnaissance mission in order to determine the positions of the advance

¹¹¹ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*.

¹¹² 42 Brigade, *Summary of Attack on September 28th 1918*.

¹¹³ Brigadier-General, 43 Brigade, *Report on Operations September 28th 1918* (from TNA WO95/1876 War Diary of 14th Division: General Staff).

troops.¹¹⁴ The squadron consisted of DH9 bombers. Second Lieutenant John Blandford took part in the mission and his written memoirs present a vivid snapshot of the conflict:

*There was a thin ground mist covering all the low-lying devastated area between Ypres and Passchendaele, which was a morass of water-filled shell craters. We could see a good many shell bursts popping through the mist, German as it proved, for beyond the misty area we could see our infantry patrols and some tanks probing forward and in action against the German rearguards in open country, all along the front. We knew then that the Second Army had broken clean through all the German defences, and that here was open warfare again after four long years! A great moment believe me.*¹¹⁵

At 1900 General Plumer issued new orders to continue operations on the following day. These included important strategic objectives which were essential for maintaining the progress of the offensive. The key elements were for II Corps to continue its flanking role for the Belgians; XIX Corps to secure the Ypres-Comines canal crossings and support X Corps, once the latter had gained the Wytshaete-Messines ridge, in clearing the area west of the canal; XV Corps to move north-east and seize crossings over the River Lys.

¹¹⁴ P. Hart, *Aces Falling: War Above the Trenches 1918* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), pp. 321-2

¹¹⁵ IWM documents , J. S. Blandford, Second Lieutenant, 206 Squadron, typed manuscript, *Sans Escort*, p. 16.

Further orders were also received from Degoutte, around 1930, once again after Plumer had already determined Second Army's actions for the next day. Degoutte stated that resistance had been weaker opposite the British Second Army and the Belgian right flank. Accordingly, he concluded that it was here the attack must be pressed without pause. He also included instructions for the use of the French Cavalry Corps and VII Corps – though neither would come into action subsequently. The Official History records dryly that 'General Plumer saw no reason to modify the orders he had already given'.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*.

Chapter Four

The Battle of Ypres

Advance to Contact: 29 September – 3 October 1918

Company have dug themselves in in shell holes out in open country.

Pouring with rain. Troops fed up.¹

29 September

The increasingly poor weather, allied to the deteriorating ground conditions, was already beginning to interrupt transport and supply lines. Heavy rain on the night of 28-29 September impeded troops moving to attack jumping-off points; mist caused units to lose direction. Many attacks were delayed as a consequence. Artillery support would be limited as guns were restricted in their ability to move to forward positions. The day also saw an increase in German resistance and there was hard fighting in a number of areas, particularly east of the Ypres-Comines canal. Army Intelligence had

¹ Private H. T. Pope, 2/15th London Regiment, 30th Division, 30 September 1918; from his diary of the war:

anticipated that the Germans would bring forward any available bodies of men to reinforce defences. Subsequently it was found that four divisions held in reserve had been added to the line.²

II Corps

28 Brigade took the lead for the 9th Division, moving forward to take the Keiberg Ridge. The British troops and the neighbouring Belgian forces were then forced to pause in front of Waterdamhoek due to enemy fire. Additional units were moved up to strengthen the attack; 5/Cameron Highlanders (26 Brigade) moved into the junction between the Belgians and 28 Brigade. The renewed assault proved too strong for the Germans and the village was captured, with the advance troops continuing east, and over the Waterdamhoek Ridge. At this point, owing to casualties and some loss of direction, contact between British and Belgian forces was lost briefly; the gap was filled by companies of the Black Watch. Heavy machine gun fire and wired defences led to a line being consolidated in front of Slypskappelle, facing Slypswood.³ During the afternoon the Belgians were reported to have moved through the village of Moorslede; meanwhile 36th Division had finally succeeded in capturing Terhand. For 27 Brigade, 11/Royal Scots and 6/King's Own Scottish Borderers had initially provided cover for the right flank of 28 Brigade, which had been exposed by the delay in driving the German defenders from Terhand. Subsequently 11/Royal Scots moved

Imperial War Museum 78/42/1.

² TNA WO157/128, Second Army Intelligence Summaries, 29 & 30 *September 1918*; the German use of any men available to help restore defences meant that the capture of prisoners from a particular unit would not

east of Dadizeele following 'hard fighting' to take Kanterhoek Farm. The brigade secured a line along Richmond Crossroads.⁴

The advance of 29th Division continued, largely in a south-easterly direction, with Gheluwe the objective; maintaining touch with 36th Division on the left and 35th Division (XIX Corps) on the right. Progress here was restricted largely due to an increase in enemy machine gun fire and, as the day continued, artillery fire from German reserve batteries. A counter-attack directed at 86 Brigade at 1200 hours was repulsed by Vickers and Lewis gun fire. French cavalry provided valuable support through maintaining liaison between the advance units of 29th Division and 36th Division to its left, although touch was lost with 35th Division around midday, when the latter was unable to advance east of Zanvoorde. Artillery support was limited by 'the state and scarcity of roads'.⁵

Despite no covering artillery fire 'owing to the shocking state of the roads',⁶ 36th Division managed to sustain its push forward. The enemy machine gun positions made good use of hedges and isolated buildings for cover, as the British advance moved beyond the damaged terrain of the former battlefield. The village of Terhand was taken in late afternoon together with the hamlet of Vijfwegen two hours later; this

necessarily indicate that the full regiment or division was present. For further details of the German Order of Battle, please refer to Appendix A9.

³ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

⁴ TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*; it should be noted that the pace of the advance reported in the diary is further ahead than that recorded on the map from the Official History (which indicates that Richmond Crossroads was reached by 2 October).

⁵ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918*.

lay one mile south of the village of Dadizeele, finally captured by 9th Division at 1600 hours.⁷

The report of 1/Lancashire Fusiliers, on the left of 29th Division, states that contact was lost with the right flank of 36th Division during the afternoon; as per orders, the troops continued to advance, with contact re-established later in the evening. Heavy rain began falling from 1800 hours.⁸

XIX Corps

XIX Corps withdrew 14th Division from the line into reserve.⁹ 35th Division was directed to attack in a south-easterly direction towards Tenbrielen and Werwicq. The advance units were held up near Zandvoorde, largely the result of the morning mist causing 105 Brigade to attack from the south-east when the original plan had been for an assault from the north. 104 Brigade had successfully taken the western side of the village including the western spur, but the Germans still retained the eastern spur, which contained pill-boxes and entrenched machine gun positions. (Initial reports had indicated that British forces held the whole village). The resulting delay would have consequences for 41st Division on its right, particularly for 123 Brigade, during the course of the afternoon. Following the preliminary manoeuvring, at 1230 hours 105

⁶ C. Falls, *A History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (London: Constable, 1996; first published Belfast: McCraw, Stevenson, 1922), p. 264.

⁷ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, *Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th-October 2nd, 4th October 1918*; WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918*; Falls, *36th (Ulster) Division*, pp. 263-5.

⁸ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Battle September 28th to October 1st 1918*.

Brigade began its advance on Zandvoorde, immediately becoming the target of shellfire. General Pollard of 106 Brigade was ordered to push through the troops of 105 Brigade towards Tenbrielen and Blagnaert Farm or to support the east/south advance on Zandvoorde; he was also to take command of all advance troops i.e. a combined battlegroup of troops from 105 and 106 Brigades. Initially, Pollard moved 17/Royal Scots (106 Brigade) to the left flank of 105 Brigade (held by 4/North Staffs) and through Zandvoorde. An artillery barrage on Tenbrielen was called down. In the afternoon 105 Brigade was able to break through south-east of Zandvoorde and advance on Tenbrielen. Under Pollard's command the result by nightfall was that 106 Brigade, with 4/North Staffs of 105 Brigade, held the line Tenbrielen – Blagnaert Farm, with the remaining units of 105 Brigade in support. While it had been possible to bring forward field artillery and machine gun units, both 'Cyclists and T.M.B. [Trench Mortar Battalion] had to be left behind'.¹⁰ Active patrols were put in place in front of the secured ground; Pollard issued orders for the attack to be resumed, by the six battalions now under his command, at 0615 hours the following day.¹¹

41st Division maintained its advance on the right of XIX Corps, with 124 Brigade initially halted on a ridge overlooking the village of Houthem. At 0700 hours the Brigade attacked the village and its bridge, with 123 Brigade in support; the capture of the village was reported by 1000 hours.¹²

⁹ TNA WO95/1880, War Diary of 14th Division, Administration Section.

¹⁰ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, *Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th - October 2nd, 4th October 1918.*

Under the covering fire of trench mortars, 123 Brigade moved quickly through the village; the troops' progress was 'exceedingly rapid, prisoners being freely taken, and opposition slight'.¹³ At this stage, German machine guns continued to fire from the opposite west bank of the Comines canal, causing some casualties. Accordingly, once clear of the village, a platoon was dispatched across the canal to take out the enemy positions; this attack was successful, capturing 36 prisoners and three machine guns. 123 Brigade continued its advance, taking up positions along the railway line; these offered good sight lines from which troops could direct fire upon enemy targets. However by 12 noon the attack had stalled; the Germans were clearly intent on holding their current positions and machine gun fire had intensified, in front of the advance companies and also from across the canal. Attempts to outflank the defenders were unsuccessful and 'a good many casualties' resulted.¹⁴

During the course of the afternoon the situation remained in the balance and the brigade's left flank remained exposed; at this stage 35th Division was not in touch with the brigade.¹⁵ There was evidence that the Germans were attempting to manoeuvre machine guns forward so as to be able to enfilade the British forward companies, in preparation for a possible counter-attack. An enemy aeroplane dropped lights to direct the targeting of defensive artillery fire. As a consequence of the heavy fighting so far there were concerns that ammunition levels were becoming very low while the

¹¹ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division; WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade; WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, *Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th-October 2nd, 4th October 1918*.

¹² TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations Commencing Sept. 28th 1918*.

¹³ TNA WO95/2639/3, War Diary of 23rd Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, *Report On Operation carried Out On 29/9/18*.

¹⁴ TNA WO95/2639/3, War Diary of 23rd Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, *Report On Operation carried Out On 29/9/18*.

casualty rate was increasing. Making effective use of their own machine guns to cover the action, the front companies aligned their positions to stabilise and make secure the line by the railway. SOS rockets were fired and pigeons released in order to call for artillery support and for more ammunition. With the circumstances of 35th Division remaining unclear, 122 Brigade was ordered to move along the Tenbrielen line and establish contact with the division's right.¹⁶

The situation was saved in the late afternoon through the successful advance by units of 30th Division on the west bank of the canal, to the right of 41st Division. Contact was made between the respective advance forces such that enfilade fire by 30th Division troops was brought to bear on the enemy across the front of 123 Brigade's line. At 1600 hours the requested artillery support commenced, with fire directed onto the German positions. The result was to allow 123 Brigade to secure its front along a line about 1,000 yards to the east of Houthem.¹⁷ In accordance with orders received, the brigade established a line of outposts for the night. The shortage of ammunition was alleviated by the dropping of three boxes of SAA by aeroplane, in response to the brigade's signal.¹⁸

¹⁵ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations Commencing Sept. 28th 1918*.

¹⁶ TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

¹⁷ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations Commencing Sept. 28th 1918*.

X Corps

Following its capture of the Wyttschaete Ridge, 34th Division proceeded to advance towards the Ypres – Comines Canal.¹⁹

30th Division was tasked with clearing the area to its front between Messines Ridge and the Ypres-Comines Canal (target: Houthem).²⁰ The neighbouring 31st Division (XV Corps) was reported to be held up 1500 yards in front of Warneton (south-east of Messines) so 90 Brigade, on the right of 30th Division, was ordered to adjust its movement in a south-easterly direction to threaten to outflank the Germans in the village. The advance by the brigade was moving forward quickly; the pace was such that the OC 2/15 London Regiment 'reported that he was 1 mile [east] of MESSINES and his Bn. advancing so fast that he could not catch them up'.²¹

The successful attack meant that by mid-afternoon 2/15 and 2/16 London Regiments of 90 Brigade 'were well on their way' to the Ypres-Comines canal,²² and out of communication from brigade HQ. The speed of the advance and the distance covered left the troops 'somewhat exhausted and disorganised'. The reserve battalion, 2/14

¹⁸ TNA WO95/2639/3, War Diary of 23rd Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, *Report On Operation carried Out On 29/9/18*.

¹⁹ TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Infantry Brigade: 2/Loyal North Lancs occupied Wyttschaete.

²⁰ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, *Order No. 5, 28th September 1918*.

²¹ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

²² TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

London Regiment, was ordered to secure the line of the advance, based on Warneton-Comines railway.²³

XV Corps

During the day 92 Brigade, led by 10/East Yorkshires and the attached 18/Durham Light Infantry, 'began to penetrate [Ploegsteert] Wood from N. and E.'; by mid-afternoon the Wood was taken and advance posts established to the east and south. 12/Royal Scots Fusiliers (94 Brigade) was attached temporarily to the Brigade.²⁴ The priority now for 31st Division was to reach and then cross the River Douve, west of Warneton; despite some resistance from enemy machine guns reasonable progress was made. Later that day the Division reinstated the original target of the River Lys south of Warneton – to be attacked by 93 and 94 Brigades. The timing of the attack was put back to the following morning at 0600 hours due to 'the extreme fatigue of the men, and the difficulty of assembling for a further attack in daylight'.²⁵

Overnight, 119 Brigade, on the left of 40th Division, had put bridges across the Warnave, ready to take advantage of any enemy withdrawal.²⁶

²³ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade; the reference to the two leading battalions becoming 'disorganised' as a consequence of the pace of the advance, is a handwritten addition to the original typed diary.

²⁴ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations... 27th September to 4th Oct. 1918.*

²⁵ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations September 26th to October 1st 1918.*

²⁶ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

Despite the problems described at the end of the previous chapter, the second day of battle brought further significant advances. A notable feature of the fighting was the co-operation on the adjoining flanks between British 9th Division (II Corps) and Belgian forces. This joint offensive had achieved a breakthrough of the prepared German defensive position, *Flanders Line 1*; by late afternoon, units were in place in front of *Flanders Line II*. The Belgians had regained Passchendaele, plus Zarren and Dixmude to the north.²⁷

Plumer issued two sets of orders during the day. At mid-day he confirmed the Second Army role of flank guard for the Belgians, emphasising the aim of covering and securing the crossing points of the Lys. That evening, taking account of the day's progress, he set out the objectives of each Corps for the following day.

The extent of the advance on 29 September had though been disappointing in comparison with the significant gains on the first day. The *Official History* puts this down to 'the inexperience of the staffs in open warfare.... [and] weather preventing the RAF from giving the usual assistance, and to the difficulties of the war-torn ground'.²⁸ The Germans had brought forward troops from a further four Divisions, either to reinforce the line or in consideration of a possible counter-attack. There were advances on the left but inconsistent results elsewhere, although large numbers of prisoners and materiel had been taken. The *Operations* report for the first two days of the battle records the capture of an estimated '3,660 prisoners, about 100 guns, and

²⁷ TNA WO157/128, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 29 September 1918.

²⁸ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*.

large numbers of T.M.s [trench mortars] and M.G.s [machine guns]. 17 E.A. [enemy aircraft] were destroyed, and 5 balloons burnt, at a cost of 3 of our machines missing.²⁹

There was some action possible by the RAF, responding to the German forward movement of reserves. Peter Hart writes of 206 Squadron undertaking a bombing raid on Menin railway station in response to reports from RAF fighters of enemy reinforcements detraining.³⁰ Each bomber dropped twelve 25 lb bombs as well as strafing the station ('... which was full of rolling stock with German troops all over the place unloading and forming up³¹) with machine gun fire.

*We learned next day that we had so disrupted the detrainment and deployment of the German division that the expected counterattack never materialised... and the 206 Squadron raid was generally considered to have had a real impact on the course of the battle.*³²

The advance made so far meant that most of the country which had been scarred by previous battles now lay to the rear of the front line forces. The prospect for the British forces was that of moving across virgin territory, with troops able to liberate towns and villages which had been under German occupation since 1914. The Germans would no longer have the benefit of defending amidst the detritus of previous battles.

²⁹ TNA WO158/218, Operations on the Second Army Front: 28th September to 13th October 1918.

³⁰ Hart, *Aces Falling*, p. 322.

³¹ Blandford, *Sans Escort*, pp. 16-17.

³² Blandford, *Sans Escort*, pp. 16-17.

However this new terrain would be unfamiliar to the attackers, which increased the importance of air reconnaissance in assisting with the production of reliable maps.

General Degoutte was still anxious for exploitation of the gains he anticipated. He drew up plans for a 'groupement d'exploitation' comprising French infantry, cavalry and artillery, together with two Belgian Divisions. However, no directions were issued for the formation's deployment and circumstances would not prompt its involvement.

Further orders issued that evening for the following day, in response to Plumer's directions, included 105 and 106 Brigades of 35th Division, under General Pollard, to attack the northern outskirts of Wervicq, and to establish a bridgehead overlooking the town. All available artillery was to carry out a barrage of Wervicq from 0550 to 0650 hours. This operation would be carried out in co-operation with an attack by 41st Division on Comines. Later that night these orders were modified, with 35th Division ordered to continue its advance through to the railway north of Wervicq; its right wing to co-operate with the left wing of 41st Division in the direction of Les Casernes.³³

30 September

The ground in front of Second Army was now unfamiliar and not helpful for attacking forces. It was generally flat and under cultivation. The continuing bad weather, in particular the torrential rainfall on the night of 29-30 September, and heavy rain throughout the following day ('The weather was bad, with heavy rain and strong

wind')³⁴ prevented the badly-needed air reconnaissance, as well as disrupting supply traffic. With a limited number of decent roads, the delivery of ammunition and rations to advancing troops by this means was near-impossible. At the same time the resistance of the enemy was stiffening. The German defenders had withdrawn behind the Lys and were determined to retain some hold on *Flanders Positions 1 and II*, as long as possible. Plumer ordered that artillery operations focus on disrupting enemy forces crossing the Lys, counter-battery and general harassing fire.

II Corps

The importance of continuing to maintain the link with the Belgian forces, and hold secure the right flank of the Belgian Army, remained a prime concern for the 9th Division. The war diary of 8/Black Watch (26 Brigade) recorded:

*... [Brigade HQ] pointed out that the Belgians on the left were not to attack till 11a.m. and reply received that this was understood and that arrangements had been made to secure our left flank.*³⁵

An attempt to outflank Slypswood was called off due to casualties.³⁶ 27 Brigade consolidated the positions in and around Dadizeele which had been taken during the

³³ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

³⁴ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, *Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th-October 2nd, 4th October 1918*; TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

³⁵ TNA WO95/1766, War Diary of 8th Battalion, The Black Watch.

³⁶ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

previous day; that evening, orders were received for the brigade to attack Ledeghem.³⁷

36th Division was engaged in a series of hard fights to capture and secure Hill 41, a key feature south of Dadizeele offering clear views of the surrounding area, and populated with farms and outbuildings that provided excellent cover for its defenders. Artillery support was still awaited and initial attacks were rebuffed. Arrangements were subsequently made for 12/Royal Irish Rifles to mount a further attack at 1630 hours under the cover of a smoke and HE barrage from 50th Brigade, RFA of 9th Division. The initial success of the assault proved brief as a heavy enemy counter-attack that evening recaptured the position.³⁸

29th Division was now engaged in heavy fighting to take Gheluwe, from where it was then to threaten Menin. To its left, 1/Lancashire Fusiliers was protecting the flank (through snipers) while also charged with maintaining touch with 36th Division. Efforts were made to link up with reserve elements of 35th Division (XIX Corps) on the right of 29th Division in order to try and strengthen the concentration of the British forces. Attacking troops, with covering fire from the attached Vickers machine guns, ran into heavy machine gun fire from enemy positions in Gheluwe, and from houses and strongpoints on its northern edge.³⁹ This drive was offset by a strong counter-attack

³⁷ TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

³⁸ TNA WO95/1771/4, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, from reports noted to Brigade HQ; Falls, 36th (*Ulster*) *Division*, pp. 265-7.

³⁹ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Battle September 28th to October 1st 1918*.

from fresh German troops during the late morning, which pushed back the advance units of 88 Brigade which were in Gheluwe.

*The enemy was holding an organised and strongly wired line in considerable strength... Owing to the exhaustion of the troops and the lack of artillery support no further advance could be made...*⁴⁰

By the close of the day, 1/Lancashire Fusiliers had managed to push forward to within a few hundred yards of the Dadizeele-Gheluwe Road.⁴¹ At 1800 hours, the battalion used the covering fire from machine guns plus field artillery support to succeed in taking a key farm held as a strong point by the enemy,⁴² which had been frustrating its advance. Next, a pill-box was rushed and captured using Lewis guns to provide covering fire; then a further farm was taken. At that point the advance stalled in the face of continuing machine gun fire, primarily from the right of the battalion.⁴³

⁴⁰ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918*.

⁴¹ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Minor Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918*; I believe there is an error in the report as it states that the line reached was the Dadizeele-Gheluvelt road, but the report by 29th Division and the OH map would suggest that the road is actually Dadizeele-Gheluwe, which is the description I have given in the text – Gheluwe lies some 4-5 miles south east of Gheluvelt.

⁴² The artillery was commanded by the Battalion R.S.M. who was killed during the attack: TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Battle September 28th to October 1st 1918*.

⁴³ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Battle September 28th to October 1st 1918*.

At 2110 hours, II Corps issued orders for the advance to continue with the objectives of Ledeghem (9th Division), Hill 41 (36th Division) and Menin (29th Division, with XIX Corps).⁴⁴

XIX Corps

During the course of the morning units of 35th Division moved forward to approach Wervicq from the north and west, supported by 159 Brigade, RFA, advancing from Tenbrielen. Troops from the battlegroup (the six battalions from 106 and 105 Brigades) aiming to complete the capture of Wervicq and make good the line of the canal, were now engaged in heavy fighting in front of Wervicq. At 0615 hours 12/Highland Light Infantry (right) and 18/ Highland Light Infantry (left) led the attack, with 15/The Cheshires and 17/Royal Scots in support, 15/Sherwood Foresters and 4/North Staffs in reserve.⁴⁵

At 0905 hours General Pollard reported the claims of a prisoner that German forces had moved back overnight to positions five kilometres east of the Comines canal. The enemy had retreated in the direction of Wervicq and was now operating from prepared positions, trenches and pill-boxes, north of the railway line. The General stated that heavy casualties had considerably weakened his forces, and that he would need artillery support in order to progress; it would not therefore prove possible

⁴⁴ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918*.

⁴⁵ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, *Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th - October 2nd, 4th October 1918*.

for him to extend his line to the left to Reeke. Arrangements were put in place for a bombardment of the enemy positions by heavy artillery from 1600 to 1630 hours; the bombardment would also cover the bridges in Wervicq across the River Lys. To support the troops on the ground, 157 and 159 Artillery Brigades were each placed under the direct command of 104 and 106 Brigades respectively (General Pollard was still at this stage in command of the battlegroup of 105 and 106 Brigades). However no effective artillery support was in position to support a new attack that day. It had also not been possible to obtain touch with flanking units; the advance line was maintained overnight, albeit with no further progress made. Machine guns were sited to the north of the position, to provide enfilade fire should it prove necessary.⁴⁶

The strength of the German resistance around Wervicq is demonstrated by the uncertain nature of the British positions at the end of the day's fighting. 104 Brigade, under General Sandilands, had been unable to establish the clear link required with units of 29th Division on its left; it could extend as far as 1000 yards west of the village of Coucou, and requested that 29th Division look to join up at that point. Overnight the left flank of 104 Brigade remained in the air. While the bad weather had restricted the ability of the artillery to get forward, positions were eventually established near Tenbrielen and Blaeagneart Farm. Delivery of rations and the evacuation of the wounded had presented serious problems due to the muddy ground.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division – from the report of General Pollard; TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade; TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, *Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th-October 2nd, 4th October 1918*.

⁴⁷ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division – from the report of General Pollard.

For 41st Division, 124 Brigade attacked successfully in the direction of the Wervicq-Comines railway, capturing signal stores, machine guns and a lorry. The speed of the subsequent advance meant that the brigade was for a time in front of neighbouring units with its flanks exposed. It consolidated on a line to the north west of Comines and patrols were pushed forward into the town which appeared to have been evacuated.⁴⁸

XIX Corps orders issued at 1300 hours, anticipating the position on the following day, 1 October, were as follows:

- a) 30th Division (X Corps) to relieve 35th Division along the line from Les Casernes to Wervicq
- b) 35th Division to hold the line Wervicq to Menin
- c) 34th Division (X Corps) to move to Zandvoorde area (lying north of Tenbrielen, west of Gheluwe); then to relieve 104 Brigade (35th Division) on 2 October, along the line Wervicq – Menin
- d) On 2 October, 41st Division to move behind 35th Division, to take over the line Menin, east to Wevelghem.⁴⁹

X Corps

On 30 September, 34th Division was withdrawn into corps reserve, with 30th Division taking full responsibility for the corps' front and the gains made by the troops so far.

⁴⁸ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations Commencing Sept. 28th 1918*.

⁴⁹ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

The morning found the division's units unclear as to the position on the flanks of the advance:

*We were now in a somewhat unsatisfactory position as situation of troops both on right (31st Div.) and left (41st Div.) was obscure.*⁵⁰

Advance parties from 2/14 London Regiment moved through to the River Lys; pack animals were used to carry mobile guns for the support of the forward troops. They found all possible river crossings in the division's area to be destroyed; the Germans had taken up positions on the south side of the river, apparently intent on holding this line.⁵¹

XV Corps

The attack by 31st Division to reach the Lys was launched at 0600 hours, with 93 and 94 Brigades leading. Enemy resistance, principally from machine guns, increased as the advance troops moved ever nearer to the river. Due to heavy casualties, the attacking forces paused on the high ground overlooking the Lys, before renewing their efforts during the course of the afternoon. Progress then became easier, the defenders' machine gun fire eased (presumably due to the Germans' withdrawal across the Lys) and 'by night all objectives had been reached on the whole front'.⁵²

⁵⁰ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

⁵¹ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

⁵² TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations September 26th to October 1st 1918*.

For 92 Brigade, 10/East Yorkshires advanced to the Warnave River; 18/Durham Light Infantry and 12/Royal Scots Fusiliers (attached from 93 and 94 Brigades respectively) continued to push towards the Lys.⁵³

The 93 Brigade suffered a number of senior casualties during these operations. This is evidence of the commitment by commanders at brigade and battalion levels to keep close touch with their advancing troops, to assist in maintaining communication and thereby control. Lieutenant-Colonel Wauhope of 13/York & Lancaster was wounded (with Major Goodburn assuming command of the battalion); Brigadier-General Taylor was wounded (with Lieutenant-Colonel Hickman of 11/East Lancs assuming command of the brigade); and the Acting Brigade Major, Captain Watts, was killed.

40th Division 'continued to drive in the enemy's covering screen', seeking to push forward to the west bank of the Lys.⁵⁴

The *Operations* record describes enemy activity as a 'minor consideration as compared with the problem of communications'.⁵⁵

*We continued to make progress [on 30 September] on the whole Battle front in spite of unfavourable ground, considerable opposition and incessant rain.*⁵⁶

⁵³ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations... 27th September to 4th Oct. 1918*.

⁵⁴ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

⁵⁵ TNA WO158/218, *Operations on the Second Army Front: 28th September to 13th October 1918*.

Over much of the reclaimed land roads were almost non-existent and the ground had been churned over through the combined effects of shellfire and the rain. To try and deal with these circumstances, Second Army had improvised via 'corduroy' roads (using wooden boards) and through the extension of existing railway lines.⁵⁷ For example, by day three of the battle the German railway system east of Ypres had been linked up to the railway station at Passchendaele. However the Belgian Army had no experience of dealing with such conditions while at the same time sustaining the pace of operations. Second Army found it necessary to slow its own advance in order to maintain coherence with its ally.

The quote from Private Pope at the start of this chapter encapsulates the view we like to have of the British Tommy⁵⁸ – practical, happy to complain while also getting to grips with the job in hand. A pretty good summary of their feelings towards Flanders and its weather (and the British do like to talk about the weather). You can picture the scene. These brief comments sum up the likely views of the Second Army troops at this time as well as any chapter in a history book.

An increasing feature of the warfare was street-fighting in order to take possession of a farm, village or town. In some cases, control of a village could change hands more

⁵⁶ TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 1 October 1918.

⁵⁷ This was a notable priority for Plumer – he required air reconnaissance to continually report back on the railway lines in front of his advancing forces, so that advance planning could take place to link up with these as soon as possible, thus aiding the provision of supplies – and artillery support - for advancing troops.

⁵⁸ *Company have dug themselves in in shell holes out in open country. Pouring with rain. Troops fed up*: Private H. T. Pope, 2/15th London Regiment, 30th Division, 30 September 1918; from his diary of the war: Imperial War Museum 78/42/1.

than once over the course of a day or period of days. On 1 October a Brigade of 9th Division approaching the village of Ledeghem from the east was attacked. The fighting moved into the village itself and the Germans were eventually pushed back. However they subsequently mounted a further counter-attack during the afternoon which successfully recaptured the village.

A later example, on 11 October, is from 36th Division which captured Mansard Farm near Ledeghem. The enemy launched a successful counter-attack during the evening and the farm was to change hands three times during the night, remaining in British possession in the morning

1 October

The pace of Army operations was sustained but the resistance of the enemy was continuing to stiffen.

II Corps

At 0830 hours 36th Division recorded that there were reports from prisoners of three fresh enemy divisions being brought up.⁵⁹ 107 Brigade had attacked at 0615 hours, with the objectives set as Heule, Bisseghem and Courtrai. The action was not successful, the troops being 'held up by enemy machine guns'.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary 36th Division: *Summary Record of October Operations*.

⁶⁰ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary, 107 Infantry Brigade.

An improvement in the weather on 1 October allowed the RAF to resume low-level attacks on German forces. Ten enemy aeroplanes were destroyed and 24 tons of bombs were dropped. During late morning, reports from the RAF reached 36th Division, referring to enemy troops heading south towards Menin; No. 7 Squadron RAF reported that it had silenced two enemy machine guns by fire from the air.⁶¹ However the rains returned on the next day, worsening the poor state of the approach roads and increasing the existing disruption, thus restricting further advances.

On the left flank of the British advance the 9th Division, attacking at the junction with the Belgian Army, was seeking to exploit the breakthrough, requesting support from all available troops including the reserve Cavalry Brigade. 27 Brigade noted at 0825 hours that 'French Cavalry Patrols do useful work on the flanks'.⁶² The Belgians were reported to have moved up to be in line with II Corps by late morning, though facing 'heavy opposition'.⁶³ At the same time however, German counter-attacks were being reported; these were particularly prolonged around Hill 41, which lay directly to the front of the eastward advance by the divisions of II Corps, enemy attacks being recorded at 1600 and 1840 hours.⁶⁴

This was to be a day of problems for the attacking units of 9th Division, as the Germans sought to reinforce their lines and strangle the breakthrough by the British

⁶¹ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division: *Summary Record of October Operations*.

⁶² TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

⁶³ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

⁶⁴ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division: *Summary Record of October Operations*.

forces. 26 Brigade had attack orders for 0600 hours but with the Belgians delaying their attack until noon, the morning saw a gap on the left of the British line. The machine gun company had been designated to fill this breach but due to the distance it needed to cover, was unable to do so in time. 8/Black Watch on the far left 'was counter-attacked as it passed the Menin-Roulers Railway'. This led to a short withdrawal of the British line and 'if the BOSCHE had been really in strength [the Black Watch] would have been cut off'. Units from 5/Cameron Highlanders moved forward to secure the gap and the Germans did not press further. The front was consolidated along the railway line.⁶⁵

7/Seaforth Highlanders, 26 Brigade, mounted an attack on the Menin-Roulers railway, north of Ledeghem, with the aim of then moving onto the village. The troops met strong resistance, with the enemy seeking to hold onto its pillboxes and strongpoints for as long as possible; machine gun and rifle fire was very 'hostile' and 'snipers [were] particularly active'. The resulting losses led to the remaining members of the battalion being reformed into one composite company.⁶⁶

27 Brigade had been ordered to attack Ledeghem. To assist this, one company of 11/Royal Scots was tasked with securing Telford farm on high ground to the north west of the village, which it did with assistance from a field gun placed to the west,

⁶⁵ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

⁶⁶ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 1st October 1918; the entry reads: *In view of our losses... [21 men killed, 2 died of wounds, 73 wounded including the Brigade commander, 4 missing] ... the whole Battalion was formed into one composite [Company] in the line.*

'firing point blank'.⁶⁷ 6/KOSB, attacking from the south, met heavy enemy fire as it moved forward; it achieved its objective after experiencing heavy casualties, such that all the remaining troops were deployed to form a defensive line. Meanwhile, 12/Royal Scots was able to push into the village and advance to the railway about 1,000 yards to its east.⁶⁸ The Germans fought back strongly:

*The enemy appear to have accurately gauged the predicament of the 9th Division. – both flanks in the air for he immediately counter-attacked on these flanks. As far as we were concerned the first counter-attack came from the South-East at 10.30a.m. and was wiped out by 4 Lewis guns firing from LEDEGHEM Cemetery. The enemy were in close column and were difficult to miss, their officers were mounted and behaved with great gallantry. The second attack came from the N.E. and S.E. at about 12.30 and forced the Brigade right back out of LEDEGHEM. The position was partially restored by the 11th Royal Scots and the station building and about 200 yards of the town were reoccupied, the 6th K.O.S.B. restoring their line under cover of a gallant attack by the 1st Inniskilling Fusiliers [109 Brigade, 36th Division] which, though costly to them, came just at the right moment...
... we were able to hold what had been won at great cost.⁶⁹*

⁶⁷ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

⁶⁸ TNA WO95/1771/4, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

⁶⁹ TNA WO95/1771/4, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

At 1810 hours 26 Brigade was reported to have re-established touch with Belgian forces who were 400 yards east of Menin.⁷⁰

On the right wing of II Corps, at 0712 hours the 29th Division reported that its troops were now in touch with 35th Division (XIX Corps). However it became clear later in the day that neither formations were as far forward as they believed, and attacks made during that day were unsuccessful. An exception was 1/Lancashire Fusiliers (86 Brigade, 29th Division) which succeeded in advancing its left flank by 400 yards, seizing two farms and a pill-box, making good use of outflanking manoeuvres with supporting fire from machine guns and Lewis guns.⁷¹

In its *Summary of Operations*, 86 Brigade makes no reference to the attack by the Lancashire Fusiliers, stating that:

*During [1-2 October] little progress was made, owing to the very strong opposition offered by enemy machine gunners from the line of numerous pill-boxes opposite our front. It was considered that further advance without many losses was impossible, without effective artillery support, which at that time was not available.*⁷²

⁷⁰ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

⁷¹ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Battle September 28th to October 1st 1918*.

⁷² TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918*.

This may be a reflection of the reserve role which the brigade undertook during 1-2 October, and its relief on 3 October, because units of 29th Division were engaged in attacks through until 3 October (described later in this chapter). In its *Operations Report*, 29th Division concluded that despite attempts to advance 'no headway could be made owing to very strong opposition'⁷³. By the close of the day's fighting the Germans were still in control of Gheluwe and the machine gun fire from its positions in the town frustrated further progress.

Subsequently, 35th Division concluded that a fresh co-ordinated attack would be required.⁷⁴

That evening II Corps received orders for the following day, operations to commence at 0700 hours: the aim was to clear the enemy from the area Ledeghem – Gheluwe – Menin. From there, 36th Division would be in a position from which to push forward in the direction of Courtrai.⁷⁵

XIX Corps

Much of the day was taken up with a re-grouping of British forces, in line with the orders issued previously. The 41st Division moved through 35th Division to establish a

⁷³ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918*.

⁷⁴ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

⁷⁵ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division: Summary Record of October Operations.

position on the latter's left, with orders to advance on Menin 'without delay';⁷⁶ 30th Division (X Corps) moved up to be available to relieve General Pollard's troops on the right of 35th Division. Meanwhile the Germans continued to concentrate artillery fire on the forward troops; when 122 and 123 Brigades (41st Division) moved east in daylight to a position north of Menin, they were heavily shelled.⁷⁷

Efforts were to be focused on driving in the direction of Menin, hence there was a realignment of units in order to concentrate forces for this attack. The advance troops of 41st Division would push forwards south of Gheluwe, while on its right 35th Division should do everything possible to maintain touch. The overall situation was frustrating: attacks by 104 Brigade from the north of Wervicq had been checked and co-ordination with 29th Division had been made difficult by the poor weather and muddy terrain. Troops from 35th and 41st Divisions were still in the process of re-arranging their positions. The casualties suffered by General Pollard's combined force (he reported that day that the approximate active strength of 105 and 106 Brigades was 900 and 500 troops respectively),⁷⁸ meant that it was not capable of mounting a further attack before its planned relief. The Corps Commander therefore ordered a further shelling of Wervicq between 1600 and 1700 hours; once it was dark, advance patrols should then be sent into the village to establish whether the enemy was withdrawing (as per intelligence reports passed down by Army HQ). Patrols found the village remained strongly held and covered by artillery.⁷⁹ General Pollard, in his

⁷⁶ TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

⁷⁷ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations Commencing Sept. 28th 1918*.

⁷⁸ TNA WO95/2470/1, War Diary of 35th Division – taken from General Pollard's report .

⁷⁹ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

summary report on the operations, gave particular praise to the signals officer of 106 Brigade, for maintaining communication between brigade and division.⁸⁰ Despite the bad weather and the severity of some of the fighting, Pollard was also able to conclude that, due to the work of transport officers '... troops were provided daily with water and rations by, or soon after, nightfall, and an adequate supply of ammunition maintained'.⁸¹

For Plumer, capture of the Wervicq – Menin line was an urgent priority. At the Army conference held that day orders were prepared for a joint attack on 2 October by 35th Division (104 Brigade), 41st Division and 29th Division; the opening bombardment to commence at 0630 hours with the attack going in at 0700 hours.

At 1930 hours the relief of 105 and 106 Brigades by 21 Brigade (35th Division) commenced. 'On relief they withdrew to near KRUISEBEECKE cross-roads where transport and cooks met them'.⁸² Behind the lines teams of pioneers and engineers were struggling to make good the road between Klein Zillebeke and Zandvoorde, to link up with the road heading east. The evacuation of casualties was speeded up by operating an alternative route, north-west out of Tenbrielen. The problems for transport and communications behind the front line positions were illustrated by a

⁸⁰ *In addition to his own Brigade he also provided a line for 105th Infantry Brigade, and as far as I understand, for others as well... [he] not only enabled me to be in close touch with events in front, but ensured Division and the R.A., being also freely informed :TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th-October 2nd, 4th October 1918.*

⁸¹ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade, Report to 35th Division on Operations September 28th-October 2nd, 4th October 1918.

⁸² TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

corps staff officer taking six and a half hours to deliver written orders from Corps HQ to the command post of 104 Brigade.⁸³

X Corps and XV Corps

To support its front line units, 30th Division Machine Gun Battalion moved up to the eastern side of the Ypres-Comines Canal.⁸⁴

The War Diary of 90 Brigade notes that 'A continued stream of traffic of all kinds circulated on the main roads [drawing] hostile fire'. By now, civilians were a substantial proportion of that traffic, looking to return to former homes or trying to avoid the new battlefields.⁸⁵

31st Division continued to push towards and consolidate its positions along the River Lys; temporary attached battalions were returned to their host brigades.⁸⁶ 40th Division now advanced across the ground north of Armentieres; from Pont de Nieppe, units advanced overnight to continue 'the envelopment of LE BIZET', establishing a number of advance posts.⁸⁷

Enemy resistance had 'stiffened considerably' to the north and west of Menin. In its centre, Second Army held the western side of Ledeghem; the left flank was secure

⁸³ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

⁸⁴ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps.

⁸⁵ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

west of Gheluwe. The Belgians continued to advance, capturing Vierschaar, Kruisstraat (north of Staden) and Hazewinde.⁸⁸ Army orders directed XV and X Corps to extend their lines north eastwards, assuming responsibility for Armentieres-Comines and Comines-Wervicq respectively. XIX Corps was to 'clear up the situation towards Menin' and then, as X Corps extended its line, drive east alongside II Corps. Finally, II Corps was to clear the ground south of Ledeghem, before resuming the advance eastwards.⁸⁹

2 October

2 October saw advance units of Belgian and allied soldiers cut off from supplies and without food. To avoid these troops having to pull back, eighty aircraft were deployed to air-drop 15,000 rations to them; an overall load of thirteen tons. Small sacks were used, each with five or ten packs, and padded with earth to absorb the shock of hitting the ground after being thrown out of the aeroplane.⁹⁰

Every effort was being made to build and repair roadways behind the advance, to improve the flow of arms and supplies to the front line troops. Teams from the pioneer battalions directed by Royal Engineers were ordered to remove debris and put new

⁸⁶ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations... 27th September to 4th Oct. 1918.*

⁸⁷ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

⁸⁸ TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, *2 October 1918.*

⁸⁹ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, *1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919*, Order No. 39, 1 October 1918.

⁹⁰ The War Diary of 107 Brigade (36th Division) records the event as follows: *The supply of S.A.A. [small arms ammunition] and rifle grenades, Nos. 36 and 37, was difficult; this was met by the Royal Air Force who dropped*

surfaces in place which could support the heavy transport and guns. From the opening day of the battle the pioneers of 6/South Wales Borderers had worked on repairing roads in the Wytschaete-Oostaverne-Houthem area, attached to 21 Brigade (30th Division).⁹¹

II Corps

For the 9th Division, 26 Brigade held the line established on the previous day. Small gains made by 7/Seaforth Highlanders were 'however nullified almost immediately by counter-attack'.⁹² The Germans also attempted to break through the line held by 27 Brigade and units of 6/KOSB and 12/Royal Scots were ordered forward in response. At 2045 hours the situation was recorded as quiet and no breakthrough had been made. The following night saw 27 Brigade moved up to take over the new line and relieve the existing troops who had been in action since the opening day of the battle.⁹³

107 Brigade had taken over the advance role for 36th Division from 1 October.

Despite the reverses initially experienced it made a further attempt to push forward on

in two days 36,000 rounds of S.A.A. including some boxes of bombs in the Brigade Sector. TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary, 107 Infantry Brigade.

⁹¹ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 6th Battalion, South Wales Borderers (Pioneers).

⁹² TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders; TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

⁹³ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade; TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

2 October but little progress was made.⁹⁴ 109 Brigade repulsed an enemy counter-attack on Twig Farm.⁹⁵

For 29th Division, 2/Hampshires (88 Brigade) fought its way into Gheluwe but was subsequently 'compelled to withdraw'.⁹⁶ A prepared attack with artillery support would be required.

XIX Corps

The planned attack by all its three Divisions, with 35th and 41st assaulting defences towards Menin, went in as directed at 0700 hours; the aim was to capture the Terhand Line of the enemy. By 0830 hours it was reported that patrols of 122 Brigade were attempting to clear Gheluwe and along the railway line, in the face of continual rifle and machine gun fire. However a strong counter-attack in the evening would force a slight withdrawal to a line along the Wervicq-Gheluwe road.⁹⁷ Overall the assault on Wervicq failed although some progress was made in a few places. The enemy defence line, the Gheluwe Switch, was proving to be too strongly held for the weakened British forces; the evidence from prisoners was that the Germans were under firm orders to hold this line for the present. General Sandilands reported that morning that his 104 Brigade, attacking the high ground west of Reeke (north of Wervicq), had sustained 'heavy casualties' and that 'High ground even if taken would

⁹⁴ The War Diary of the 107 Brigade states that the advance halted at Dibsland Farm (TNA WO95/2502/1).

⁹⁵ TNA WO95/2509, War Diary of 109 Infantry Brigade.

⁹⁶ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918*.

be impossible to hold as it is machine gunned from three sides including houses in Wervicq... Enemy artillery and [machine guns] increasing'.⁹⁸ 122 Brigade (41st Division) attacked with 18/King's Royal Rifle Corps and 15/Hampshires; the battalions were themselves counter-attacked and forced to withdraw slightly and consolidate their lines.⁹⁹ Due to these circumstances, 124 Brigade moved up during the evening as support for 41st Division but was not called upon.¹⁰⁰

Intelligence from Corps HQ stated that a large number of German troops had been seen moving on roads west and north-west of Menin; between 0800 and 1200 hours 16 trains were recorded as entering the town. This evidence of strengthened enemy forces led British commanders to conclude that 'a heavy bombardment and organised attack would be necessary before the [Gheluwe] Switch could be carried'.¹⁰¹ With further evidence suggesting that a possible counter-attack from the direction of Menin was planned, XIX Corps secured the commitment of support from X Corps should such a situation materialise. Arrangements now proceeded for the relief of 35th and 41st Divisions by 34th Division (X Corps); 41st Division took over the Gheluwe sector from 29th Division.¹⁰² Over the course of the battle, 35th Division, involved in the fiercest of the fighting, had sustained 1748 casualties (264 killed, 1366 wounded, 118 missing), distributed across all its constituent brigades and battalions.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

⁹⁸ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division; TNA WO95/2483, War Diary of 104 Infantry Brigade.

⁹⁹ TNA WO95/2365, War Diary of 18th Battalion, Kings Royal Rifle Corps.

¹⁰⁰ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations Commencing Sept. 28th 1918*.

¹⁰¹ TNA WO95/2470/1, War Diary of 35th Division.

¹⁰² TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

¹⁰³ TNA WO95/2470/1, War Diary of 35th Division.

14th Division had 41 Brigade send forward advance patrols to reconnoitre the bridges over the River Lys – there was concern that 90 Brigade (30th Division) did not have full control of the river banks.¹⁰⁴

X Corps and XV Corps

The first priority for 30th Division was to secure the line of the River Lys to its front. The aim was to then advance this line north east through Wervicq, taking advantage of the operations under XIX Corps to the north and east.¹⁰⁵ In support of these and other operations there had been as much work as possible carried out on building and repairing roads to allow supplies and artillery to be moved forward.

The previous day, 14th Division had transferred to the command of XV Corps from XIX Corps; its 41 Brigade now took over the line from 30th Division (X Corps) on the left.¹⁰⁶ 92 Brigade (31st Division) advanced its line to the Armentieres-Ploegsteert Railway, and set up posts on the eastern side.¹⁰⁷

For 40th Division, 2 October saw 10/KOSB across the Lys at Erquinghem with its 120 Brigade reserve, 11/Cameron Highlanders, deployed in support.¹⁰⁸ The following day, following an evacuation by the Germans, the division was able to surround Armentieres; it found 'All chimneys, towers and churches blown up by enemy, who

¹⁰⁴ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁰⁵ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps.

¹⁰⁶ TNA WO95/1880, War Diary of 14th Division, Administration Section.

has also fired many villages E. of LYS'. By 4 October, Warneton was secure and 31st and 40th Divisions were established in positions on the west of the Lys, with footbridges in place to commence further crossings.¹⁰⁹ The primary task of 40th Division, to maintain touch with 59th Division on the right flank of Second Army, had been achieved.

Day five of the battle had seen 'obstinate resistance' from the Germans, particularly around Gheluwe and Ledeghem. The Belgians had captured Hazewind but a strong enemy counter-attack had pushed their advance troops out of Roulers. A combined attack by French and Belgian forces the following day, supported by tanks, made gains west of the city.¹¹⁰

The impact of the Flanders' mud upon military operations should not be underestimated. Paddy Griffith, in reference to the operations twelve months previously, provides a concise and clear description of the resulting problems for weaponry:

HE shells became buried and smothered in [the mud]. If they could fly at all, aircraft could not tell friend from foe since the uniforms of both had been equally discoloured by it. Mortar base plates sank into it every time a bomb

¹⁰⁷ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations... 27th September to 4th Oct. 1918.*

¹⁰⁸ TNA WO95/2611/4, War Diary of 11th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

¹⁰⁹ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade, *Report of Operations... 27th September to 4th Oct. 1918*; TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

¹¹⁰ TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summaries, *3-4 October 1918.*

*was fired... Small arms became hopelessly clogged by it within an hour of opening fire...*¹¹¹

29th Division concluded:

*The nature of the country, over which the advance was made, was indescribable, waterlogged and absolutely destroyed after 4 years of incessant shelling... After the first day, the weather broke and there was 36 hours of continuous heavy rain... The almost complete absence of shelter... made the conditions very trying for the troops.*¹¹²

In the face of such conditions, that Second Army managed to maintain the momentum generated by the breakthrough on the first day of battle, demonstrates high levels of motivation and morale from the men involved.

The orders from II Corps recognised the cumulative impact of the wet weather and the deteriorating ground conditions upon supplies and fire support for the front line troops:

Divisions will consolidate and hold whatever line is held on the evening of to-day 2nd October... until such time as it is practicable to move forward heavy

¹¹¹ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 88-89.

¹¹² TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Ypres Operations, Period September 28th 1918 – October 4th 1918*; however the report also notes that ‘despite the difficulties of communication, ration and ammunition supply... at no time was there any failure of supplies’. It is also worth noting that the report suggests

*artillery and launch forward another properly organised attack with artillery support... so soon as practicable as many troops as possible will be withdrawn into reserve.*¹¹³

Falls describes the problems for transport by day two of the battle, given the need to both bring forward artillery and also to establish a relay system for supplies:

*The roads were choked. The only tolerable among them... were the Menin and Zonnebeke Roads. Upon each was a solid mass of transport, which often for hours at a time remained immobile.*¹¹⁴

The summary by 107 Brigade (36th Division, II Corps) of its experiences during the battle gives a valuable insight into nature of the fighting and the problems caused by the extent of the advance achieved, when combined with the severe weather conditions, poor road links, and difficult terrain.¹¹⁵ The German defenders had the advantage of operating on interior lines, closer to their supplies and supporting artillery; bolstered by reserves, they were increasingly determined to hold their ground. The brigade moved into the attack on 30 September, as enemy defences were becoming stronger. Artillery support remained limited with only 18-pounder guns able to be brought forward and supplies of artillery ammunition (no smoke shells were available) restricted because of the difficulty of carriage by pack on long and almost

that had cavalry been available to exploit the gains of the first day, then the important line of the Menin-Roulers railway might have been captured at that time.

¹¹³ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division: Summary Record of October Operations.

¹¹⁴ Falls, 36th (Ulster) Division, pp. 269.

impassable roads: 'The limited roads that existed were blocked with transport and troops (including a French Cavalry Division) for long periods...'.¹¹⁶

Although the German units opposite might be under strength, they were well-equipped with machine guns operating from prepared strongpoints and concrete pillboxes.

*While it was important to push towards COURTRAI, and further, out-flank the enemy defensive lines protecting LILLE, the losses suffered by troops (in good spirits though tired) decided in favour of a policy of waiting until our guns and supplies came up, before undertaking an advance again on a big scale.*¹¹⁷

With the worsening transport and supply problems, together with German reserves strengthening the defensive lines of the *Flanders Positions*, the battle ceased. The Belgians were glad to halt in order to re-group following the fighting of the past five days: 'an inexperienced army operating in difficult circumstances (and unfamiliar with open warfare) ran ahead of its supplies'.¹¹⁸ The British were two miles short of Menin. General Plumer recognised that heavy artillery and planned preparations would be necessary to achieve a full breakout. He issued orders for attacks to cease for the

¹¹⁵ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade.

¹¹⁶ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade.

¹¹⁷ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade.

¹¹⁸ Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 136.

present, the ground currently held to be consolidated, artillery to be manoeuvred forward, and communications improved.¹¹⁹

On behalf of the Belgian Army, Gillain wrote to Plumer to congratulate him on 'the magnificent success' achieved by Second Army during the battle;¹²⁰ he highlighted the co-operation of II Corps with Belgian forces in the successful 'joint attack'.

Writing to the Commander of 29th Division, Lieutenant-General C.W. Jacob (II Corps) pointed out that the division had been 'specially selected' for a key task on the opening day of the battle, the capture of the Broodseinde Ridge, which it had achieved and more in the first 24 hours of the attack. He also congratulated the division on its subsequent capture of Gheluvelt on 28 September and, after very heavy fighting, the village of Gheluwe, on 3 October.¹²¹ These gains were important in terms of supporting the Belgian Army's attack and maintaining the momentum of Second Army's initial breakthrough.

¹¹⁹ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, 1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919; Order No. 40 stated:

1. *The attack carried out on the Army front today made little progress owing to the determined resistance offered by the enemy, both with Artillery and machine gun fire.*
2. *Corps will consolidate the ground they now hold and no further attacks will be made until further orders.*
3. *Every effort will be made to improve communications and push forward Artillery as rapidly as possible.*

¹²⁰ Letter from Chief of Staff, Belgian Army to General Plumer, British Second Army, 3 October 1918; a copy is included with the War Diary of 15th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment (Prince Of Wales' Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum). Translated into English from the original French.

¹²¹ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Letter, 3rd October 1918, Headquarters, II Corps, from Lieutenant-General C.W. Jacob, forwarded as 29th Division No. C.G.S. 51/39.*

Reports from civilians and prisoners indicated that the morale of the German troops was fragile, that of Bavarian units particularly poor, and of concern to their officers. Depots were being evacuated and materiel moved back to reserve positions.¹²²

Many of the post battle operations reports made reference to the importance of artillery support for the infantry to be able to overcome determined enemy defences and entrenched machine gun posts.

*Very great credit is due to the supporting artillery. Many guns only took up position on Y/Z night and fired their barrage as a Map Shoot. The barrage, though ragged, was excellent...*¹²³

Reports also made positive comments about the direct support to infantry units by attached and supporting machine gun and trench mortar sections:

Machine Guns advanced with Battalion Headquarters under the immediate control of Battalion Commanders. Section Officers, however, were encouraged to seize every opportunity of using their own initiative, and, by their untiring efforts, skill and boldness in handling their weapons, the Machine Gunners assisted very considerably throughout the operation.

*Stokes Mortars proved invaluable in overcoming hostile points of resistance.*¹²⁴

¹²² TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 3 October 1918.

Map 5 shows the stages of the advance made by Second Army after the first day of the battle through to the decision by Plumer to break off the attack on 3 October.

Conclusions on the operations indicated that the range of flexible tactics adopted by the advancing infantry units of Second Army - the precise details varied between brigades and divisions - had generally been successful. The men and their officers exercised their initiative as they moved forward. Decisions on the use of terrain and cover, and the deployment and direction of supporting firepower, were made in response to the immediate circumstances.

*Very few casualties were suffered from hostile fire. I attribute this largely to the fact that all ranks had been trained to 'dribble' forward and under cover of trench mortars, Lewis Guns, Rifle Grenades and rifle fire, outflank centres of resistance.*¹²⁵

Army Order 41 directed all Corps to maintain harassing actions by infantry and artillery, designed to persuade the Germans that a new attack was imminent. The aim was to prevent the enemy from moving troops north where the Belgians, with French

¹²³ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918.*

¹²⁴ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918.*

¹²⁵ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Report On Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade from 28th September to 2nd October 1918.*

support, intended to exploit Second Army's breakthrough.¹²⁶ Although Degoutte wished for a new general advance to commence on 7-8 October, King Albert subsequently set the date as 14 October.¹²⁷ The high number of Belgian casualties so far was an important factor in this decision to allow more time for preparation of the next phase.

The Battle of Ypres saw British Second Army casualties of 303 officers and 4,392 other ranks; for the Belgians, around 2,000 soldiers had been killed and 10,000 were sick or wounded. Second Army had captured 4,672 prisoners and about 100 guns. Overall, the GAF had taken over 10,000 German prisoners, 300 guns, 100 trench mortars, and 600 machine guns.¹²⁸

The long guard was over, and the shattered tower of Ypres still stood, the pointing witness of an inviolated charge. The curving belt of fire and steel – so often strained near to breaking-point, so often pierced but never broken – had spread wide, had gone forward.

*There was no Salient.*¹²⁹

¹²⁶ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, *1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919*, Order No. 41, 3 October 1918.

¹²⁷ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*, p. 92.

¹²⁸ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*, footnote, p. 92.

¹²⁹ Brice, *The Battle Book of Ypres*, p. 52.

Chapter Five

The Battle of Courtrai

Breakout: 14 – 19 October 1918

[Captain Baron] liked a well-planned unalterable routine... He petulantly disapproved of the open warfare which had suddenly come after years of trench routine: unexpected things kept happening and decisions had to be made at once without any guiding precedent – which was most incorrect.¹

In Flanders in 1302 the Battle of Courtrai was fought, with a result that confounded all known expectations. The workers of Bruges were in revolt and their Flemish infantry inflicted a major defeat on the flower of French knighthood – so many nobles were slain that royal commissioners were forced to, in the words of one author, ‘scour the provinces for bourgeois and rich peasants prepared to pay for ennoblement’.² Just over six hundred years later another Battle of Courtrai was fought, and the troops of an army once considered to be the most powerful in Europe would be defeated by a British force largely consisting of conscripts and transferees.

¹ From the opening page of R. Aldington, ‘Victory’, a short story in B. Korte, ed., *The Penguin Book of First World War Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 41-48.

² B. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (Macmillan, 1979), pp. 76-77.

At Zero hour of 0535 on 14 October 1918, British Second Army launched its assault.

The battle took place against the background of the German High Command making efforts to pursue a negotiated armistice. The rumours regarding the prospects of an end to the war were beginning to circulate amongst the British troops. It was in these circumstances that GHQ acted to try and ensure that the focus remained on defeating the German Army in the field. On 7 October 1918, 90 Brigade (30th Division) recorded the following order from Field Marshal Haig:

There are indications that the attention of officers and men is in danger of being diverted by insidious rumours from their single task of defeating the enemy... F.M. C.inC. [Haig] warns all ranks against the disturbing influence of such unfounded Peace talk and wishes it to be clearly understood that at no time has there been a greater need of relentless efforts or a fairer promise of greater results. The Army will concentrate in an entire energy of bringing operations in the field to a successful and decisive issue.³

Second Army again deployed ten divisions, with 14th Division transferred from XIX to XV Corps; the disposition north-to-south was now:

| | |
|-----------|---|
| II Corps | 9 th Division 29 th Division 36 th Division |
| XIX Corps | 35 th Division 41 st Division |
| X Corps | 30 th Division 34 th Division |
| XV Corps | 14 th Division 31 st Division 40 th Division |

Map 6 shows the Army's disposition at the start of the battle, and the advance achieved during the first 48 hours.

The Germans held *Flanders Position II* and still held *Position I* south of Gheluwe. Since ceasing attacks on 3 October, which had seen the occupation of Armentieres on the right of the line,⁴ Second Army had maintained a daily programme of harassing artillery fire (gas shells, hurricane bombardments and neutralising fire), small arms fire, wire cutting, feint attacks and patrol work. This achieved its aim of persuading the enemy that an attack was imminent, to the extent that the German artillery fired a counter-preparation bombardment every morning. Support services worked on re-making roads and laying new railway lines, allowing the artillery to be moved forward.

³ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

⁴ TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 4 October 1918.

Much of the fighting during this period was for control of the various farmhouses and smallholdings that could serve as points of resistance. Despite bad weather that 'interfered considerably with flying' the RAF concentrated on attacking important railway junctions, dropping over 3,000 bombs.⁵

Overall the GAF had 32 Divisions (13 Belgian, 10 British and 9 French) faced by the German Fourth Army of 24 Divisions.⁶

In conjunction with the Belgian and French forces to its left, the Second Army launched the new offensive on 14 October, retaining the role of securing the right flank of the GAF. The recently inserted French XXXIV and VII Corps were to act as the main strike force with immediate flanking support from Belgian divisions on either side. The aim was for the Belgian forces to seize Roulers and from there advance to Thielt and Ghent. XX, XIX, and II Corps of Second Army received initial orders to advance in the direction of the River Lys, thereby linking with XV Corps (holding the right flank) along the north-east / south west line of the waterway. 'All that was required of the Second Army was a wheel to the right up to the Lys'.⁷

However, Plumer was apparently mindful of the potential for his Army to do rather more than guarding a flank. He perhaps agreed with Haig's opinion that the British

⁵ TNA WO158/218 *Operations Reports* - from which much of the supporting information in this paragraph is also taken.

⁶ See Appendix A for more details on the German Army structure and dispositions..

⁷ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*.

armies were providing the cutting edge for the allies' offensive operations.⁸ Haig was still urging Plumer to stick with the flank role; Second Army should not assault across the River Lys unless there were clear signs of a German withdrawal. However Haig also wanted Second Army to cross the river to the east of Courtrai so that it could link up with the BEF near Tournai.⁹ It is probable that Plumer was influenced by other factors, not least his continuing lack of confidence in GAF Chief of Staff, Degoutte. The successes of the previous battle had given him a new belief in the strength and abilities of Second Army troops. He was also aware of increasing evidence that the defence put up by the German forces was weakening and that their commanders were making preparations for a further withdrawal.

On 11 October, Plumer issued a modification to his earlier orders, changes which implied that a far more aggressive assault should be launched, whilst ensuring that the right flank of the Belgian Army remained secure. Delays by the latter were impeding the coordination of artillery fire support for the forthcoming attack. Therefore Army Order 43 directed II Corps to detail a detachment of infantry and machine guns on the left flank, to 'move in touch with and at the same rate as' the Belgians. Meanwhile each Army would 'move at its own pace', with the consequence that 'Second Army will gradually become echeloned forward'.¹⁰

⁸ See references in Haig's Diary for October 1918 (TNA WO158/244); these views are also referred to in various secondary assessments of Haig's opinions on the leading part being played by the BEF armies at that time, e.g. Harris with Barr, *Amiens*.

⁹ Powell, *Plumer*, p. 276.

¹⁰ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, *1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919*, Order No. 43, 11 October 1918.

The Second Army threat to cross the Lys (with the associated pressure from British Armies to the south) might hasten German evacuation from the industrial cities of Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing. Therefore Corps commanders should be prepared to use forward advance guards to establish bridgeheads south of the river, targeting sites such as Wervicq, Lauwe and Marcke.

This line of reasoning was supported by GHQ Intelligence, which reported on 14 October that the enemy was evacuating material from the Belgian coast and showing little interest in constructing further defences in the area. The conclusion drawn was that the Germans would not fight indefinitely to retain the region and were likely to look to withdraw south of Lille and then to a line based on the River Schelde.

Various conferences and meetings took place as the preparations of the Army proceeded. On 12 October, 26 Brigade held a conference at its headquarters to discuss the 'forthcoming operations'.¹¹ French forces were now moving forward in preparation for the next phase of the campaign; on 4 October, the diary of 27 Brigade (9th Division) recorded that 'French 7th Corps reported advancing towards ROULERS'.¹² There were also some minor adjustments between the adjoining British (9th Division) and Belgian units; on 5 October, '6th Belgian Regiment relieved 12th Royal Scots on the left'.¹³

¹¹ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

¹² TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

¹³ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

There was still evidence of enemy resistance above the battlefield. On 4 October 7/Seaforth Highlanders experienced a night attack by German aircraft, bombing roads around the battalion camp behind the village of Waterdamhoek.¹⁴ Around the same time 120 Brigade recorded:

At 1400 four E.A.s [enemy aircraft] crossed our lines bringing down one of our O.B.s [observation balloons] in flames...

Strong formations [of RAF planes] were observed to cross the enemy lines meeting with heavy A.A. fire...

*Repeated attempts were made [by enemy aircraft] to cross our lines...*¹⁵

On 7 October, Lieutenant-Colonel W A W Crellin, commanding 15/Sherwood Foresters (105 Brigade, 35th Division), was severely wounded by enemy shellfire and subsequently died of his wounds.¹⁶

British units were continuing to push forward at regular intervals, and at various points along the Second Army Front. On the right, the orders of 40th Division on 6 October established 120 Brigade as advance guard, responsible for defences south of the Lys, with guns from Brigade RFA, a machine gun company and a half company of cyclists attached.¹⁷ 119 Brigade assumed responsibility for the north bank. The subsequent instructions of 120 Brigade on 7 October illustrate the arrangements

¹⁴ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

¹⁵ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Intelligence Report 3-4 October 1918*.

¹⁶ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁷ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

made to address the operational challenges of this war of movement. There are references to 'the wide frontage' and the consequent 'large gaps between posts' which required advance patrols and scouting sections to take special precautions. All patrols were to be deployed as 'strong fighting patrols capable of dealing with any small parties of the enemy encountered'. There was also emphasis on guarding and covering any bridgeheads achieved, taking account of the various streams and rivers which lay across the general line of the Army's advance.¹⁸

On 9 October, units from 9/Irish Fusiliers (108 Brigade, 36th Division) captured Goldflake Farm, a fortified position on the south facing slope of Hill 41. A strong counter-attack by the Germans not only retook the farm but also pushed back the troops holding Twigg and Mansard farms on the crest of the hill. The importance of these last two positions for the forthcoming operations led in turn to British counter-attacks; Twigg Farm was secured after an immediate attack and Mansard Farm following an assault just before dawn.¹⁹

In 14th Division, 41 Brigade recorded the regular harassment experienced as a consequence of enemy artillery fire, as well as trench mortars and machine guns. There was some frustration with the response of the British guns, given the perceived advantages of well-positioned observation points held by the German defenders. On 10 October the Brigade welcomed the artillery 'crashes' on selected enemy positions, noting:

¹⁸ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Instructions No. 2, 7 October 1918*.

*The silly sentiment of not wanting to shell COMINES and WERVICQ Churches certainly helped to increase [our] casualties, which would not have happened had the enemy been deprived of such excellent observation.*²⁰

That same day the Brigade observed fires in Wervicq which, together with the 'enemy's wild harassing fire, indicates a possible withdrawal soon'.

For the new attack it was decided that there would be no preliminary bombardment and a creeping barrage would support the infantry. This would commence three minutes before Zero hour and proceed at the rate of 100 yards every two minutes, with a pause of 15 minutes every 1,500 yards. This rate of advance would have been unthinkable twelve months previously, indicative of the confidence of the attackers, the changed nature of the terrain over which they were to advance, and the perceived weaknesses of the defenders.

On the evening before the battle the British artillery conducted targeted shelling of enemy lines:

*At 1900 our Artillery heavily gas shelled hostile positions with the new BB (Mustard Gas) shell.*²¹

¹⁹ C. Falls, *A History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (London: Constable, 1996; first published Belfast: McCraw, Stevenson, 1922), p. 272.

²⁰ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

²¹ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade .

(A notable German casualty resulted from the use of mustard gas shells in the British bombardment).²²

RAF support for the attack was delayed; the weather was dry but a ground mist prevented air operations until after 1100.

II Corps

9th Division still operated on the left of II Corps and Second Army, with the 9th Regiment of the Belgian Army on its left; for the initial attack, 26 Brigade was deployed on the left of the Division with 28 Brigade on its right, and 27 Brigade in reserve. The immediate objective was the Winkel-St-Eloi – Drie Masten Road, and then to drive for the Courtrai-Lenlade Railway. Once this was achieved the division was expected to undertake a crossing of the River Lys and the capture of the town of Harlebeke. On the immediate boundary of the two armies, to assist in the coordination of operations, liaison platoons were established drawn from

²² ... the British opened an attack with gas on the front south of Ypres... They used the yellow gas whose effect was unknown to us, at least from personal experience. I was destined to experience it that very night... We were subjected for several hours to a heavy bombardment with gas bombs, which continued throughout the night with more or less intensity... About midnight a number of us were put out of action, some for ever. Towards morning I also began to feel pain. It increased with every quarter of an hour; and about seven o'clock my eyes were scorching as I staggered back and delivered the last despatch I was destined to carry in this war. (A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by J. Murphy (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1939), p. 162).

Adolf Hitler, serving with the Bavarian Reserve Regiment 16, was virtually blinded, his eyes described as 'glowing coals' upon his return to regimental HQ - quoted in S. Jones, *World War I Gas Warfare Tactics and Equipment* (London: Osprey, 2007), p. 54. The gas has been assumed to be mustard but could have been British 'White Star' gas – a mixture of chlorine and phosgene; in the event it was considered that the blindness was due to hysteria rather than the physical effects of the gas - Freemantle, *Gas!*, p. 116; the author also points out that 'It is interesting to note that Hitler did not use chemical weapons during the Second World War'.

neighbouring units. Each liaison platoon comprised one officer and twelve men of each nationality.²³

8/Black Watch (26 Brigade) – 28 Brigade – 2nd Battalion, 9th Belgian Regiment

5/Cameron Highlanders – 1st Battalion, 9th Belgian Regiment

7/Seaforth Highlanders – 3rd Battalion, 9th Belgian Regiment.

There had also been arrangements agreed for a series of light signals which the Belgian forces would use to report progress or call for support as they advanced.²⁴

With no preliminary bombardment, the 18 pounder barrage of HE and smoke would begin three minutes before Z hour, before moving forward in 50 yard lifts per minute. The RAF was involved in monitoring the progress of the attack, including a 'Counter Attack Aeroplane... for the purpose of giving warning of hostile attack' – the warning would be via the dropping of a red parachute light. The changed nature of the warfare by this point is illustrated by the order stating that company commanders 'will ensure that no men leave their units to go in search of souvenirs'.²⁵

With zero hour set at 0535 hours, the immediate objective for the 29th Division was Ledeghem, and the cutting of the railway between Courtrai and Ghent. The day's attack began under the cover of 'an intense artillery barrage' with a twenty minute

²³ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, *Order No. 36, 13/10/18.*

²⁴ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, 27th (Lowland) Brigade *Order No. 276, 12/10/1918, Appendix B: Light Signals to be used by the Belgian Army.*

²⁵ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, *Order No. 36, 13/10/18.*

defensive barrage planned once intermediate objectives were reached. Unfortunately the early morning mist combined with the smoke of the barrage created visibility problems for the attackers, causing infantry to lose touch with the barrage or, in some cases, to lose direction entirely. However the fog proved to be of overall assistance to the assaulting troops 'who were able under its cover to get close to and surround hostile posts without encountering any aimed fire'.²⁶ There was some initial street fighting but the capture of the village was largely achieved by 0700 hours, with large numbers of the enemy surrendering. 1/Lancashire Fusiliers, starting as reserve for 86 Brigade, was responsible for 'mopping up'.

The approach by 86 Brigade was typical of the battle plan applied by the Corps formations, with a one battalion front, support and reserve battalions moving up and through the front battalion as each objective line was reached. The advance on the first objective was covered by a field artillery barrage; the next advance received a covering barrage from heavy artillery. Subsequent covering fire included trench mortars. In due course, touch was restored between the attacking battalions, both within the 29th Division and with the right flank of 9th Division. Progress was steady despite opposition from enemy machine guns and light artillery fire.²⁷ Importantly, during the evening all field artillery and much of the heavy artillery was able to move up into position to support the next day's attack.²⁸

²⁶ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

²⁷ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Operations 13-15th October 1918; Report on Operations by 86th Infantry Brigade on 14th October 1918*; TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *Operation Instructions No. 1, 12th October 1918*.

²⁸ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

88 Brigade was tasked with supporting the arrangements to cross the Heulebeek Stream.²⁹ By 1730 hours, 2/Hampshires were 'going for Salines' and had reached the Driemaasten-Gulleghem Road, from where they attracted enemy machine gun fire from the direction of Gulleghem; reports that 36th Division had captured the village appeared to be premature (which was correct). 9th Division was held up by defensive fire from the Bois de Heule Wood.³⁰

The results from RAF reconnaissance as recorded at 36th Division HQ showed that the artillery preparations had been successful in closing down the initial defensive fire from enemy batteries.³¹ However, this was not necessarily the experience of 36th Division's units on the ground. 107 Brigade recorded that at H Hour as the attack commenced there was a 'fairly heavy enemy reply to our barrage', but by 0600 hours 'enemy artillery quieter'.³² Reports from prisoners that the attack had not been anticipated showed that there had been value in the decision to dispense with a preliminary bombardment.³³

The division made good progress, entering Moorseele (1033 hours) and then looking to outflank Gulleghem from the north and south (1325 hours), from which heavy machine gun fire was reported. The attack stalled here and plans by 107 Brigade to deploy a motor machine gun battery supported by a platoon of II Corps cyclists were

²⁹ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *Operation Order No. 212, 12th October 1918*.

³⁰ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade.

³¹ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

³² TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade.

changed as these units were ordered to pull back into divisional reserve during the evening. A line 300 yards west of Gulleghem was consolidated and plans made to make a fresh assault in the morning.³⁴

The liberation of occupied towns and villages meant there were new considerations amidst the fighting, as civilians were overtaken by the advancing allied forces. A report on the progress of the 35th Division (XIX Corps) on the right flank of II Corps stated that the division was advancing towards the Lys via 'Woelvelghem which [the] enemy [is] shelling... Civilians released'.³⁵ 107 Brigade recorded that 'A number of civilians were found in Moorseele and the outskirts of Gulleghem and evacuated to the rear'.³⁶

The unexpected pace of the advance was illustrated by an unconfirmed report that the 6th Cavalry Division had possibly reached Gulleghem.³⁷

By the close of the day, the advance on the II Corps front had progressed around three miles, on a two mile frontage. A line running north-south was established on the west side of Gulleghem, one and a half miles west of Heule (which lay on the rail line out of Courtrai), with units deployed to provide 'defence in depth' to secure the gains.³⁸

³³ Falls, *36th Division*, pp. 272-3.

³⁴ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade; Falls, *36th Division*, pp. 274-5.

³⁵ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division, 1200 hours.

³⁶ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade.

³⁷ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division, 1245 hours.

³⁸ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Operations 13-15th October 1918*; troops were placed in front line posts and in support positions, with machine gun posts dispersed throughout.

Gas shelling of Moorseele by the Germans was recorded on a number of occasions that evening and the following day, no doubt designed to disrupt the build-up of British forces for the anticipated further attacks.³⁹

XIX Corps

At 0535 hours, 104 and 105 Brigades led the attack by 35th Division, under a creeping barrage; 106 Brigade in support. The advance was towards the River Lys, in a direction to the south of Courtrai and the village of Marcke. The immediate task was to capture and secure high ground south of the village of Gullegghem, overlooking the river.⁴⁰ Troops found welcome benefits from moving over ground unaffected by the fighting in previous battles:

It is interesting to note that the advance and arrangements for the accommodation of troops were much facilitated on account of the fact that we were now operating in open Country untouched by heavy shelling and free from concrete pill-boxes. The good roads and level ground made possible the quick advance of the Field Artillery and Infantry and the existing farms, houses etc., which were not destroyed by shell fire were used for the accommodation of Support and Reserve Troops.⁴¹

³⁹ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade.

⁴⁰ TNA WO95/2483, War Diary of 104 Infantry Brigade.

At the close of the day the division was held up on a line just west of the hamlet of Kloefhoek (Klythoek).

At the synchronised Z hour of 0535 hours, 122 Brigade moved forward to begin the attack by 41st Division on the 'Terhand Switch';⁴² 124 Brigade (plus 23/Middlesex from 123 Brigade) was in support. Following a creeping barrage of 100 yards every two minutes, early morning mist combined with the smoke from the enemy's defensive barrage to create difficulties for the assaulting troops; direction was hard to discern and officers faced problems in exercising command – 'supervision of any units larger than a section [was] practically impossible'.⁴³ As the advance progressed the fighting became more intense; the area contained a number of small farms which provided cover for defenders. The attacking troops were confronted by the expected machine gun fire and also by 'enemy light field guns firing over open sights at point blank range'.⁴⁴ The latter were engaged by 18 pounder guns attached to each of the attacking battalions. The success of this last action once the fog began to disperse, combined with outflanking manoeuvres to take out each farm and its defenders in turn, saw progress resumed over the course of the morning. The first day's objective, a line running south-west to north-east through the hamlet of Wijnberg, was achieved by around noon. Resistance continued throughout the day and the Germans also attempted counter-attacks on the junction between 41st and 35th Divisions, though

⁴¹ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

⁴² The Terhand Line of prepared trench works and defensive positions built by the Germans.

⁴³ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 13th 1918*; commenting on the initial problems of communication caused by the smoke and fog, an *Addendum No. 1* to the report states: '... all supervision of units larger than a section or half platoon [was rendered] impossible. Officers and N.C.Os, however, took command of the nearest body of men and collected stragglers of all units...'.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 13th 1918*.

these were repulsed without reported difficulty. At 1600 hours the division's advance troops had consolidated the ground won.⁴⁵

X Corps

With the objective of Menin, 34th Division launched its attack with 102 and 103 Brigades, operating in liaison with 41st Division on its left and 30th Division (also under X Corps) on its right.⁴⁶ The troops began from the starting line of the Gheluwe Switch, facing the village of Gheluwe; two days previously, a raiding party from 4/Royal Sussex had captured a German soldier, thereby providing some valuable information on the facing defenders. The division's subsequent summary report provides a concise account of the resulting advance:

The 103rd Infantry Brigade on the left of the Divisional front enveloped GHELUWE from the North and South capturing all the enemy garrison located there. They were hung up temporarily in the TERHAND SWITCH by enemy field guns shooting over open sights from RUMANIAN FARM. The 5th K.O.S.B. and 8th Scottish Rifles, however, succeeded in capturing two and one of these guns respectively, and established themselves on their final objective on the N.E. outskirts of MENIN. The 102nd Infantry Brigade on the right came under heavy machine gun and artillery fire when they commenced to advance. They overcame all resistance, however, and established themselves in the

⁴⁵ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 13th 1918*.

⁴⁶ TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Infantry Brigade.

*TERHAND SWITCH by nightfall, being all along their final objectives on the Western outskirts of MENIN.*⁴⁷

The Commander of 34th Division, Major-General Nicholson, recorded that 'the barrage at 100 yards in two minutes.... was much too fast.... communications were bad and information inaccurate'. He also subsequently heard stories from troops that '....putting the barrage down 300 yards ahead of the infantry line was too far and the cause of heavy casualties from machine guns which were not touched by the barrage'. Despite this, his division had taken part in the successful capture of Gheluwe village which had been 'smashed and shelled with Thermite shells'. 'The Hun surrendered freely, only machine-gunners fighting'.⁴⁸

For 30th Division, 21 Brigade (right flank) and 90 Brigade (left flank) led the attack. Support included the division's 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, and also one company from 14th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps (the 14th Division would be attacking on the right of 30th Division). The barrage would provide cover for the attack on the railway line, the village of Reeke and the road junction there.⁴⁹ 7/Royal Irish (21 Brigade) launched its attack under the cover of an artillery barrage of smoke and HE, together with Stokes Mortars. The advance pushed on into Wervicq despite resistance in the village from enemy snipers and machine guns. With further support from artillery and mortars, the troops then moved on Hoogemotte.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

⁴⁸ Nicholson, *34th Division*.

⁴⁹ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps.

⁵⁰ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment.

The use of machine guns as part of the artillery barrage to cover infantry assaults had been a regular feature of the British Army's plan of attack throughout the latter part of 1917 and in 1918. The 'Machine Gun Barrage', with sections of heavy machine guns providing indirect fire onto enemy positions, was designed to pin down defenders while the attacking infantry advanced. The other crucial role for the heavy machine gunners was to take forward their guns in order to deploy in defensive or covering positions, consolidating the ground won by the infantry. A system for command and control was required as the battle developed and units moved forward. The orders to 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, for the attack by 21 Brigade on 14 October, included details on the allocation of gun companies to specified infantry units, arrangements for a covering barrage, instructions on the steps to be taken to secure and defend captured positions, and reporting requirements to Brigade HQ.⁵¹

As well as providing the additional firepower to resist a counter-attack by the enemy, the machine gun teams allowed the infantry the space and time to regroup and also to move onto the next objective, as required. The prescribed detail in the orders regarding timing, and the relay and receipt of information, is indicative of the 'modern' style of warfare being waged but without the benefit of a mobile system of wireless communication. In these circumstances, much was dependent on forward preparations, with pre-planned timings based on such factors as distance and terrain.

⁵¹ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, *Order No. 43. 11th October, 1918.*

The covering barrage began at 0531 hours with the synchronised attack beginning four minutes later. The line of the River Lys was 'held by the enemy in fair strength' with the main points of resistance being fortified pill boxes.⁵² For 30th Division, 1/6 Cheshires (21 Brigade) had begun to cross the Lys during the afternoon.⁵³ The smoke barrage helped the attackers to take the enemy by surprise in the drive for the Lys, engineers commencing bridging works as soon as possible.⁵⁴

XV Corps

14th Division had been transferred to the command of XV Corps, while maintaining its position along the Ypres-Comines Canal, facing the village of Comines. Its role was to take advantage of any withdrawal by enemy forces resulting from the attacks by X Corps formations to its left. In this case it was establish a bridgehead across the Lys, covering the village; linking with 30th Division on its left, with whose progress it was to keep pace.⁵⁵ At 0750 hours, with 30th Division reported to have reached Wervicq, 41 Brigade pushed forward patrols to the river. The neighbouring farms, Blanche and Lamlash, were found to be strongly defended, and there was heavy machine gun fire from Comines (with the church tower a likely observation post). Artillery fire was brought to bear on the town, the barrage including smoke. From 1215 hours the RE began putting pontoon crossings over the river at four specific points identified in the original attack orders, as well as making temporary repairs to a damaged bridge. The

⁵² TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

⁵³ TNA WO95/2328, War Diary of 21 Infantry Brigade.

⁵⁴ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 2/23rd Battalion, London Regiment.

attacking battalions, 33/London and 29/Durham Light Infantry, were each allocated two bridges. By mid-afternoon, infantry began to cross the river and orders were issued for a bridgehead to be established and for reserve units to move forward in support. However, this initial success could not be sustained. In the face of heavy enemy shelling, the 'Advanced posts East of River... were blown out of position',⁵⁶ and the bridgehead was withdrawn. Orders from division were for a crossing to be forced the following morning, with artillery support.

The early fighting in the battle shows the continuing application of flexible tactics by Second Army forces. Smoke and gas shells were again used in specific circumstances to screen the attackers. There were several instances of the successful use of Lewis guns in support of infantry units; for example, the capture by 107th Brigade, 36th Division, of a length of the *Flanders Position II* plus the railway and Mooreseele behind it. 36th Division also successfully employed cyclists and motor machine guns to outflank enemy machine gun positions west of the village of Gulleghem. 28 Brigade (29th Division) crossed the Wulfdambeek river using eight portable bridges; each battalion had 18-pounder field guns and 6-inch mortars up with the attack. 29th Division's report praised the quick thinking of 'Junior Commanders' who 'took prompt steps... to overcome opposition... when the line was checked'.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade; TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade, *Order No. 23, 13th October 1918*.

⁵⁶ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

⁵⁷ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

1/Royal Irish Rifles attacked Gulleghem but without artillery support, the attack becoming held up by the density of the wire and machine gun fire. A second attack took place at 1700 with an outflanking operation but there was a gain of only 200 yards. One section did manage to bring down a German reconnaissance plane and captured its crew.⁵⁸

The first day of the battle saw the GAF capturing over 6,000 prisoners, more than half taken by British forces. The Belgian Army, with the French XXXIV Corps operating between its Northern and Southern *Groupements*, had reached Rumbeke, Roulers and Gitsberg. Second Army captured Gheluwe and Moorselle, and was positioned to strike for Menin.⁵⁹ With the significant ground gained, the operations were a convincing success. Resistance had been limited. Private Pope (2/15th London Regiment) recalled that his unit 'stopped by a pill box to collect prisoners [who gave] no resistance.... we lighted cigarettes as we went forward.... [encountering] stranded Germans who gave themselves up after being threatened'.⁶⁰

Philpott points out that there were broader strategic gains from Second Army's advance, with the capture of enemy lateral communications along the line Roulers-Thourout-Courtrai bringing about a general retirement by German forces in Flanders.⁶¹

⁵⁸ TNA WO95/2502/3 War Diary of 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles.

⁵⁹ TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, *14 October 1918*.

⁶⁰ Private Pope, war diary.

The Second Army Commander was rightly pleased with the results:

*Please accept my congratulations and convey them to all commanders and troops engaged today on the very successful results on what had been a long and arduous day.*⁶²

15 October

This success was repeated on 15 October, with Plumer's orders urging units to consolidate the gains of the previous day, send forward patrols and to establish bridgeheads across the Lys, if possible to achieve 'without undue loss'. On the right XV Corps, employing the cover of artillery and machine guns, put temporary bridges across the Lys and established a firm bridgehead. This was a crucial move as it allowed enemy defences on the right (southern) bank of the Lys to be outflanked. To the north, II Corps in conjunction with the Belgian right wing made good progress despite encountering considerable resistance during the initial stages of the attack.

The Germans were estimated to now have twelve divisions facing the GAF with between seven and nine divisions available as reserves.⁶³ The enemy made full use of snipers and machine gun posts well dug-in behind fortified positions, including

⁶¹ W. J. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front 1914-18* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p. 159.

⁶² The message is recorded in WO95/2330, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment.

abandoned farmhouses. Enemy artillery continued to resist as the British troops advanced. 'Jerry was shelling the [Lys] bridge with heavy stuff.... He shelled every road and street....'⁶⁴

II Corps

On the left of Second Army, the Belgians attacked at 0900 hours, with a preliminary barrage opening ten minutes earlier.⁶⁵ Initial covering fire for the British advance made effective use of machine gun attachments as well as battalion Lewis guns.⁶⁶ The principal objective for II Corps was the village of Heule.

For 9th Division, 27 Brigade now took the lead, with the objectives of Hill 40 and the village of Steenbeck. 11/Royal Scots attacked the Hill but were hit by surprise fire from the direction of Laaga-Kepel Wood (north of Steenbeck) which had been reported to have been cleared of the enemy. This led to the battalion carrying out a mopping up exercise in the vicinity of the wood before resuming its assault. Despite encountering heavy wire defences the Hill was subsequently 'successfully stormed', its capture recorded at 1010 hours. Thereafter the battalion was forced to outflank Heetje in order to progress, whereupon it became pinned by the enemy's defence, concentrated around a windmill which dominated the surrounding ground. As the evening approached the German defenders appeared to recognise the danger of

⁶³ TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, *14 October 1918*; of the reserves, two divisions were assessed as 'fresh', two or three as 'moderately fresh', three or four as 'tired'.

⁶⁴ Private Pope, war diary.

⁶⁵ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

being trapped in what had become a salient and the position was evacuated. Belgian troops were now entering the area and some were persuaded to consider moving on Heetje.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, 12/Royal Scots had moved up behind its brother battalion and proceeded to attack and capture Steenbeck, under the cover of an artillery and machine gun barrage. The advance of 9th Division was initially checked west of Heule Wood but an outflanking action by 2/South Wales Borderers (87 Brigade, 29th Division) captured the wood and allowed the advance to continue.⁶⁸ At this point 27 Brigade paused to ensure contact with the Belgian and 29th Division units on its flanks. It was now looking to drive towards Harlebeke but became concerned to learn that the Belgians had been checked by a counter-attack in the vicinity of the railway line, and that 29th Division had at that time no further orders to progress; 'an obvious opportunity for the Battalion Commander to use his initiative' in the opinion of 27 Brigade. GOC 9th Division subsequently authorised the resumption of the advance, ordering the brigade to 'press on whether the others followed or not'. The cyclists and motor machine guns proved to be very effective in maintaining the pace of the advance, driving towards the river and preventing the defenders from getting a chance to reorganise. The

⁶⁶ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Narrative of Operations 13-15th October 1918*.

⁶⁷ TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

⁶⁸ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

machine guns were able to cause severe casualties amongst the troops retreating via the main road and the adjoining railway.⁶⁹

By late evening, the Belgian forces had taken Heetje and Bavichove, despite a heavy counter-attack by the Germans. Opposite the British forces, the enemy had dug itself in to retain a small bridgehead west of the Harlebeke-Courtrai road. Civilians warned that roads leading to the Lys in the vicinity of Courtrai had been mined.⁷⁰

87 Brigade took the lead for 29th Division, 88 Brigade in support. The infantry kept close touch with the barrage and made good early progress. 87 Brigade was at the outskirts of Heule by 1330 hours, whereupon it was decided to consolidate the ground gained and await the capture of the village itself by 36th Division; thus avoiding the risk of a counter-attack from that direction when the advance resumed. At 1800 hours, crossings over the Heulebeek were secured at Watermolen and Old Mill. Orders were received to drive for the Lys on the 16th.⁷¹

36th Division received morning reports that Gullegghem was believed to be taken except for some remaining enemy machine gun positions. As ordered, 1/Royal Irish Rifles had made a further attack at 0900 hours on the village, supported by a creeping barrage. The assault was a success, allowing an advance up to 1000 yards east of the village. The attack had not been without problems, heavy wire causing the

⁶⁹ TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

⁷⁰ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

troops to lose touch with the barrage after a time.⁷² 2/Royal Irish Rifles (from the same 107 Brigade) were then able to pass through their sister battalion and advance in the direction of the II Corps objective of Heule.⁷³ This village, less than a mile from the outskirts of Courtrai, was captured by units from 109 Brigade (reported to 36th Division HQ at 1515 hours).⁷⁴ Numerous prisoners were taken, from 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 181st Infantry Regiment (40th Saxon Division) and 9th Uhlan Regiment (6th Cavalry Division). British troops were now through Heule and advancing easterly towards the Courtrai-Ingelmunster railway. That evening a defensive flank was formed and further operations deferred until the following day.⁷⁵

However, overnight 107 Brigade was ordered to try and find out whether the enemy intended to make a stand on the west bank. 2/Royal Irish Rifles sent forward a patrol into Courtrai, the troops finding that the bridges across the Lys had been destroyed. The patrol appears to have acted contrary to the orders from division, most likely on the initiative of its leader Lieutenant Adams. He may have had some particular motives of his own as he was 'a native of Courtrai'.⁷⁶ The group 'failed to send back

⁷¹ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*; TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade.

⁷² TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade. The village was the target for artillery fire later that day, mainly with gas shells (TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division, *1930 hours*) - the shelling was reported to have taken place around 1730 hours.

⁷³ TNA WO95/2502/3, War Diary 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles.

⁷⁴ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

⁷⁵ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade; Falls, *36th Division*, pp. 275-6.

⁷⁶ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade; WO95/2502/4, War Diary 2nd Royal Irish Rifles.

reports of its whereabouts' and 'remained in Courtrai until involved in our own barrage, returning later with five prisoners'.⁷⁷

During the evening II Corps issued orders that the 36th and 29th Divisions, acting in co-operation with the 35th Division (XIX Corps) on their right, were to continue the attack towards the River Lys, it being a priority to seize and hold river crossings.⁷⁸

XIX Corps

For 35th Division, 105 Brigade attacked at 0900 hours, between Kloefhoek and Kappelhoek. Despite enemy machine gun fire from houses on the outskirts of Wevelghem, the units moved forward; shortly after 1000 hours posts were established on a line Wlinberg – Kloefhoek Cross Roads – Kappelhoek. During the afternoon 4/North Staffs led for the brigade, working its way forward in conjunction with 104 Brigade on its left, and troops from 41st Division on its right, protecting the southern flank of the advance. Posts were then set up east of the Wevelghem – Gullegem Road. Under cover of darkness a patrol of 15/Sherwood Foresters reached Wevelghem Church, finding no enemy soldiers. On report of this to HQ a second patrol of 4/North Staffs was sent forward; this group made its way through Wevelghem and reached the north bank of the Lys, just above the village of Lauwe.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade; WO95/2502/4, War Diary 2nd Royal Irish Rifles; Falls, *36th Division*, p. 277 refers to the choice of Lieutenant Adams not being 'altogether an advantage, for he made an investigation so thorough that he was not back till the following morning...'

⁷⁸ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division, *1930 hours*.

106 Brigade received orders to pass through 104 and 105 Brigades, then to attack and secure the 'high ground commanding the Bridge head crossing the Lys opposite the village of Marcke'. A conference of unit commanders together with their opposite numbers from the artillery was held late that evening, and zero hour was agreed as 0530 hours the following morning.⁸⁰

The initial attack by 41st Division was also impeded by machine gun fire from Wevelghem, striking the left flank of the British troops. The pace of the advance was maintained nonetheless and the west bank of the Lys was duly reached. A line was consolidated from there, through the northern outskirts of Wevelghem, and along the Wevelghem-Gulleghem road. That night the Division was relieved by troops of 101 Brigade (34th Division, X Corps) and its units moved north, taking up positions west of Courtrai.⁸¹

X Corps

After the successes on day one, the troops of 34th Division completed the occupation of Menin. Their orders were then to strike for a line from Le Malplaquet, south and east of Halluin, to Le Cornet. In the face of strong resistance, patrols fought their way across the Marathon and Mongrel bridges over the River Lys where they succeeded

⁷⁹ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

⁸⁰ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade.

⁸¹ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 13th 1918*.

in creating two bridgeheads. Both of these positions were under threat but the soldiers 'managed to hang on' until relief forces from 30th Division arrived.⁸²

On the left flank of the Division, as mentioned above, 101 Brigade had moved north to take over positions previously held by units of 41st Division.⁸³ During these manoeuvres the brigade also carried out the clearing of the village of Wevelghem, establishing jumping off points from which to make a crossing of the Lys on the following day.⁸⁴

202 Field Company, Royal Engineers (30th Division), was ordered to reconnoitre and repair the bridges over the canal section of the River Lys between Wervicq and Comines, and to put two foot bridges in place for the infantry.⁸⁵

For 30th Division, 21 Brigade led by 7/Royal Irish continued to press forward.⁸⁶ By the morning the battalion had established positions along the northern bank of the Lys.⁸⁷ Later that day, south of Wervicq, 1/6 Cheshires managed to force a passage across,⁸⁸ aided by the success of 14th Division on its right which had secured a

⁸² TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*;

TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, *Order No. 46. 15th October, 1918*.

⁸³ TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Infantry Brigade: the Brigade relieved 124 Brigade of 41st Division on the line of the River Lys at Ruddy Farm.

⁸⁴ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

⁸⁵ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 202 Field Company, Royal Engineers (30th Division).

⁸⁶ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, *Order No. 46. 15th October, 1918*: 'The enemy are retreating. The 30th Division will advance and maintain touch with the enemy'.

⁸⁷ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment.

⁸⁸ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 1/6th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment.

crossing to the south west. Approaching midnight, the engineers succeeded in putting a pontoon bridge in place despite regular shelling by the enemy.⁸⁹

90 Brigade was ordered to cross the Lys between Bousbecque (where the bridges were reported to be burning) and (Le) Malplaquet. Advancing to the high ground above, fighting patrols were then to push forward and maintain close contact with the enemy. One company from 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps would provide support as required.⁹⁰ 2/15 London Regiment was initially ordered to cross at Bousbecque. In practice, 'A' Company of the battalion crossed via Wervicq and established a bridgehead which was subsequently reinforced by 'C' Company.⁹¹

XV Corps

14th Division had forced a crossing of the River Lys south west of Wervicq through 41 Brigade, after the latter had launched a further assault at dawn and met little opposition. The first troops across were then able to outflank the remaining German defenders on the facing east bank. More worrying was the loss of touch with neighbouring units on both flanks, which were yet to cross. It was 1600 hours before contact was re-established and the line running along the Wervicq-Comines road, and the railway line south of Comines, secured. 'The mopping up of Comines was

⁸⁹ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

⁹⁰ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, *Order No. 46. 15th October, 1918.*

⁹¹ TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/15th London Regiment.

completed'.⁹² 42 Brigade moved up into line at Comines, with 41 Brigade withdrawn into reserve.⁹³

On the Army's right, 40th Division operated under orders for 'further objectives for the pursuit and harassing of the enemy in the event of his withdrawal', whilst maintaining touch on its right with 59th Division at the junction of the two British Armies.⁹⁴

As the battle progressed, the heaviest fighting involved those formations in the northern half of Second Army, in and around Courtrai. To the south, the main task for XV Corps was to continue the advance of its units eastwards across the Lys and towards Tourcoing and Roubaix, looking to wheel the right wing of the Army into a north-south alignment with its left flank and the coalition forces to the north. The corps was looking to try and take advantage of the pressure on the enemy further north so that the movement of its own units could be carried out with the minimum of casualties. The sequence of daily orders issued by 92 Brigade (31st Division) illustrate the nature of the drive towards and across the Roubaix canal,⁹⁵ rotating units into and back from the front line or vanguard of the attack in order to maintain the momentum of the advance. The logistics of these operations placed a heavy workload upon staff and support services in ensuring the regular flow of daily supplies for the leading troops. In addition, billeting arrangements were required for those soldiers in support or reserve.

⁹² TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

⁹³ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade.

⁹⁴ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

As 9th Division on the left flank of the Army blasted its way through a couple of miles of German defences, the units of 40th Division were about to begin an advance of over 15 miles to bring about the north-south configuration of the Second Army front. Moving across more open country, these forces had to remain constantly vigilant for pockets of enemy resistance. Second Army was across the Lys near Comines, though the latter was yet to be taken. Wervicq and Kloethock ridge had been captured; Menin was poised to fall. Reports suggested that the enemy intended to evacuate Lille – all civilians would be left behind except males of military age.⁹⁶

On 15 October the German Fourth Army commander Crown Prince Rupprecht ordered a general retirement to prepared positions east of Thourout-Roulers and south to Menin.⁹⁷ (This ground was in fact already held by the allies).

The progress made by French forces in the north was disappointing (see **Map 6A**). Their advance of 4 kilometres compared poorly with the 10 kilometres achieved by the Belgian Southern Groupement and II Corps.⁹⁸ Foch became unhappy with this

⁹⁵ 90 Infantry Brigade Orders 302-8, issued over the period 12-18 October 1918. The orders are attached as appendices to TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade, *October 1918*.

⁹⁶ TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, *15 October 1918*.

⁹⁷ M. Schwarte (ed.), *Der Deutsche Landkrieg* (Leipzig: Barth) – quoted in the *Official History* as ‘A well-known and reliable general history of the War’. The same source attributes the British Army successes to the overwhelming numbers of the attackers and to the use of tanks – while Second Army outnumbered the German defenders (though it is not clear that the difference was ‘overwhelming’) it did not enjoy the benefit of tank support.

⁹⁸ In his 1922 account, G.A.B. Dewar makes reference to a new term in British military language, to ‘Deb’: this was based on the supposed actions of French General Debeney’s on the right of British Fourth Army during the Battle of Amiens; Dewar defines the term by its user intending ‘to remain quiescent for a while, till advance on his front had been made easier by the progress of his neighbours’ (Dewar, *Haig’s Command Vol. II*, p. 332). The implication is that the French forces interposed between the Belgian Army on British Second Army’s left, were content to ‘Deb’ during the Battle of Courtrai. Dewar explains the French actions by the desire to ‘preserve a

situation and subsequently arranged for a regrouping of French forces to create a French Sixth Army under General de Boissoudy. On 19 October this took over the line held by the Belgian Southern Groupement, adjoining II Corps of Second Army.

David Stevenson summarises the position in the Battle of Courtrai by 15 October as follows:

[The GAF forces] were advancing faster than expected and threatening the Germans on the Flanders coast, who had the greatest distance to retreat if the Western Front became untenable. The local commanders feared being cut off and for two weeks Ludendorff had rejected their requests to pull back, but now their position became critical and on the 15th [October] the OHL authorised a general withdrawal.⁹⁹

16 October

The full impact on ground operations of Plumer's modified orders of 11 October would now become evident. II, X and XIX Corps were to cross the Lys and establish bridgeheads on the south side. XV Corps was already across and so the Army's left pivoted on Bousbecque to allow the right wing to swing around and undertake an advance of over five miles. By the close of the day the four Divisions on the right of Second Army (40th, 31st, and 14th of XV Corps and 30th of X Corps) held a line across

powerful French Army to give weight to French counsels in the peace negotiations', which was justified by 'the incomparable exertions and sacrifices of the French Army and nation in the early years of the war'.

the Lys up to Bousbecque. The remainder of the army rested on the north bank of the river.

II Corps

From 16 October onwards the heavy howitzers and long-range guns of II Corps engaged targets south of the Lys. Harassing fire was carried out together with the bombardment of targets selected by the infantry. The artillery of the other corps moved forward as conditions permitted, crossing the Lys as soon as appropriate bridging was in place. Overnight, 29th Division had consolidated a line in the centre of the II Corps front, holding Cuerne and Watermolen.¹⁰⁰

The 9th Division continued to keep pace with the Belgians on the left of the Army, with arrangements in hand to cross the Lys. By lunchtime, the division was reporting that patrols had crossed the Lys at Menin, Wervicq and Comines. The Belgians were now in possession of the southern side of the Roulers-Lys Canal. By early evening their forces were reporting the retirement of enemy artillery from Harlebeke in the direction of Deerlyck and Vichte.¹⁰¹ In front of 27 Brigade, during the night a team of Royal Engineers had put two bridges across the Lys, but being placed very close together a German shell destroyed both. Despite this, three companies of 6/KOSB made a crossing that evening and attacked the Courtrai Road. This was successful but a subsequent attempt to work round Harlebeke was rebuffed. Accordingly a bridgehead

⁹⁹ Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 165.

¹⁰⁰ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

was formed on the road with flanks secured on the loop of the river. The enemy made a limited attempt to take out the position but was easily beaten off.¹⁰²

Advance units of 29th Division kept pace with neighbouring forces to reach the Lys; otherwise the day was focused upon the preparation of crossing points. In response to a request from 9th Division for support in holding its initial bridgehead, that night 88 Brigade sent two platoons of 2/Hampshires across the river. A further bridging attempt was made to provide an alternative line of retreat but was stopped by heavy enemy machine gun fire.¹⁰³

By early morning the advance troops of 36th Division had reached Courtrai and the west bank of the Lys, finding many civilians still living there.¹⁰⁴ Bridges across the river were found to be blown and so arrangements proceeded for the putting down of pontoon crossings, under the cover of a smoke screen. The objective remained that of clearing Courtrai of the enemy and establishing bridgeheads across the Lys, beyond the town. That afternoon, 60 men of 108 Brigade were reported to have established an initial position on the east bank but their bridge was subsequently destroyed by enemy artillery fire; fierce enemy counter-attacks led to them

¹⁰¹ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁰² TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

¹⁰³ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade; TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

¹⁰⁴ *There were scenes of great enthusiasm among the citizens, who came forth from their cellars to greet the troops: Falls, 36th Division*, pp. 277-9; however this was no easy victory and his account continues: *But the Germans were not far off. As the first British troops appeared on the quays of the Lys, here eighty feet wide, heavy machine-gun fire burst out all across the opposite bank.*

subsequently being withdrawn by ferry.¹⁰⁵ There was another reason for the withdrawal: rather than a direct assault on Courtrai, the city would be outflanked to the north and a drive made to the Scheldt – thereby making it untenable for the Germans to continue to hold the industrial cities to the south. In these circumstances there was no value in fighting to retain a bridgehead without a bridge.¹⁰⁶

XIX Corps

At 0530 hours 106 Brigade moved through its companion brigades in 35th Division and attacked the enemy to the front. The Germans were overrun and the brigade advanced down to the River Lys, east of Wevelghem. Units from 104 and 105 Brigades were pulled back to secure the area west of the Menin-Roulers railway. 41st Division was deployed to relieve 36th Division.¹⁰⁷

X Corps

After the capture and clearing of Wevelghem, 101 Brigade of 34th Division crossed the Lys between Halluin and Marcke, successfully establishing advance posts.¹⁰⁸

For 30th Division, in the early hours 'A' Company of 2/15 London Regiment (90 Brigade) crossed the Lys via a destroyed bridge and moved into Bousbecque. In

¹⁰⁵ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

¹⁰⁶ Falls, *36th Division*, p. 278.

¹⁰⁷ TNA WO95/2470/1, 35th Division.

¹⁰⁸ TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Infantry Brigade.

response the German artillery fired on the village, the bombardment including gas shells. Later on the division received orders to adjust its line northwards during the evening, to take over a portion of line from 34th Division.¹⁰⁹

Arrangements were already underway to improve the transport infrastructure in support of the advance. For the next few days 6/South Wales Borderers (Pioneers) worked on repairing the approaches to Menin and then on the neighbouring bridges.¹¹⁰

XV Corps

The priority for XV Corps was to cross the Lys, with 40th Division ordered to sustain forward pressure on a retreating enemy.¹¹¹

Information from prisoners together with observed evidence, suggested that the Germans were looking to undertake a planned withdrawal to the Schelde. Despite encountering strong covering detachments of artillery, machine guns and small arms, British forces maintained their pursuit. German Fourth Army had been instructed to retire on the prepared *Hermann Position* (running from Ghent, through Tournai and Conde, east of Le Cateau). However, this line would be broken on the following day, by the British Fourth Army operating south of Flanders.

¹⁰⁹ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, *Order No. 46. 15th October, 1918.*

¹¹⁰ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 6th Battalion, South Wales Borderers (Pioneers).

¹¹¹ *All indications point to the enemy carrying out an early withdrawal in front of 40th Division...*

For Second Army the day had brought the clearing of the north bank of the Lys up to Halebeke. Intelligence assessments concluded that the enemy had brought up seven divisions from its reserves to reinforce the GAF battlefield, giving a total of 17 German divisions engaged since the Battle began. It was believed that five divisions were still held in reserve in the Courtrai and Lille areas; but north of Courtrai, all enemy divisions had been committed.¹¹²

On 16 October, reflecting his own unhappiness with the limited progress of the French forces,¹¹³ King Albert issued orders (reaching Plumer on 17 October) which altered the responsibilities of Second Army within the Army Group. The British force would no longer retain its original designation as the flank guard (not that Plumer had shown himself restricted to that role). XV and X Corps were to push eastwards, south of the Lys; XIX and II Corps were to consolidate their positions and then to clear the enemy from the vicinity of the Lys and Courtrai. The Official History states that 'General Plumer again ignored the orders of the GAF.... [directing] XV and X Corps to advance to the Tournai-Courtrai railway.... XIX and II Corps to make all preparations to cross the Lys when the situation demanded'.¹¹⁴

The 40th Division will be ready to advance... and will vigorously press the retreating enemy: TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Warning Order No. 229*.

¹¹² TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, *16 October 1918*.

¹¹³ For example, '... the French in Flanders in October did little more than shadow the retreating enemy, leaving the fighting to their allies': Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 274, reference Edmonds, *Official History Vol. IV*, pp. 114-5, *Vol. V*, pp. 281, 584.

¹¹⁴ Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*.

17 October

The Second Army Intelligence Summary reported that naval forces had landed at Ostend and occupied the town. British Fifth Army was entering Lille. Reports indicated that the Germans were attempting a planned withdrawal to the Scheldt, including delaying positions along the Lys and the Courtrai-Bossuyt Canal.¹¹⁵

II Corps

II Corps and XIX Corps received orders to both consolidate the current positions and to prepare for river crossings.¹¹⁶ Overnight there was fierce fighting as 9th Division struggled to retain its hold on the bridgehead across the Lys, just south-east of the village of Cuerne.¹¹⁷ In the early hours, troops from 2/Hampshires (88 Brigade, 29th Division) had crossed the river to secure the right flank of 27 Brigade. The British advance forces faced strong enemy shelling followed by a determined counter-attack at 0510 hours which caused some initial withdrawal; however a bayonet charge managed to recover the ground.

During the early morning there were concerns regarding supplies for the troops on the east bank; the damaged bridges were preventing the delivery of fresh ammunition across the river. At 0830 hours arrangements were made to carry out the planned

¹¹⁵ TNA WO157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, *17 October 1918*; it was now estimated that up to 19 enemy divisions in total had been deployed against the GAF.

¹¹⁶ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, *1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919*, Order No. 44, 17 October 1918.

supply drop from the air for advance troops. Aeroplanes of the RAF subsequently dropped ammunition and rations in order to sustain the bridgeheads. While there were no engineers available to repair the bridges, infantry continued to manage to cross the river by making use of the remaining wreckage. On the right, 29th Division succeeded in clearing the enemy from a farm which had been holding up the advance. However at 1630 hours, the advance troops holding the bridgehead had faced a strong enemy counter-attack supported by an artillery bombardment. Though the attack was repulsed it was decided to withdraw the troops temporarily given that no support could be delivered until secure bridges were in place. During the course of the evening the division's engineers successfully constructed six bridges.¹¹⁸

36th Division was ordered to transfer north and to relieve the 3rd Belgian Division in the front line; this would mean it taking over the left flank of Second Army, and to be responsible for leading the drive by the Army to cross the Lys, while acting in conjunction with French forces to its left. The Belgian Army would then concentrate on clearing the coast as far as the Dutch border. II Corps orders were for efforts to establish bridgeheads to be put on hold pending the identification of suitable crossing points and the putting down of appropriate bridging materials.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

¹¹⁸ TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*; TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

XIX Corps

41st Division was ordered to consolidate its position, clearing any remaining enemy from the vicinity of the River Lys and Courtrai. While preparations were to be made for bridging the river, no attempt should be made to cross while opposition was in situ.¹²⁰

X Corps

Army Order 44 instructed XV Corps to maintain the drive eastwards, supported by X Corps.¹²¹

102 and 103 Brigades (who had led the attack by 34th Division on the opening day of the battle) were withdrawn into reserve and support respectively.¹²² 101 Brigade maintained the division's advance eastwards, troops of 2/Loyal North Lancs crossing the Lys at Ruddy farm. The brigade subsequently captured a series of villages between 16-19 October: Lauwe, Knocke, Rollegem and Belleghem.¹²³

At this point in the battle, to improve the effectiveness of combined arms tactics, 30th Division took the initiative in reforming its different arms into what were described as 'Brigade Groups' named for the Brigade commander:

¹¹⁹ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

¹²⁰ TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

¹²¹ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, *1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919*, Order No. 44, 17 October 1918.

89 Brigade *Currie's Group*

90 Brigade *Stevens' Group*

21 Brigade *Goodman's Group*.¹²⁴

These formations brought together infantry and units from other specialist services under a unified command structure, in what would later be described as a 'battlegroup' formation. In common with its companions, the order of battle for the *Stevens' Group* comprised:

Brigade HQ

1 x Infantry Battalion (2/14 London Regiment)

1 x Infantry Battalion (2/15 London Regiment)

1 x Infantry Battalion (2/16 London Regiment)

1x Light Trench Mortar Battery

1 x Brigade, Royal Field Artillery:

(including 1 x Section, Divisional Ammunition Column;

1x Trench Mortar Battery)

2 x Companies, 30th Machine Gun Battalion

1 x Section, Royal Engineers

¹²² TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

¹²³ TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Infantry Brigade.

- 1 x Cable laying Signal Section, Royal Engineers
- 1 x Field Ambulance Unit
- 1 x Company, 30th Divisional Train ASC
- 1 x Section, Cyclists¹²⁵

This combined arms formation was intended to facilitate the pursuit of the enemy. It allowed the brigade commander to have the immediate control of specialist weapons and support services, able to issue orders and direct deployment; encouraging a flexible approach to the challenges of the different forms of enemy resistance. This system represents a formalising of the variety of combined arms arrangements which Second Army formations had used during the campaign. The attack orders delineate the particular responsibilities of the infantry commanders and the commanders of the support units, and how these commands would interrelate as the assault progressed.

The commander of 30th Division, Major-General W Williams, would appear to have been looking for an improvement in the pace of the advance, believing that his troops had been slow to adapt to the mobile warfare now taking place.¹²⁶ Williams was looking for the more effective use of fire support units in suppressing or taking out enemy positions.

¹²⁴ TNA WO95/2332, War Diary of 89 Infantry Brigade.

¹²⁵ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade, listed in entry for *19 October 1918*, 'The Brigade Group now consisted of...'

¹²⁶ This is demonstrated by a subsequent message from Williams to his troops. An entry on 20 October in the war diary of 90 Brigade records: *The Div, Commander considered that hitherto our advances had been too slow. This appeared to be due to the excess of caution exercised by Battalions in advancing, a relic of trench warfare. Also*

It was reported in the early hours that the enemy was retreating and therefore British efforts to cross the Lys were increased. Some troops of 90 Brigade/Stevens' Group used rafts made from duckboards, able to carry two or three men, in order to ferry themselves across the water. 2/15 London Regiment crossed at Bousbecque, 2/16 London Regiment at Menin, using pontoon bridges. During the day the soldiers encountered civilians from neighbouring villages that the enemy had evacuated, such as Turcoing and Roncq. As the advance brigade group for the division, the troops held the line Roncq-Mont D'Halluin-Reckem (with 34th Division on the left and 31st Division on the right).¹²⁷

XV Corps

Having moved up into line two days previously, 42 Brigade now led the advance by 14th Division. Units of 40th Division moved forward across the Quesnoy railway line with patrols entering Wambrechies; it was necessary to erect a footbridge as 'All bridges across [the Canal] between Quesnoy and Wambrechies had been destroyed by the enemy'.¹²⁸

Between 16-19 October (as shown in **Map 7**), units along the Second Army line crossed the Lys despite the resistance from German covering forces. Considerable use was made of deploying field guns in advanced positions in order to neutralise or

artillery and M.G. support was not made use of to the best advantage, in order to overcome quickly such resistance as we experienced. TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

¹²⁷ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade; WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/14th Battalion, London Regiment.

take out enemy machine gun positions. Where daylight crossings were deemed too dangerous then an offensive was launched under cover of darkness. The variations in the depth and breadth of the Lys meant that a variety of bridging arrangements were used including rafts, a barrel bridge, and pontoon bridges. X Corps formations crossed on 17 October, clearing the southern bank from Bousbecque up to Lauwe.

202 Field Company, Royal Engineers (30th Division) was deployed to construct a bridge across the Lys at Halluin. Later in the day, once the enemy had been cleared from the opposite bank, a barrel tier bridge (for infantry crossing in single file) was constructed.¹²⁹

18 October

II Corps

26 Brigade (9th Division) ordered 7/Seaforth Highlanders to reconnoitre the Lys Canal to ascertain the most suitable places for bridging as well as the best positions from which to deliver covering fire for a crossing. The battalion was also to try and identify enemy strong points which would require attention from the artillery.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Brigade; TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

¹²⁹ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 202 Field Company, Royal Engineers (30th Division).

¹³⁰ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

At dusk, 5/Cameron Highlanders (26 Brigade) moved into the line at Bavichove, relieving 3 Battalion, 9th Belgian Regiment.¹³¹

Overnight, 88 Brigade (29th Division) looked to put a patrol of 2/Hampshires across the river to probe for enemy defences. Signs of enemy retirement would be the signal for further units to cross the river. In the event, heavy machine gun fire made the use of pontoons deemed to be impossible and the action was postponed.

The 36th Division completed its relief of the 11th Belgian Infantry Regiment (3rd Belgian Division), east of Hulste.¹³² The intention now was to put bridges across the Lys on the following day. The French would not be ready to cross until 20 October at the earliest, but Second Army considered the importance of driving beyond the river to be paramount.¹³³

XIX Corps

News was now filtering through of military successes elsewhere on the GAF Front:

*Troops much elated by the news of the capture of LILLE and BRUGES and the landing at OSTEND.*¹³⁴

¹³¹ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

¹³² TNA WO95/2509, War Diary of 109 Infantry Brigade.

¹³³ Falls, *36th Division*, p. 281.

¹³⁴ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

Such reports boosted morale, encouraging the British soldiers to maintain their pressure on the enemy.

That same day, preparations were in hand to renew the advance, with 35th Division HQ in conference with unit commanders to plan an attack to capture Marcke, south of Courtrai. For 41st Division, the planned crossing of the Lys was postponed for 24 hours; 123 Brigade was to push patrols across the river if an opportunity arose. The division's diary records heavy enemy shelling, including gas, of Courtrai, Heule and surrounding roads.¹³⁵

X Corps and XV Corps

101 Brigade (34th Division) continued its successful progress eastwards, liberating the village of Knocke. The brigade's CO, Brigadier-General Woodstock, took part in a successful victory parade into Lauwe, meeting an 'enthusiastic reception by liberated civilians'.¹³⁶

43 Brigade (14th Division) had assumed the advance role from 42 Brigade. With 10/Highland Light Infantry as the lead battalion, it successfully attacked the railway at Mouscron and pushed on through the village.¹³⁷ Advance guards of 31st Division were moving beyond the line Roncq – Croix Blanche.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

¹³⁶ TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Infantry Brigade.

¹³⁷ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade.

¹³⁸ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade.

40th Division continued to harry the retreating German forces,¹³⁹ recording later that day 'Roubaix was evacuated by the enemy and entered by our troops'.¹⁴⁰

18 October saw Second Army extend its left flank northwards, relieving part of the Belgian line. The leftwards wheel of Second Army continued, bringing British forces to the south of Courtrai. Advance guards went forward, probing the defences and making use of cycles for transport. On 19 October Courtrai was taken. In fact it was 'regained' as an advance unit of the 9/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (36th Division) had entered the town two days previously but been forced to retire due to enemy gun-fire. That night II Corps finally forced a crossing of the Lys and by the first light of 20 October, the whole of Second Army was across, or moving forward in support.

The pace and extent of the advance placed a strain upon communications; signals teams were responsible for ensuring that contact could be maintained between unit headquarters and the forward troops; to allow progress to be monitored and for appropriate support to be provided. In addition to disruption from the enemy there remained the potential for the weather and the terrain to cause significant problems. Formations continued to adopt a wide range of methods for communication, no doubt

¹³⁹ *Enemy withdrawing Eastwards through ROUBAIX and TOURCOING. 40th Division is to continue to advance. 120th Infantry Brigade will be about WAMBRECHIES by 12.00 hours 18th inst.:* TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁴⁰ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

working on a 'belt and braces' approach – at least one of the methods tried at any particular time would make the necessary connection.¹⁴¹

The advantage of wireless in comparison to wire communications (telephone and telegraph) in terms of reliability was notable, but the size of the necessary equipment and its related lack of mobility meant it could only normally be used for contact between headquarters at brigade level and above. Although there was concern at the amount of work involved in maintaining telephone links, a more positive view was taken at brigade level. 90 Brigade recorded that 'the new practice' of the laying of phone lines from battalions to brigade as the advance proceeded had been a success.¹⁴² Given the problems of enemy shelling and poor road connections, the most successful methods identified were often those used on battlefields in previous centuries: the carrier pigeon and the horse mounted despatch rider. This is a very vivid demonstration of how the attempts to come to terms with the immense developments in firepower and the technology of warfare were constantly frustrated by the lack of an effective, secure and mobile form of battlefield communications. Given all the circumstances, perhaps there should be appreciation for the amount of communication that did actually take place during fighting, whilst recognising the

¹⁴¹ For an example see TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 30th Divisional Signals Company, ... *notes on operations during the period 11th to 21st [October]*. The methods employed included telephonic and telegraphic (...communication was never lost to the Brigades, but great difficulty was experienced in maintaining the lines, which were very frequently cut. It was necessary at times to have as many as six lines to ensure communication at all); wireless (...used with success. Over 100 messages were sent during operations); pigeons (...again used with great success. As on previous occasions, the first message to arrive from the front line after the attack had been launched was by Carrier Pigeon); visual (Four stations comprising the visual system were manned during the whole period of operations, but were never used); runners (...The state of the trenches... made great delay in this service); despatch riders (The roads were entirely impassable for motor cyclists, and Horse Despatch Riders had invariably to be used...).

¹⁴² TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade, 20 October 1918.

limitations placed on offensive operations by the urgent need for an improved technology.

Efforts continued to put effective transport arrangements into place and move resources and supplies forward in support of the front line troops. Effective staff support was important. The pace of the advance allied to the poor roads and shelled terrain was causing problems. 41 Brigade noted:

*Owing to congestion of roads and bad traffic control over bridges transport of units seriously delayed.*¹⁴³

As a consequence of further German withdrawals to the north, the French and Belgians were able to accelerate their advance. On 17 October the Belgians had entered Ostend. Two days later they were in Zeebrugge and Bruges.

19 October

II Corps

Original orders called for advance units to force a crossing of the River Lys during the night of 19/20 October. Towards midnight, troops crossed the Lys via the pontoon bridges ('barrel raft' and 'barrel pier' constructions), with very light casualties overall. 5/Cameron Highlanders (26 Brigade, 9th Division) crossed at 2300 hours, establishing

an initial bridgehead extending 250 yards east of the river; then moving 500 yards east of Harlebeke.¹⁴⁴ For 29th Division, 88 Brigade began ferrying men across the river from 1800 hours, via rafts and pontoons. Once a crossing of the river was forced then the division was to aim for the village of St. Louis and ultimately for the River Escaut. By 0130 hours, 2/Hampshires had successfully secured the Harlebeke-Courtrai Road east of the River, which was to be used as the assembly position for a new attack.¹⁴⁵

At 2330 hours, 36th Division HQ recorded that two of its battalions from 109 Brigade were now across the Lys. 9/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers plus a unit of three machine guns was the first, working its way beyond the river and halting in front of Beveren (held by German machine gun teams), 400 yards east of the Courtrai-Ghent road. 1/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers then crossed to its left, securing the left flank and pushing north-east. In turn the troops attacked the four small villages of Desselghem, Spriete, Straete and Dries, capturing the first three before consolidating on the edge of the latter.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁴⁴ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

¹⁴⁵ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *86th Infantry Brigade Order No. 280, October 19th 1918*; TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade; TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

¹⁴⁶ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division; TNA WO95/2509, War Diary of 109 Infantry Brigade; Falls, *36th Division*, pp. 281-4. Falls describes how the 'greatest difficulty' of the 'operation of bringing [1/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers] across [the Lys], forming it up and attacking north-eastward, at right angles to the line of

XIX Corps

35th Division delivered its planned attack across the Lys, capturing Marcke, with over 1,000 civilians 'released' as a consequence of the advance.¹⁴⁷ Around midday, two companies from 123 Brigade (41st Division) crossed the river, seeking to maintain touch with 35th Division, and subsequently reached Courtrai Railway Station; during the rest of the day the brigade deployed in strength along the railway line and the canal.

That afternoon, planning took place to prepare for a new operation on the following day, attacking in the direction of Sweveghem (three miles east of Courtrai). XIX Corps set the final objectives as the River Scheldt between Bossuyt and Avelghem.

X Corps

There was fierce fighting for Belleghem as 101 Brigade struggled to secure the village in the face of determined resistance. The turning point was the capture by two companies from 2/Loyal North Lincs of a farm on the northern edge. This threatened to outflank the Germans, whereupon the defence of the village ceased quickly; by

attack of the 9th Inniskillings, of supporting the new attack by barrage fire... owing to good staff work, intelligent local leadership, and the dash of the private soldier, was carried through without a hitch'.

¹⁴⁷ TNA WO95/2483, War Diary of 104 Infantry Brigade.

2300 hours, the Battalion had cleared the village and reached the Courtrai road.¹⁴⁸

34th Division was now ordered to withdraw into reserve positions.¹⁴⁹

30th Division, its attacking formations continuing to be organised into brigade groups, maintained its drive for the line linking the hamlets of Belleghem and Ruddervoorde.

The opposing German forces 'appeared determined to hold up our advance' and enemy shellfire 'indicated that he intended to hold the line of L'ESCAUT RIVER'.¹⁵⁰

That night 90 Brigade HQ issued orders for 2/14 London Regiment ('London Scottish') to continue to press forward on 20 October in order to reach the objective; the river would have to be attacked and taken by force.¹⁵¹

It had been decided to try replacing the field gun section attached to the forward battalion, with a mobile 4.5 inch howitzer. This was subsequently judged to have 'achieved good results'.¹⁵² The expectations of London Scottish remained high,¹⁵³ and the battalion did not disappoint, securing the final objective of the L'Escaut River by just after midnight.

¹⁴⁸ TNA WO95/2456, War Diary of 101 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁴⁹ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

¹⁵⁰ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁵¹ *The London Scottish had now been fighting for some days, and were rather tired, but in excellent spirits. The Brigadier considered them fit to continue the advance: TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade. The Diary also records the praise afforded to London Scottish by Division (... congratulate MAJOR WHYTE and all ranks of the London Scottish on the rapidity with which they reached their objective today and for the skilful way in which they fought forward...) and the Brigadier-General (... would also like to add his appreciation of the fine work done by the London Scottish during 10 days of hard fighting under the most difficult of conditions and wishes you all success in your advance to the final objective tonight... The Bde. has not yet failed to take all objectives allotted to it in this advance, and the Brigadier feels confident that the upholding of this reputation is safe in your keeping tonight...).*

¹⁵² TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁵³ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

XV Corps

The advance troops of XV Corps were now in the vicinity of Heeseaux and Wattrelos, and the canal east of Roubaix, seeking to push further east towards Dottignies and Leers Nord.¹⁵⁴ A realignment took place as 40th Division was withdrawn and the 31st extended its line to the right to make touch with 59th Division.

19 October also saw a General Directive from Foch, instructing the GAF to advance in the general direction of Brussels. In response, Albert issued further orders for the GAF to move speedily to cross the Lys and the Deynze-Ecloo canal, thus denying the Germans the time to organise resistance. If resistance was encountered then 'the principal part in dislodging him would fall to the British Second Army'. This recognised that the success of the Army in already crossing the Lys put it in the position to rapidly 'advance towards the Schelde',¹⁵⁵ allowing French and Belgian forces to the north to cross the Lys and advance over the open ground ahead.

Victory in the Battle of Courtrai had wider strategic implications of benefit to all the allied forces. Stevenson points out the consequences of the enemy's decision to undertake a withdrawal from the coast:

¹⁵⁴ TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁵⁵ Quoted from: Edmonds *Official History Vol. V*.

The allies could now push up to the Dutch border, overrunning the Bruges/Ostend/Zeebrugge triangle and the bases for the Flanders U-boat force, which was recalled. Defeat on land therefore also weakened the Germans at sea, and limited their scope for falling back on submarine warfare to compensate for failure on land. The withdrawal also meant that the Allies had outflanked the Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing manufacturing complex, which the British had occupied on 17 October, and which Ludendorff had previously intended to hold [for bargaining purposes]... [the Germans thus] yielded crucial bargaining cards.¹⁵⁶

The Battle of Courtrai was now officially at an end but Second Army's advance to liberate Flanders was not.

¹⁵⁶ Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 165; reference Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*, p. 293.

Chapter Six

Second Army Operations 20 October – 11 November

War of Movement: From the Lys to the Schelde

They were all ready and prepared to take the offensive

As we passed through and out we saw our guns so comprehensive.

Firing, roaring, spitting shells just like a hurricane

And then we knew, we had the men, the guns we'd sought in vain...

.... We were soon on the move again, this time we were excited

For we were chasing him over hill and dale, the Aisne and into Belgium...¹

The area for the final stage of the advance by British Second Army was in essence a ridge from which there were many spurs or smaller ridges. Agricultural land populated with numerous farms and cottages, it was divided in two by the Bossuyt-Courtrai canal running south-east to north-west. Marshy land lay to the north but the whole area, due to heavy rainfall, was difficult going. To assist the advance of the infantry 'a

¹ An extract from *Ode to the 11th Battalion, East Yorkshire Regiment 1914-1918* (92 Brigade, 31st Division, XV Corps, British Second Army) by Henry Barratt Reynolds, Corporal, number 11/234, age 78 (1971); located

Brigade of Field Artillery [was] included in each Infantry Brigade Group...’ in order to deliver ‘close and immediate Artillery support to our advancing infantry and to prevent checks’.² Specific arrangements were also put in place for division HQ to be informed of enemy gun positions so that heavy artillery fire could be called up. There were special instructions issued which reflected that ‘the fighting of the last few days has become more mobile than has hitherto been the case and is now practically open warfare’.³

Transport and supply remained a constant challenge. One example of the competing priorities was the Deputy Director Supply & Transport complaining on 30 October that the GOC Heavy Artillery has retained all lorries for siege guns only - ‘this scheme is wrong in mobile warfare’.⁴

During this period there were further reports of the enemy withdrawing. XV Corps issued orders which stressed the importance of advance units continuing to push forward. Mounted troops deployed ahead of the infantry would be able to reconnoitre enemy movement and dispositions.⁵

Work was continuing along the Lys on the repair and construction of bridges. From 19-21 October, 202 Field Company, Royal Engineers (30th Division) concentrated on

alongside War Diary papers of 11th Battalion, East Yorkshires (Prince Of Wales’ Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum, York).

² Nicholson, *private papers* (IWM); the arrangements are described in *Training Leaflet No 5: The Action of Artillery in Close Support of Assaulting Battalions*.

³ Nicholson, *private papers* (IWM) - taken from *Field Service Regulations Part I*.

⁴ TNA WO95/292, Deputy Director Supply & Transport, Daily Visits and Inspections.

⁵ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade, *Brigade Order No. 45*.

the construction of a super heavy pontoon bridge, capable of taking larger transport and artillery.⁶

The front line troops were increasingly weary from the exertions of the previous week's fighting. On 20 October, the diary of 7/Seaforth Highlanders (26 Brigade, 9th Division) made reference to the 'tired condition of the troops' and representations were made to delay a further push forward.⁷ Some units had been in almost constant action for a sustained period. That same day, 90 Brigade (30th Division) recorded:

*The Bde. had now been in action practically continuously since Aug. 15th, fighting almost the whole time and during that period had carried the 30th Division forward a distance of over 28 miles as the crow flies.*⁸

The flu epidemic was also making its presence known. Two days later the same brigade noted that 'A considerable number of cases of the prevalent Influenza began to occur in the Brigade'. On a more positive note, on 24 October all three Battalions 'received drafts, the first for a very long time'.⁹

Peter Hart has summarised the fighting during the Hundred Days as 'some of the worst of the war... what faced [British soldiers] was probably the hardest campaign

⁶ TNA WO95/2323, War Diary of 202 Field Company, Royal Engineers (30th Division).

⁷ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

⁸ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

⁹ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

ever fought by the British armed forces'.¹⁰ He points out that, whereas in previous offensives such as the Somme and Third Ypres men had fought in the front line for a short number of days and then been withdrawn into support or reserve,

... in 1918 the pressure was simply unrelenting. There was such a shortage of manpower that those units who could keep going were repeatedly used...

*Men were caught in an awful trap where they could see victory approaching but also knew that as things stood they might not live to see it, yet they fought on. This was self-sacrifice on a grand scale.*¹¹

The evidence from war diaries indicates that Second Army formations worked hard to ensure the regular rotation of units between front, support and reserve positions as the advance proceeded. As the Army neared the Schelde and the potential for an end to the war grew closer, whole divisions were withdrawn from the front. A snapshot of the roster of a battalion from 90 Brigade, 2/14 London Scottish, which had been heavily involved in the recent fighting as advance guard for the drive to the L'Escaut River, shows how much pressure there was on depleted troop resources in the front line. On 21 October 1918, the actual Battalion strength was listed as:

41 Officers

764 Other Ranks.

¹⁰ P. Hart, *1918: A Very British Victory*, (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), p. 364.

¹¹ Hart, *1918: A Very British Victory*, p. 364.

These figures are below the full complement for a battalion, but still do not give the true picture, as the actual 'fighting strength' was even lower:

25 Officers 539 Other Ranks (plus the Chaplain)

- the result of the number of troops 'away' on leave, undertaking training or on medical duties.¹²

One week later, the problem of troop numbers was discussed at a conference of 120 Brigade (40th Division); the situation was considered to be so severe that a radical reorganisation was proposed:

*Owing to the under strength of Battalions it was decided to organise Companies on three platoon basis and, if necessary, subdivide platoons into three sections – 2 rifle and 1 Lewis Gun Section.*¹³

¹² TNA WO95/2340, War Diary of 2/14th Battalion, London Regiment. The table below shows the location of these 'missing' soldiers:

| Location | Officers | Other Ranks |
|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Field Ambulance | 6 | 92 |
| Officer Rest Camp | 1 | 1 |
| Leave | 5 | 70 |
| Military Duty | - | 13 |
| F P Camp | - | 1 |
| Command | 3 | 28 |
| Courses | - | 17 |
| Detachment | 1 | 3 |
| TOTAL | 16 | 225 |

Of particular note is that 75 soldiers are on official leave, a high number given the ongoing demands on the Battalion. It suggests that this remained a high priority despite the manpower problems and the pressure of the forward drive against the retreating German Army; it may also reflect the level of stress being experienced by the troops.

This was a serious step, reducing companies from four to three platoons and offsetting this through increasing the relative proportion of fire support from Lewis guns.

II Corps was now advancing on a line from Hoogmolen (lying five miles east-south-east of Courtrai) then north-east through Ooteghem - Ingoyghem – Engelhoek. With the Army's left flank now placed to operate in conjunction with French forces, 36th Division was responsible for liaising with its allies. On 20 October, the 164th French Division reported that it was to send a brigade forward with the aim of crossing the Oyghem Bridge. During the afternoon the French line was advanced up to the junction of the Roulers canal and the River Lys, six miles north-east of Courtrai. An attack on the village of Leicant (Leikant) was initially successful but the Germans counter-attacked and the French were forced to retire.¹⁴ The French were also reported to be unable to cross the Lys at that stage due to the absence of bridging materials, thereby delaying the advance of 36th Division.¹⁵

Map 9 shows the progress of Second Army operations 20-27 October 1918.

Having been at rest since 16 October, three days later at 2100 Hours the units of 107 Brigade moved into assembly positions for taking over the lead position for 36th

¹³ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *27th October 1918*. I have not found other references to such drastic steps so this may have been an exception (or perhaps similar actions elsewhere were less formalised or not recorded officially in the war diary).

¹⁴ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

Division from 109 Brigade. A conference of battalion commanders at brigade HQ earlier that day had discussed the orders and arrangements for the crossing of the Lys and the subsequent attack. At 0200 hours on 20 October (a 'very wet night') the advance battalions (1/Royal Irish Rifles and 15/Royal Irish Rifles) moved forward. The enemy had continued to shell the Lys overnight and 'there was a direct hit on the bridge, a pontoon being damaged and a length of the superstructure destroyed'.¹⁶ Engineers worked furiously to make good the repairs and the lead battalion crossed the river and assembled north-west of the Harlebeke – Vive St Eloi road; linking there with the forward units of 109 Brigade. Following a creeping barrage, at 0600 hours the troops moved off, with some additional cover from an early morning mist. Beveren was soon captured but the attack then met heavy machine gun fire, and Lieutenant-Colonel B.J. Jones commanding 15/Royal Irish Rifles was amongst the casualties, subsequently confirmed as killed. Although the attack was checked on a number of occasions throughout the day – 'progress... was slow' – the main Courtrai-Ghent railway line was crossed before 0800 hours and the line was eventually halted west of the village of Knock, north-west of the River Gaverbeek. Dries had been the one remaining position still held by the enemy, threatening the left flank of the advance, but was finally taken by 12/Royal Irish Rifles (108 Brigade) during the early hours of

¹⁵ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

¹⁶ Falls, *36th Division*, p. 284.

21 October.¹⁷ Overnight there was heavy shellfire from enemy artillery, HE and gas, plus machine gun fire.¹⁸

In 29th Division, 86 Brigade swung its line to the south-east, pivoting on St Louis, and attacking under a covering barrage. 88 Brigade launched its attack under a creeping barrage, employing a one battalion front with supporting battalions moving up and through as each objective line was achieved. The village of Staceghem was reported captured at 0730 hours, the Esscher Wood at 1000 hours, and troops continued to press south eastwards.¹⁹ There was a strong emphasis throughout on the front units maintaining contact with their neighbours on the flanks; to ensure that the advance of Second Army was made in concert with a steady and coherent forward manoeuvre across the GAF front.²⁰ 41st Division was checked around Courtrai and touch was lost for a time with 29th Division on its left.²¹ II Corps issued orders for the advance to be resumed on 22 October, once its three Divisions were in line and contact re-established with 41st Division.

¹⁷ Falls, *36th Division*, pp. 285-6. Falls describes how it had been hoped that the advance by the French on the left of the Division would support the pinching out of the Dries pocket but in the event the 133rd French Regiment was delayed by having to fight its way forward from the Lys.

¹⁸ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations carried out by the 107th Inf. Bde. 28.9.1918. to 28.10.1918.*

¹⁹ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*; TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade. It should be noted that there are contradictions between the division, brigade and battalions' war diaries regarding the actual disposition of the attacking and support battalions: briefly, the 88 Brigade diary has the Battalions moving forward in the initial order of 2/Hampshires (lead), 2/Leinsters (support) and 4/Worcesters (reserve); the division's record has a two battalion front attacking with 2/Leinsters (right) and 2/Hampshires (left) – the battalion diaries are unclear. I suspect that the division wanted a two battalion front (which was consistent with the view of senior commanders) but 'on the ground' the brigades decided to operate the arrangement of a one battalion front with subsequent leapfrogging to maintain the pace of the advance.

²⁰TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade.

In this way the enemy was subject to a constant pressure and opportunities to check the British troops by enfilade fire were restricted. One can now detect an almost irresistible momentum to the forward movement of Second Army and its French and Belgian allies, which is clearly visible from **Map 8** and the lines of advance from 4 to 30 October.

20 October also saw 35th Division (XIX Corps) attack in a south-east direction. After assembly east of Courtrai the attack commenced at 0615 hours on a broad frontage, with 104 Brigade on the right, 105 Brigade in the centre (its own left following the line of the Courtrai-Bossuyt Canal), and 88 Brigade of 29th Division to the left. There was no artillery barrage to cover the advance but the troops made good progress, with the exception of 4/North Staffs. The battalion was delayed in front of the small hamlet of Blokken (lying about two miles east of Courtrai) by machine gun and artillery fire.²²

Shortly after 0700 hours the hamlet of Beekstraat (one mile south of Blokken) was captured; at 0730 hours there were troops on the outskirts of Sweveghem village. This was a period of intense fighting with the German defenders seeking to restrict the attackers at every opportunity, as the diary of 105 Brigade noted:

Up to this point the fighting, along the whole of the Brigade Front, had been very heavy and dangerous owing to the exposed nature of the ground and

²¹ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

stout manner in which the enemy contested the approach of every farm. Advantage was taken of ditches and by crawling up these our troops were able to work round the flanks of the enemy's Machine Gun nests and Farms.

[Having taken most of Sweveghem village]... shortly before 0900 the enemy, reinforced, worked forward into the village and for some time very heavy fighting ensued in the neighbourhood of the church, during which we suffered heavy casualties. Eventually our troops were forced back to the Western outskirts of Sweveghem where they were heavily fired upon by the enemy's artillery and Machine Guns causing further casualties.²³

This account of the clashes taking place as the troops of 35th Division fought their way forward from Courtrai, provides a succinct picture of the warfare in Flanders during this final stretch of the campaign. It does not portray a beaten enemy or German defenders whose will to resist had been eroded. It does show a British Army pushing forward through initiative and commitment. This is warfare that would have been very familiar to later British forces fighting their way up the Italian peninsula, scrambling through the bocage of Normandy, or street fighting in French towns, in 1944. It is also very different from the popular image of trenches, a barren landscape, and 'the big push' which colours modern perceptions of the First World War. These British soldiers were fighting to overcome strong and determined enemy resistance, farm by farm,

²² ... several machine guns and two 15c.m. Howitzers, the latter firing over open sights at our advancing troops who were but three hundred or four hundred yards distance: TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

²³ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

hamlet by village, to liberate an occupied country. This is the sharp side of war - dirty, challenging, confused, dangerous – and nothing is won easily or without pain. Army Operations Reports concluded that ‘hard fighting has taken place for all high ground, where the enemy has defended himself obstinately... fighting... has been severe’.²⁴

The drive by the troops of 35th Division continued. Although the confused situation limited the amount of artillery support available, by 0900 hours 4/North Staffs had pushed the enemy back at Blokken; before being held up north west of Sweveghem. Despite a heavy artillery barrage upon enemy lines, the move forward by 15/Cheshires was initially blocked by machine gun fire; at 1330 hours the battalion succeeded in pushing patrols across the Keibeek. That afternoon 15/Sherwood Foresters entered and captured Sweveghem and 4/North Staffs resumed the advance on the brigade’s left. The line now stabilised on the eastern outskirts of Sweveghem with 4/North Staffs exposed to enemy fire from the northern side of the canal.²⁵

After a further pause to take stock of the situation, 35th Division confirmed orders for the objectives to be captured. At 2330 hours, a new attack by 105 Brigade supported by an artillery barrage succeeded in taking the line of the Kreupel-Pontlevis Bridge (one and a half miles south-east of Sweveghem). Overnight the Germans were still

²⁴ TNA WO158/218 *Summary of Operations*, Week ending 25 October 1918.

²⁵ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

holding the neighbouring Kappelle Milaene Farm, but a sharp action at 0500 hours compelled them to withdraw.²⁶

Elsewhere on the 35th Division front, troops were moving towards the village of Hoogstraatje (less than half a mile south of the Courtrai Bossuyt Canal). 106 Brigade moved through 104 Brigade to take up position. Although delayed in part because of 'the weather', the attack began shortly after the start time of 1715 hours, supported by a creeping barrage. Progress was steady; early the following morning the support battalion, 17/Royal Scots, was ordered forward so as to align with the left of 106 Brigade's forward battalions (12/Highland Light Infantry and 18/Highland Light Infantry); and then to make a link with Hoogstraatje. This it did and the battalion also sent patrols up from west of the village to the Canal, thereby establishing a direct line on the Division's front and securing the objective.²⁷

With the advance of Second Army gathering pace as it pursued the withdrawing German forces, it was crucial to maximise the effectiveness of the artillery fire support for the infantry. The need was for clear guidelines and instructions that reflected the demands of this new war of manoeuvre. In many respects these arrangements confirmed was already happening in practice – different methods of partnering infantry and artillery when on the attack have already been described; for example, the attachment of a field gun and crew to a company of infantry, or locating an artillery liaison officer at the forward HQ of a battalion. Senior officers were anxious to ensure

²⁶ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

²⁷ TNA WO95/2489, War Diary of 106 Infantry Brigade.

that there was the closest possible co-operation between the two arms, not least to minimise the potential number of infantry casualties during an attack.

Instructions issued by 34th Division in October 1918 reflected these developments.²⁸ They confirmed the inclusion of a brigade of field artillery in each infantry brigade group, under 'the immediate command' of the brigadier-general; battalion and company commanders were to apply to brigade for artillery support. The artillery brigade commander would act as artillery adviser. The role of the attached field artillery would include fire cover for advance and assault, and the engaging of enemy guns. Division would control the artillery of brigade groups in support or reserve, as well as the heavy artillery; the principal responsibility of the latter was for counter battery fire. A brigade would only apply for the support of heavy artillery once its own field artillery had been engaged or if 'a very strong and obstinate centre of resistance is encountered'.²⁹

The war of manoeuvre also led to growing recognition of the need to increase flexibility during operations. Junior officers and section leaders needed to be able to exercise far greater initiative as an attack developed in order to tackle the different challenges as they presented themselves. A further set of instructions issued by 34th Division (two days after the rules regarding artillery co-operation) addressed this

²⁸ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *General Staff Instructions No. 14, 21-10-1918*.

²⁹ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *General Staff Instructions No. 14, 21-10-1918*; these instructions also drew attention to *Training Leaflet No.5, The Action of Artillery in CLOSE Support of Assaulting Battalions*, advising that 'The present form of warfare gives splendid opportunities for practising the very excellent methods laid down in this pamphlet'.

concern.³⁰ Acknowledging that ‘the fighting of the last few days has become more mobile than has hitherto been the case and is now practically open warfare’, the order states that ‘a certain re-arrangement of ideas on the part of all commanders’ is necessary. It is considered essential that ‘all commanders down to section and fire-unit commanders’ should study Field Service Regulations Part I. Furthermore, the headquarters of infantry and artillery brigades and of battalions ‘must be further forward than is the case in trench warfare’ so that the commander ‘can influence the progress and action of the fight by the use of his reserves and auxiliary weapons’.³¹

The instructions then proceed to specify in detail the responsibility of the unit commander for taking control of the situation when an advance stalls because of enemy resistance. While the rules are quite prescriptive, they also empower the commander to assess the immediate problems and take decisions on the spot; including the deployment of fire support, auxiliary weapon teams, and reserves. He should ‘get into touch with the situation... making if necessary a personal reconnaissance’; such that he will ‘issue the necessary orders on the spot’.³²

Finally, the instructions look at some of the particular issues presented by the nature of the enemy’s defensive methods. The ‘premature deployment’ of advancing troops is advised against because the enemy’s rearguard actions were often specifically designed to encourage such a response. Only the minimum necessary number of

³⁰ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *General Staff Instructions No. 15, 23-10-1918*.

³¹ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *General Staff Instructions No. 15, 23-10-1918*.

soldiers should be used to probe for the enemy's positions; once located, the 'position must be attacked without delay' with sufficient troops and fire support 'to make its capture a certainty'.³³

These orders from 34th Division show the concern to conserve troop numbers and not to take unnecessary risks that might result in heavy casualties. To this end there is a heavy emphasis on maximising the fire support available to tackle enemy positions. There have been many references in the earlier descriptions of operations to brigades deploying on a one battalion front. While this in itself is a likely consequence of seeking to limit the number of troops in the firing line at any one time, there is also the risk that the attack will not be sufficiently strong for the size of the front – hence the instructions from 34th Division also state that a front of 2000 yards should be treated as the maximum for one battalion to assault. Commanders are expected to take full responsibility for the 'combined arms' nature of the fighting; in effect, they were being supplied with a broad range of resources (in terms of quality and quantity and variety) and they are expected to make good use of these.

20 October also saw 1/6 Cheshires of 21 Brigade (30th Division) carry out an 'advanced guard action' in pursuit of the retreating Germans. The latter made a final stand on the ridge below the hamlet of Saint Genois. Under the cover of darkness the

³² The Instructions conclude that only by using this approach 'can a Commander ensure the effective co-operation of the different arms at his disposal, retain control of the fight and impress his own personality upon the course of events'.

³³ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *General Staff Instructions No. 15, 23-10-1918*.

position was successfully 'stormed and captured'.³⁴ Meanwhile II Corps had been ordered to 'stand fast until flanks come up into line' at which point 9th Division would move through to drive for the Scheldt.³⁵

Over the next few days the units of II Corps continued to push the enemy back. On 21 October, 36th Division attacked with units from 107 and 108 Brigades, operating in conjunction with the 133rd French Infantry Regiment; there was no artillery barrage. Touch with the 133rd Regiment was lost temporarily: 'As the French on our left were unable to advance it was found necessary for a Coy. of the 12th Royal Irish Rifles to take up a position to guard our left flank which was exposed'.³⁶ A brigade of French cavalry was also attached to the division in order to assist with liaison and offer reconnaissance and support. There were reports of the cavalry looking to attempt to break through on the 107 Brigade front though this did not materialise.³⁷ On the left of Second Army there were reports of French operations in the area of Spitaals Bosche Wood and the village of Waereghem.³⁸ On the following day units from all three divisions in II Corps were involved in operations focused on and around Vichte.³⁹ The village was successfully captured, together with Hill 50 to the south. However, attempts to then push on towards Ingoyghem met heavy enemy fire from both that

³⁴ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 1/6th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment.

³⁵ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

³⁶ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade.

³⁷ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

³⁸ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

³⁹ Subsequent reports from prisoners stated that orders had been given for Vichte to be held 'at all costs' but if taken then the German defenders should fall back northwards in the direction of Waereghem: TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, 23 October.

village and the village of Ooteghem, such that ‘... it was obvious that no progress could be made to INGOYGHM until OOTEGHEM was taken’.⁴⁰

Further south, 41st Division attacked through 35th Division, the latter withdrawn to refresh. The objective was the line of the River L’Escaut from Bossuyt to Autryve. Initial progress was very good and by noon 20/Durham Light Infantry had occupied the villages of Baveghemknok and Poeldriesch. On the left of 124 Brigade progress was slower, with the Germans holding the tunnel over the Courtrai-Bussuyt Canal in considerable strength. 10/Queens had to cross the canal by this passage in order to work down the north east bank. The battalion was blocked by troops of 122 Brigade who were in front and had been unable so far to force ‘this strongly wired and defended enemy position’.⁴¹ Meanwhile 26/Royal Fusiliers, ‘against considerable opposition’ occupied the Duikingberg-Achterberg road facing the Canal.⁴²

That night, 41st Division consolidated the line Poeldriesch-Baveghemknok, pending a further drive forward in the morning.⁴³

Also on 21 October, 30th Division made arrangements to drive across the Scheldt. During the morning 1/6 Cheshires captured the hamlet of Helghin (Helchin).⁴⁴ Currie’s Group assumed the lead position for the division, establishing posts along the west bank of the river; all the existing bridges had been destroyed by the enemy. The

⁴⁰ TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

⁴¹ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*.

⁴² TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*.

prospects of a daylight crossing were considered unlikely, given the weight of fire from the German defenders; the group was ordered to seek for an opportunity to make an assault that night. Initially frustrated, it was dusk on 22 October when Royal Engineers were able to construct a pontoon bridge for the troops. One platoon of 2/South Lancs managed to cross but was then forced to withdraw by heavy artillery and machine gun fire. The following day saw the bridge partially destroyed by enemy shells and it was again dusk when engineers were able to put two new bridges in place; one in front of 2/South Lancs, one in front of 2/17 London Regiment. Three South Lancs platoons fought their way across but were again pushed back. Their pontoon bridge was destroyed during the fighting and the surviving troops were forced to crawl along the other bridge in order to get back to the west bank. The Germans were holding the east bank of the river 'in strength... [particularly] enemy snipers and M.Gs.'⁴⁵

During 22 October, II Corps continued its advance with the aim of seizing the crossings over the Escaut, contact now re-established with French forces. The 5th French Division had captured St Hubert. The 4th French Cavalry Brigade was placed under 29th Division with the aim of passing through the advancing infantry to seize crossings over the Scheldt at Avelghem, Rugge and Berchem; should the bridges be

⁴³ TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

⁴⁴ TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 1/6th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment.

⁴⁵ TNA WO95/2332, War Diary of 89 Infantry Brigade.

destroyed then the cavalry were to drive north east along the river and attempt to impede enemy defensive operations.⁴⁶

At 0900 hours, 36th Division, 107 Brigade leading, attacked towards and through Knock. The assault ran into a determined counter-attack on its left flank in the early afternoon; this opportunity for the enemy was created by 108 Brigade failing to keep pace with the advance. 107 Brigade looked to assist by sending forward reserves though in the event the Germans were pushed back without the extra manpower. The strength of the enemy assault is shown by neighbouring units also being pushed back before the line was re-established.⁴⁷ There were subsequent reports from prisoners that suggested this enemy attack had been a determined effort to 'turn the Klijtberg Ridge position from the North' and that it had been 'carried out by a Prussian Assault Battalion sent up for the purpose'. The enemy was looking to take all possible steps to delay the advancing British forces so that its planned withdrawal could proceed at a manageable pace. Further evidence from prisoners confirmed the decision of the Germans to pull back in an easterly direction.⁴⁸

During the day, 36th Division captured and consolidated the Klijtberg Ridge. The intensity of the fighting taking place and the instances of fierce enemy resistance are also demonstrated by the need for 27 Brigade (9th Division) to be reinforced by 8/Black Watch from 28 Brigade in order to ensure there were no gaps in the British

⁴⁶ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

⁴⁷ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, as recorded at 1716 hours on 22 October.

⁴⁸ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade.

line and that the captured ground could be consolidated effectively.⁴⁹ 29th Division also met heavy opposition and only limited progress was made; French cavalry patrols encountered very heavy machine gun fire and any outflanking manoeuvre was considered impossible.⁵⁰

That same morning, 41st Division, utilising the temporary footbridge erected at Knokke, attacked along the north-east bank of the Courtrai-Bossuyt Canal. This move was checked by heavy machine gun fire, with intense fighting developing around Keiberg. 12/East Surreys flanked left and right of the canal tunnel (which civilians had reported as mined); Stokes mortars were used to take out the machine guns still firing from within.⁵¹ A fresh attack was made at 1400 hours and after some heavy fighting the north bank of the canal tunnel was cleared. This position was secured and held until relief by 34th Division on the night of 23 October. 41st Division then 'side stepped Northwards' to relieve 29th Division along a line facing Hoogmolen.⁵²

Reports to II Corps HQ in the evening spoke of hard fighting right across the front line with a number of references to the use by the enemy artillery of gas shells in its defensive barrages. At 0730 hours on the following day, the Germans were reported to be retiring along the front of VII French Corps.⁵³ By noon, it was reported that 29th Division had taken Ooteghem but this proved to be premature; however the operations there allowed 9th Division to consider an attack from the south towards Hill

⁴⁹ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

⁵⁰ TNA WO95/2285, War Diary of 29th Division, *Report on Operations, Period October 14th 1918 – October 22nd 1918*.

⁵¹ TNA W095/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

50 where the enemy was still resisting. At 1301 hours, 6/KOSB reported the capture of the Hill. Enemy fire from in and around the village of Ingoyghem continued to cause problems for II Corps forces.⁵⁴

On 23 October, 36th Division sent forward advance guards, moving towards the Escaut at Tenhove. A squadron of French dragoons was attached to 107 Brigade and ordered 'to proceed towards TENHOVE, to try to seize KLEINEBERG and BERGWIJK and bridge over L'ESCAUT'.⁵⁵ However long range enemy machine gun fire proved sufficient to prevent much progress and the dragoons were subsequently withdrawn.⁵⁶ On the left of the division, 108 Brigade was working hard to maintain contact with the 41st French Chasseurs, meeting particular difficulties at the Railway Halt at Heirweg (Heinweg) due to German machine gun fire. An 'International Post' was subsequently established at the nearby level crossing.⁵⁷

In front of the division the Germans were occupying strong positions, defending a line (north to south) Heinweg – Huisbosch - Scheidhoek – Ingoyghem. 109 Brigade now took over the front line role; in recognition of the hard fighting it had taken part in, 107 Brigade was withdrawn into division support and for training. For 14th Division, 42

⁵² TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*.

⁵³ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

⁵⁴ TNA WO95/1771/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

⁵⁵ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations carried out by the 107th Inf. Bde. 28.9.1918. to 28.10.1918*.

⁵⁶ 'A squadron of French dragoons... made a spirited dash for the Escaut crossing at Berchen, but came under heavy machine-gun fire from the second line of hills, which it was evident the enemy held in force.' Falls, *36th Division*, p. 287.

⁵⁷ TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade.

Brigade spent most of 24 and 25 October making 'endeavours... to find any possible means of crossing River L'ESCAUT'.⁵⁸

16/Manchesters subsequently crossed on 29 October and established advance posts on the eastern side. The attack took the form of three 'Assault Parties', each with its Lewis gun teams placed so as to provide covering fire. There was also a fire plan for support from trench mortars and artillery.⁵⁹ 41 Brigade took over the new line on the final night of the month.

On 24 October, 41st Division attacked the Hoogmolen Spur but was beaten back by heavy machine gun fire. The division would now take part in the 'Action of Ooteghem' which was planned to take place the following day.⁶⁰

The Germans had set up intermediate defensive positions to the east of the Lys. Some were heavily wired and carefully sited to maximise the effectiveness of the defence. Their lack of troops led the Germans to make the most of field guns deployed well-forward, snipers, and machine gun posts. These arrangements appear to have been intended to delay the attacking forces while the German Army looked to re-establish itself on the *Hermann Position* beyond the River Schelde. The full extent of these defences does not appear to have been detected in advance by Second Army. Supporting artillery was still being transported forward – until 24 October, most

⁵⁸ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade.

⁵⁹ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade, *Brigade Order No.32, 29th October 1918* and *Artillery and Stokes Mortar Time Table and Targets*.

⁶⁰ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*.

heavy guns and howitzers were awaiting the completion of satisfactory bridges across the Lys. The war diary of 36th Division for that day noted that a bridge was to be constructed over the Bossuyt Canal which was robust enough to take horse transport.⁶¹ The infantry found themselves advancing without significant artillery cover. The marshy ground, deteriorating further through heavy rainfall, made progress difficult.

One of the more unusual problems of supply during this period was recorded in the war diary of 43 Brigade. The Medical Officer of 20/Middlesex had approached the ADMS complaining about:

*... [the] difficulty of supplying [Battalion] men with dentures.*⁶²

Air support was restricted by the continuing bad weather and its impact on visibility, although the RAF was now able to move squadrons forward to occupy former German aerodromes.⁶³ The lack of air reconnaissance caused problems for operational planning, in terms of knowledge of the terrain and mapping, enemy movement, and the deployment and operation of the artillery.

Progress along the line was further hampered by the slow advance of the French Sixth Army to the left of British forces. The Germans had strengthened the resistance in front of Second Army because these positions had to be held until the troops

⁶¹ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

⁶² TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade, 25th October 1918.

opposing the French could themselves pull back. The delay in the French advance was also causing II Corps to again have to regulate its own rate of progress in line with that of its ally, 'the flank of the 36th Division was consequently refused'.⁶⁴

Action of Ooteghem: 25 October 1918

Circumstances improved from 25 October, although there were exceptions: 7/Seaforth Highlanders were prevented from a further advance by the weight of machine gun and shellfire.⁶⁵ Orders for 36th Division were to maintain the advance with artillery support, with the immediate objectives of Hofdries – Caenkouter – Caster; to be followed by a forced crossing of the Scheldt. 9th Division was set the objective of the village of Tiegham. If these attacks were successful then the 4th Cavalry Brigade was on stand-by to pass through the line after Tiegham, then to wheel left and capture the neighbouring high ground. This proved to be optimistic given the strong resistance by the German defenders, and the exploitation by the cavalry was deferred. Evidence of the determination of the enemy to hold up the British advance is noted in 36th Division's diary, there being 'very few cases of surrender' and 'In many cases enemy soldiers continued firing M.G.s until bayoneted'.⁶⁶

⁶³ TNA WO158/218 *Summary of Operations*, week ending 25 October 1918.

⁶⁴ TNA WO158/218 *Summary of Operations*, week ending 25 October 1918.

⁶⁵ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

⁶⁶ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

Notwithstanding these incidents, by 25 October heavy artillery was finally in place to support a set-piece attack. Plumer identified the line of the Schelde as the objective. Involved in what has been designated as the 'Action of Ooteghem' were (south-north): X Corps (34th Division), XIX Corps (41st Division) and II Corps (9th and 36th Divisions) with the co-operation of the French 164th Division and a French cavalry brigade. 35th Division was put on stand-by to relieve 41st Division on completion of the operation.

Commencing 0940 hours, the infantry moved forward under the cover of a creeping barrage. A counter barrage by the Germans caused some early casualties as the assault began.⁶⁷ The attack to take and consolidate the high ground east of the village of Ooteghem was pressed home, despite the weight of machine gun fire from the north. 41st Division captured the high ground around Hoogemolen by 0945 hours then advanced on Kiebergmolen; 10/Queens was reported to have cleared Heersteert by 1420 hours. However there were further frustrations beginning with units of 9th Division being subsequently forced to withdraw from Ooteghem. In so doing, as the result of a 'mistaken order', they also pulled back the left flank of 124 Brigade on the forward slopes above the village although this position was subsequently recovered. By mid-afternoon, 9th Division was being held at Zaveleinde, 34th Division was making limited progress and had lost touch with 41st Division, while the latter ordered 124 Brigade to refuse the left flank (given the check to 9th Division) and ensure it was in touch with 123 Brigade (which was advancing on Avelghem).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*.

⁶⁸ TNA WO95/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

During the night, advance patrols pushed forward along the road from Driesch to the outskirts of the village.⁶⁹

102 Brigade of 34th Division was located just east of the Courtrai-Bossuyt Canal and it was from these positions that it attacked alongside the units of the 41st Division. The outcome was the clearing of the whole front of the canal, from Knocke southwards, including the capture of Moen. This latter operation by 1/4 The Cheshires, saw the village 'smoked'; following this barrage the troops surrounded the dwellings and then moved in to carry out the mopping up. By the evening, the British forces had secured a stretch of the River Scheldt running southwards from Autryve to Bossuyt. The previous night had seen 1/7 The Cheshires make two attempts to cross the Canal at Locks 3 and 4, but they had been beaten back. On the afternoon of 25 October they made a third successful attack, allowing them to join up with 1/4 The Cheshires, south-east of Moen. The 34th Division also captured Autryve as part of the operation.⁷⁰

The Action of Ooteghem was a partial success, the southern divisions (34th and 41st) achieving their objectives but II Corps had been frustrated in its attempt to capture Ooteghem itself. The war diary of 5/Cameron Highlanders recorded that '... the Enemy's counter Barrage was the heaviest yet experienced since the 28 Sept.'⁷¹ The

⁶⁹ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*.

⁷⁰ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

⁷¹ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

weekly operations record for Second Army uses classic understatement in reporting that the fighting which took place 'was of a severe character'.⁷²

Scout patrols sent out on the morning of 26 October reported that the Germans had evacuated large areas of the front, retreating to the east of the Escaut.⁷³

The subsequent move forwards by 41st Division into Avelghem was followed by heavy enemy shelling of the village. (The last enemy patrol seen leaving the village fired 'a white light' as it left, interpreted as the signal for the barrage). The advance by 124 Brigade saw its troops move through a series of villages: Avelghem, Waffelstraat, Rugge, Kaphoek, Langestraat, Bosch, and Kloosterhoek. That night the division was relieved by 35th Division.⁷⁴

The war diary of 36th Division records information from prisoners suggesting the Germans were now carrying out a planned withdrawal to the River Schelde (Scheldt),⁷⁵ giving fresh urgency to the progress of the British forces. X and XV Corps on the right of the Army's front, were now able to extend the length of the line held on the west bank. The 26th Brigade of 9th Division now occupied Ooteghem, but II Corps as a whole had not moved up to the river. The fight to control the air space

⁷² TNA WO158/218 *Operations Reports*; TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

⁷³ It was likely that this information originated from local Belgians, as the war diary of 18/King's Royal Rifle Corps recorded: *[Advance patrols] met civilians who reported that Driesch and Avelghem were clear of the enemy; forward patrols confirmed this position.* TNA WO95/2365, War Diary of 18th Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps.

⁷⁴ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918.*

⁷⁵ TNA WO95/2492, War Diary of 36th Division.

was intensifying; 27 October saw 14 German aircraft and 6 balloons shot down, for the loss of 6 RAF planes.

26 October had brought the start of a realignment of the Corps fronts and the deployment of divisions, to allow some rest for those units which had borne the brunt of the fighting. For instance, 34th Division was transferred to II Corps, relieving the 36th Division on the front facing the Anseghem-Langestraat Ridge.⁷⁶ 40th Division returned to the line, allowing 31st Division to redeploy north. There were now just seven divisions operating in the line, while retaining the four corps command structure. From 28 October the disposition of Second Army, north-to-south, was as follows:

| | |
|-----------|--|
| II Corps | 34 th Division 35 th Division |
| XIX Corps | 31 st Division |
| X Corps | 30 th Division 29 th Division |
| XV Corps | 14 th Division 40 th Division |

⁷⁶ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

On the night of 27-28 October, 42 Brigade (14th Division) relieved units of 40th Division to its right and also took over the line from 30th Division on its left.⁷⁷

Thus the first seven days of action beyond the Lys had produced a limited advance by Second Army of no more than seven miles. More importantly however, the Army's right wing had now reached the Schelde. 40th Division operated under daily orders combining defence arrangements with an emphasis on continuing to advance in the event of enemy withdrawal'.⁷⁸ Its forward patrols engaged in skirmishes with enemy positions across the river in the vicinity of Warcoing and Pecq. On 1 November, the Division held a line of outposts along the west bank of the Escaut, from south of Pecq up to the canal at Espierres.

For the other British units and the French and Belgian forces operating further north, the fighting, particularly on the fronts of II Corps and XIX Corps, had been intense at times. It had taken considerable perseverance by the infantry, reinforced whenever possible by artillery support, to sustain the pressure upon the German forces. 124 Brigade (41st Division), summarised the results of its advance role during 20-26 October as follows:

As a result of the six days operations... which included two advances to the line of the river L'ESCAUT to a depth of 7,000 and 6,000 yards respectively, involving two big attacks and one minor one, more than twelve villages were

⁷⁷ TNA WO95/1880, War Diary of 14th Division, Administration Section; TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division.

*liberated from the enemy and very heavy casualties were inflicted, besides the capture of in-numerable machine guns.*⁷⁹

The Brigade suffered 364 casualties of which 54 were killed.⁸⁰

Since the launch of the original attack of the GAF on 28 September there had been intense pressure upon the principal combat units of Second Army. The 36th Division had been one of the key formations to bear the brunt of the fighting; Falls describes the division's circumstances in stark terms:

*The bolt of the 36th Division was now shot... The casualties since the beginning of offensive operations numbered over three thousand... But not more than a tenth of these casualties... had been replaced by reinforcements. As a consequence battalions in action had seldom more than two hundred or two hundred and fifty bayonets. Though little they knew it, [36th Division's] part in the war was finished.*⁸¹

⁷⁸ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division, entries for 26 October-1 November.

⁷⁹ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*

⁸⁰

| | Killed | | Wounded | | Missing | |
|----------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| | Officers | Other Ranks | Officers | Other Ranks | Officers | Other Ranks |
| 10/Queens | - | 4 | 1 | 19 | - | 2 |
| 26/R Fusiliers | 2 | 19 | 8 | 112 | - | 10 |
| 20/ DLI | 3 | 26 | 6 | 144 | - | 8 |
| Totals | 5 | 49 | 15 | 275 | - | 20 |

TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*.

⁸¹ Falls, *36th Division*, pp. 289-90. The full section reads:

The bolt of the 36th Division was now shot... The casualties since the beginning of offensive operations numbered over three thousand. Of these, six-sevenths were wounded, and a very large proportion, most fortunately, suffering from light wounds from machine-gun bullets, or a temporary disabling whiff of gas. But not more than a tenth of these casualties... had been replaced by reinforcements. As a consequence battalions in action had seldom more than two hundred or two hundred and fifty bayonets. Other arms had suffered in less, but still in

As further evidence of the continuing threat to British troops, on 29 October a senior officer was wounded by enemy shellfire. The GOC 120 Brigade, Brigadier-General W.P. Hore-Ruthuen, who had only been in post for just over a week, was visiting his front line units when:

*At dawn enemy heavily shelled the area. The G.O.C. was slightly wounded in the back.*⁸²

The large amount of civilian traffic being generated as areas were liberated was causing problems for the British artillery, causing its fire to be 'confined to definite targets'. The Germans were accused of using a high proportion of gas shells, causing casualties amongst unprepared civilians.⁸³

Action of Tiegham: 31 October 1918

Plumer now set in train the arrangements for a major attack by II Corps and XIX Corps, with the French, on 30 October; later deferred to 31 October at the request of the French. That day the 'Action of Tiegham' involving II Corps (34th and 35th Divisions) and XIX Corps (31st Division) cleared the way forward for a full advance to

high proportion, while the loss of transport animals was becoming serious. [On 27 October] a wire from the X. Corps [was received] to the effect that the Division would be relieved by the 34th [Division]... Though little they knew it, [36th Division's] part in the war was finished.

⁸² TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade; Brigadier-General Hore-Ruthuen took over command of the Brigade on 18 October, replacing Brigadier-General C.J. Hobkirk who was transferring to England. Happily, Brigadier-General Hore-Ruthuen was sufficiently recovered to sign off the war diary record for the month.

secure the Schelde.⁸⁴ The operation would also provide a springboard for the advance of French Sixth Army (see **Map 10**).

Each of the divisions had the support of three or four brigades of field artillery. All the Corps artillery plus the guns of resting brigades and the heavy artillery of X Corps were utilised in support of the attack. A key objective was the neutralisation of enemy batteries and machine gun positions, plus the masking of enemy-held high ground by smoke, on the east bank of the Schelde. On the British left, French and American divisions would also be attacking. Two companies of French tanks were deployed with II Corps. For 34th Division, 103 Infantry Brigade would lead, with 5/King's Own Scottish Borderers on the right and 8/Cameronians on the left, each supported by one company of 5/Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, together with thirty tanks of the 18th French Tank Battalion.⁸⁵ During the operation, the tanks and infantry worked well together, with the British troops reporting that the tanks 'were of very great assistance',⁸⁶ and Major-General Nicholson (34th Division) noting that they proved to be 'of great value on the right'.⁸⁷ The tank crews also praised the co-operation of the infantry.⁸⁸

⁸³ TNA WO158/218 *Operations Reports*.

⁸⁴ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

⁸⁵ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Narrative of Operations From October 26th to November 1st 1918*; each attacking battalion had ten tanks attached, with the remaining ten held in reserve.

⁸⁶ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

⁸⁷ Nicholson, *private papers* (IWM) - he also recorded the importance of the Second Army actions in assisting the French, noting that the commander of 41st French Division was 'all over the 34th Division for having held his flank for him the day before. He practically acknowledged that his own men were not taking any [ie capturing any ground] and that our taking the Southern end of the high ground in front of them enabled them to get forward'.

⁸⁸ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

At Zero hour of 0525 hours the infantry moved forward under a creeping barrage of artillery and machine guns, moving at a rate of 100 yards in three minutes. This would cease for two hours upon reaching the first objective, to allow guns to be moved forward.

Overall, the attack proved to be a significant success with a series of villages liberated during operations. 5/KOSB made good progress south of Anseghem 'with the aid of the tanks'.⁸⁹

Advancing via Hill 41, 8/Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) had cleared and captured Anseghem by 1100. The aim had been to turn the village on both northern and southern flanks, mopping up the remaining defenders later. However the flanking manoeuvre north of the village by three companies failed – these were forced to abort the operation and instead dig in and set up a defensive flank facing south-east. The battalion therefore had to mount an attack on the village from the south and this proved successful. The reason for the failure north of the village was that the French advance on the left had been frustrated by fierce enemy resistance; in the evening the Germans still held strong positions on high ground above Boschkant, and the French and American forces were pinned in the valley to the north-west. The French tanks with the left half-company of 8/Cameronians were unable to operate effectively, finding the ground too marshy and the approaches to the enemy positions too

⁸⁹ *Three tanks volunteered to go out in front of [the advance line] to clear enemy M.G. posts. Two of these were destroyed by hostile gun fire and the crews badly wounded : TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, Narrative of Operations From October 26th to November 1st 1918.*

exposed, with a German field gun (eventually taken out by British field artillery) particularly effective.⁹⁰

An 'International Liaison Company' had been formed under the command of a British Officer, consisting of half-companies from the 23rd French Regiment and 2/4 Queen's (Royal West Surrey). However, the lack of progress by the French delayed this unit near Winteeken. In the afternoon, a company from 2/4 Queen's moved to fill the gap between the Liaison Company and Anseghem.⁹¹

To address the problem of the German machine guns and artillery sited above Boschkant, 5/Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders sent forward fighting patrols overnight in order to maintain pressure on the defenders. The end result was that British troops eventually took possession of the positions, without opposition, by 0300 hours on 1 November. This action relieved the pressure on the allied troops who moved forward at dawn. The French and American units then went on to clear all of the high ground west of the Scheldt, as far north as Audenarde.⁹²

The detonators of explosive charges placed by the enemy on the bridge at Rugge were successfully removed by an NCO from the Tunnelling Company.⁹³

⁹⁰ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Narrative of Operations from October 26th to November 1st 1918*.

⁹¹ TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Narrative of Operations from October 26th to November 1st 1918*.

⁹² TNA WO95/2437, War Diary of 34th Division, *Summary of War Diary for October 1918*.

⁹³ TNA WO95/2483, War Diary of 104 Infantry Brigade.

By 1 November the Second Army line was secure along the length of the west bank, with a small number of posts established subsequently across the river. II Corps transferred to Army Reserve.⁹⁴ The orders of 40th Division summarise the approach of Second Army at this point of the campaign:

*... [The] enemy [is] continuing preparations for the destruction of roads and railways east of SCHELDE... therefore should enemy defence weaken then units are to establish advance guards east of the Inundations and prepare to carry out further advance to capture high ground to the front.*⁹⁵

From 14-31 October, Second Army had captured 7,422 prisoners, 172 guns plus considerable numbers of machine guns and trench mortars. During this same period, 76 German aeroplanes were destroyed and four balloons, for the loss of thirty British planes.⁹⁶

From the beginning of November, Plumer commenced plans for a forced crossing of the Schelde. 41 Brigade noted on 31 October, following a briefing at 14th Division HQ, 'the policy of offence to be adopted... [the] keyword being the SCHELDT must be crossed at all costs'.⁹⁷ Artillery, sufficient to protect the west bank and conduct counter-battery work, was maintained in action. All other guns were to be held in preparation for supporting the crossing. Provisional orders were prepared to take

⁹⁴ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, 1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919.

⁹⁵ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, 40th Division Order No. 226.

advantage of any identified reduction in the German defences. Bridging material was being brought together. Probing patrols were sent forward regularly including two minor bridging operations. The enemy continued to resist with force, employing harassing fire including gas bombardments. 124 Brigade recorded that during four days in line, 1-4 November:

... the enemy showing considerable artillery activity, and considerable machine gun fire was experienced from posts on the East bank of the river [Scheldt].⁹⁸

Despite this, the British succeeded in establishing a number of advance posts on the opposing bank. 20/Durham Light Infantry (124 Brigade, 41st Division) established a bridgehead across the Schelde,⁹⁹ opposite Berchem, on 2 November. There was no immediate enemy opposition but the night brought heavy shelling and regular sniping such that it was decided to withdraw the post. What happened next is perhaps indicative of the growing sense within the Army that the end of the war was in sight.

On the following night 3-4 November, further crossings were made by soldiers from the brigade's other battalions, 10/Queen's and 20/Durham Light Infantry, and posts set up on the eastern bank. Having confirmed the ability to carry out such operations - 'and since it was just as easy to command the Eastern bank from our side' – the

⁹⁶ TNA WO158/218 *Operations on the Second Army Front: 14th October to 31st October 1918* – which also records that on 14th October there were 20 enemy planes and four balloons destroyed, which was a record for one day (Nine British planes were lost).

⁹⁷ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, 31st October 1918.

⁹⁸ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations from Nov. 1st to the commencement of the Armistice at 11.a.m. Nov. 11th. 1918.*

⁹⁹ 41st Division had come back into the line from the beginning of November.

brigade ordered that these posts were withdrawn.¹⁰⁰ This action was no doubt influenced by the prospect of an end to the war, and a desire to ensure that the lives of British soldiers were no longer placed at risk unless there was no other alternative. In this case the priority was for the units of Second Army to have all possible arrangements in place for a strong and successful crossing of the Schelde – and for this to be made at a time of the Army's choosing. The main activities of 124 Brigade throughout this period were designed to prepare for a crossing, patrols seeking possible sites for foot or pontoon bridges.¹⁰¹ Over the next few days, while in divisional reserve, the brigade concentrated on training for the river crossing.

40th Division had been looking to cross at Pecq with a subsidiary crossing east of Warcoing. Enemy resistance was considerable – machine gun, trench mortar and artillery fire – and 1 November brought an enemy counter-attack which was repulsed.¹⁰² A small number of advance posts were set up on the eastern bank during 2-3 November despite enemy mortar and artillery fire. By 5 November, patrols were operating east of Pecq and Warcoing; enemy withdrawal had allowed troops to push forward towards Herrines.¹⁰³

The night of 4-5 November brought an attack by units of 14th and 29th Division to force a crossing between Helchin and Bossuyt. Previous attempts to cross, through taking advantage of operations by 121 Brigade (40th Division) on the right, had failed despite

¹⁰⁰ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations from Nov. 1st to the commencement of the Armistice at 11.a.m. Nov. 11th. 1918.*

¹⁰¹ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations from Nov. 1st to the commencement of the Armistice at 11.a.m. Nov. 11th. 1918.*

covering fire from trench mortars and machine guns. During the early hours, engineers threw a number of bridges across the water and parties of infantry crossed in the face of minimal enemy defensive fire. By 0530 the positions were secured, with no fatalities and three men wounded.¹⁰⁴

Following repeated pressure from Haig, by 4 November Foch had finally agreed that British Second Army would be removed from the GAF and restored to Haig's command, as part of the BEF. This is discussed in more detail in the following chapter. Second Army would now be responsible for maintaining 'close contact with the enemy and to follow up and press him with advanced guards in the event of his withdrawing';¹⁰⁵ and to force a passage of the River Escaut, the attack being carried out under the command of XV, X and XIX Corps. The operation would be in cooperation with British Fifth Army and its 39th Division, advancing in the Tournai area.¹⁰⁶

Meanwhile the successes of the campaign were being acknowledged. On 5 November, 9th Division (in Army reserve) was inspected by the King of the Belgians at Hulste Aerodrome. In recognition of this, the GOC declared the following day as a holiday for all troops.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁰³ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division, entries for 2-5 November.

¹⁰⁴ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁰⁵ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, *1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919*, GHQ OAD 950: 3 November 1918.

¹⁰⁶ Referred to in TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade, *Instructions No.1, 8th November 1918*.

¹⁰⁷ TNA WO95/1771/4, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade.

On 6 November, 40th Division held a conference which considered the plans for the forced crossing of the Scheldt, by frontal attack if necessary. Two days later, 119 Brigade (40th Division) crossed the river 'in pursuit' of the enemy.¹⁰⁸ Patrols reported weakening resistance and some troops penetrated through Herrines. The following day the division advanced over seven miles, liberating a series of small villages and hamlets.¹⁰⁹

For the intended final phase, II and XV Corps were withdrawn into reserve. The number of front line divisions had been reduced over time to the point where, for the purpose of operations beyond 9 November, there would be only five divisions operating in the line, under a two Corps structure. The disposition of Second Army, north-to-south, would be as follows:

| | |
|-----------|---|
| XIX Corps | 41 st Division 35 th Division 31 st Division |
| X Corps | 30 th Division 29 th Division |

By now it was clear that German forces had given up on holding the line of the Schelde and Second Army sent forward advance units, using pontoon bridges and boats, onto the eastern bank. On that day 35th Division was tasked to seize and hold

¹⁰⁸ TNA WO95/2611/4, War Diary of 11th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

¹⁰⁹ TNA WO95/2594, War Diary of 40th Division, entries for 7-9 November.

Bercham railway, crossing the river through the use of canvas boats (the RE would then erect floating foot bridges).¹¹⁰ 20/Durham Light Infantry spent the night on the eastern bank at Meersche.¹¹¹ For 30th Division, 89 Brigade forced a passage over the River Escaut, with 21 and 90 Brigades ordered to follow up in support.¹¹² Following reports from patrols of enemy withdrawals, 43 Brigade (14th Division) moved forward to secure canal locks. 42 Brigade took up 'assault positions' to cross between Pecq and Helchin.¹¹³

Army orders were issued to include confirmation of the crossing of the Scheldt that morning (XV Corps: 14th and 40th Divisions – who were then withdrawn to Army Reserve) and the securing of the line Cordes-Anseroeul-Renaix-Nukerke. On the left, XIX Corps would maintain touch with the French Army (the French tank detachment transferring to Army Reserve). X Corps was tasked with seizing the ridge above St. Sauveur before pushing east. XIX and X Corps would then push on to the River Dendre, with XV and II Corps following.¹¹⁴ During the final three days of the war, Second Army advanced 22 miles, reaching the Dendre.

At 1020 hours on 11 November, 124 Brigade HQ was set up at Nederbrakel, four miles east of the Dendre, 'where an enemy machine gun, with one officer and six

¹¹⁰ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

¹¹¹ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations from Nov. 1st to the commencement of the Armistice at 11.a.m. Nov. 11th. 1918.*

¹¹² TNA WO95/2328, War Diary of 21 Infantry Brigade.

¹¹³ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade, *Instructions No.1, 8th November 1918.*

¹¹⁴ TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, *1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919*; TNA WO158/218, Second Army Summary of Operations, *24 August 1917 – 16 November 1919*, Report week ending 15 November 1918. The operation also saw the transfer of 36th Division to XV Corps.

other ranks were captured'.¹¹⁵ Its battalions were deployed along the river, having spent the morning advancing to that line.

By way of the Army's final act before the Armistice took effect at 1100 on 11 November, a squadron of the 7th Dragoon Guards, attached to X Corps, advanced towards the bridge over the Dendre at Lessines. At around 1045 the troops charged the village, taking 130 prisoners and a machine gun; more importantly, the bridge, which was wired for demolition, was captured intact. A further 41 prisoners were captured on higher ground overlooking the village; it now being after 1100, these prisoners were released.

During the period 1-11 November, 719 prisoners were captured by Second Army together with 18 guns, six trench mortars, 142 machine guns, and two complete trains and ten locomotives.¹¹⁶ The Army held the final line of East of Lessines – South and West of Ghoy – Ginintreau – La Livarde – Goeffendinge – part of Grammont – due North and West to the French right at Paricke.¹¹⁷

Thus the British Second Army concluded its war. As a commentary on the Army's achievements, Paul Harris concludes 'The Flanders operation.... was a major success'.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations from Nov. 1st to the commencement of the Armistice at 11.a.m. Nov. 11th. 1918.*

¹¹⁶ TNA WO158/218 Operations on the Second Army Front: 1st November to 11th November 1918.

¹¹⁷ TNA WO158/218, Second Army Summary of Operations, *24 August 1917 – 16 November 1919*, Report week ending 15 November 1918.

¹¹⁸ Harris with Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice.*

Chapter Seven

War of Liberation

*After four years of tyranny, during which they subjected us to a reign of steel and blood, they are going, vanquished... by the heroic resistance of a whole people who... have held out to the bitter end.*¹

*The last phase of the war took place in hitherto undamaged country where civilians still lived and were often surprised and killed by the cruel storm of the approaching force of war.*²

The Liberation of Flanders

The eastward drive of the fighting was liberating areas of Flanders which had been under German occupation for over four years. Two days into the Battle of Courtrai, 41st Division commented on the 'large number of civilians passing through our lines'.³ One day later 121 Brigade recorded that 'during the advance civilians were found in

¹ From the front page of the resistance newspaper *La Libre Belgique* published at the start of October 1918, quoted in O. E. Millard, *Uncensored: The True Story of the Clandestine Newspaper 'La Libre Belgique' Published in Brussels During the German Occupation* (London: Robert Hale and Company, 1937), p. 283.

² B. Stichelbaut and P. Chielens, *The Great War Seen From the Air: In Flanders Fields 1914-1918* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2013), p. 259.

³ TNA W095/2618, War Diary of 41st Division.

all villages and houses'.⁴ 7/Seaforth Highlanders noted that 'During the afternoon and evening a large number of civilians passed through our lines on their way to Winkle-St-Eloi'.⁵

On 18 October, Second Army Intelligence reported that thousands of civilians were being drawn towards the main towns including Tourcoing, Lauwe and Courtrai.⁶ The advancing troops of the Army saw evidence of this at first hand as they moved into and through the liberated areas.

*On the 18th [October, 1918] General Woodcock and the headquarters of the 101st Brigade made a triumphant entry into Lauwe, which was the first Belgian Town we had entered which was still inhabited. The inhabitants gave the general a demonstrative and enthusiastic welcome. The enemy was evidently in full retreat, and a crowd of liberated civilians were met on all sides.*⁷

*[Tourcoing was] full of civilians who received the battalion with the greatest enthusiasm: the streets were thronged with people, many of whom were most anxious to press refreshment of all kinds upon the first British troops they had seen.*⁸

⁴ TNA W095/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade.

⁵ TNA W095/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

⁶ TNA W0157/129, Second Army Intelligence Summary, 18 October 1918 'Civil Population'.

⁷ Wylly, *The Loyal North Lancs Regiment*, p. 151.

⁸ Major-General Sir L. Nicholson and Major H. McMullen, *History of the East Lancashire Regiment in the Great War 1914-1918* (Liverpool: Littlebury Bros., 1936) – the reference is to 13/East Lancs.

Although there had been assurances from the enemy that Courtrai would not be shelled, there had been artillery fire on 16 October resulting in a number of civilian casualties. In general, across the front, private houses were being found intact although many had been looted. Behind enemy lines, civilians were still being forced to assist in the construction of defensive positions.

Arrangements were put in place to manage the movement of British forces into formerly occupied towns and villages, and to handle the passage of civilians through and behind the lines of advance. It was important for the British troops to remember their status as liberators of the areas they advanced into, whilst also acting in a manner that would distinguish them from their German opponents. Towards the end of the Battle of Courtrai, 92 Brigade (31st Division) issued orders for units behind the line:

Troops of Battalions in support will be billeted as closely as possible... No houses except those in which troops are billeted will be entered...

Men will not leave their billet areas.

The strictest discipline will be maintained in the town.

*Men will walk about properly dressed, and will present a smart appearance and impress the civilians by their marked contrast to the German troops. Men will not wear garlands or flags in their hats or on their tunics.*⁹

A growing concern was to ensure that the Belgian population was adequately fed and supplied, with arrangements for evacuation where possible or necessary during the fighting. During the Battle of Courtrai, 88 Brigade (29th Division) encountered numbers of civilians gathering at the Collecting Station set up in Ledeghem; with the town under direct observation from Courtrai, they were in danger from enemy shellfire. The brigade put in place its own arrangements for evacuation.¹⁰

The success of the Army's logistical arrangements meant that the British assumed much of the initial responsibility for providing supplies. On 18 October the Deputy Director Supply & Transport recorded that:

*A very considerable quantity of civilians are now being fed by the British. This feeding is limited to 4 days rations in order to give the French and Belgians time to get rations from their own bases. The French will probably do this but it is perfectly certain that the Belgians, who are devoid of any idea of organisation, will never do it.*¹¹

⁹ 92nd INF. BDE. ORDER NO. 309, 18.10.18: TNA WO95/2356/5, War Diary of 92 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁰ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, 16th October 1918.

With the increasing contact between troops and civilians, units were also charged with identifying anyone who might be supplying information to the enemy. Having considered the issue of liberated villages, 43 Brigade (14th Division) concluded:

C.O.'s or Senior Officers to be Commandants of the villages where they are and to see to questions of lights, supplies and suspects.

*Suspects to be reported to Brigade.*¹²

The potential for action by spies or saboteurs was a new problem for the British as its troops encountered fresh numbers of civilians. On 22 October, 93 Brigade (31st Division) recorded that telephone wires between its HQ and the HQ of 13/York & Lancaster had been found to be cut in several places:

*In one case a piece of telephone wire 300 yards long had been cut out of the line. Several civilians were arrested as spies and handed over to the Belgian police attached to the Brigade.*¹³

There was concern that the retreating Germans had made arrangements for the collection of information on British operations. On 20 October, XV Corps issued a set of orders designed to guard against the potential for intelligence to be passed to the Germans, through putting restrictions in place for the monitoring and control of civilian

¹¹ TNA WO95/292, Deputy Director Supply & Transport: Daily Visits and Inspections, *18 October 1918*; on the following day he notes that XV Corps have demanded assistance to feed civilians around Tourcoing and Roubaix, estimating 150,000 adults and children (which would appear to be an excessive figure).

¹² TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade.

movement. All troops were to be circumspect 'in conversation either with or within hearing of all civilians'.¹⁴ Specific actions included the 'immediate detention of all suspicious individuals who may show undue interest in our movements and reporting at once any pigeons flying Eastwards or places from which pigeons are observed to have been released; in the latter case immediate investigation should be made by the observer'.¹⁵ All cables and lines were to be checked out by Signals and great care taken in the relay of messages. Civilians living in houses earmarked as headquarters would be the subject of detailed enquiries.

On 22 October, 41 Brigade (14th Division) arrested a Belgian named Van Hoenacker who was passed to the Assistant Provost Marshal 'charged with being a German agent'.¹⁶ Two days later the Brigade recorded the arrest of two women who were also charged with working for the enemy.¹⁷

While there is no evidence to link these incidents with the earlier orders from XV Corps, it is likely that units were increasingly suspicious of civilian activity. What had caused these Belgians to be arrested, or their subsequent fate, is not recorded.

Where possible, forward areas were to be evacuated, to reduce the risk of civilian casualties and prevent the potential concern of troops for the safety of civilians from impeding military operations. 93 Brigade noted on 22 October that:

¹³ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁴ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Brigade, *XV Corps No. I.G.41a/10, 40th Division*.

¹⁵ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Brigade, *XV Corps No. I.G.41a/10, 40th Division*.

¹⁶ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *22nd October 1918*.

*Our artillery was quiet owing to civilians moving about in the enemy's forward areas.*¹⁸

On 17 October, 90 Brigade had recorded that:

Civilians... came into our lines who said that the enemy had evacuated Turcoing and surrounding area...

*There were no civilians in [Bousbecque, Menin, Halluin] but 40 or 50 were in Roncq and these greeted our troops with every sign of joy.*¹⁹

The retreat of the German Army in the face of the advance by the allied forces brought conflicting experiences for the immediate populace. In many cases the enemy's withdrawal brought unexpected but very welcome relief. Towards the end of the Battle of Courtrai, 41 Brigade (14th Division) was marching into reserve at Roncq:

*Civilians were met on the line of march who appeared somewhat dazed but nevertheless delighted.*²⁰

¹⁷ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, 24th October 1918.

¹⁸ TNA WO95/2360, War Diary of 93 Infantry Brigade.

¹⁹ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

²⁰ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, 19th October 1918.

However, the hasty departure of the occupiers could cause short-term problems as noted by 27 Brigade (9th Division) on the second day of that battle:

The inhabitants of CUERNE told us that not an hour before we arrived there the enemy had streamed through a panic stricken mob of 2,000 soldiers who looted everything they could lay their hands on. Two Uhlan officers were killed at CUERNE trying to escape.²¹

On the morning of 21 October, 1/6 Cheshires (21 Brigade, 30th Division) had captured the hamlet of Helghin (Helchin):

Civilians were occupying the farms and houses in the area through which we had advanced and our troops were warmly welcomed everywhere. Belgium flags were flying and bells ringing half an hour after the enemy had been forced to evacuate each place. The casualties amongst the civilians were promptly attended to by our medical staff.²²

During the period 20-26 October 'more than twelve villages were liberated from the enemy...' by 124 Brigade.²³ Troops now viewed the battered landscape through the eyes of its besieged civilians:

²¹ TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918*.

²² TNA WO95/2330, War Diary of 1/6th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment.

²³ TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations commencing October 20th 1918*.

*A few days ago we marched through a town which was once in German hands; it is a fearful mess now, nothing but one vast heap of bricks and timber and scarcely a wall standing.*²⁴

This destruction had not taken place everywhere, as 2/South Lancs noted:

*The country through which the battalion marched, and which had been evacuated by the enemy, offered a marked contrast to that in which it had been operating for so long. Villages were more or less intact, the country showed little sign of war in comparison to what we had been accustomed for so long, and a number of civilians were seen... All villages through which the battalion marched were decorated with the Belgian flag and the inhabitants were most enthusiastic. Traces of fighting could be seen here and there and occasional shell holes were noticed on the roads.*²⁵

The same battalion was received with even greater enthusiasm the following month, on Armistice Day:

During the march great enthusiasm was shown by the inhabitants and on arrival in Flobecq the people were much excited and gave the troops an

²⁴ From the letters of D. E. Griffin, 2/1st East Riding Yeomanry, letter dated Thursday 5 September 1918, IWM collection.

²⁵ War Diary, 2nd Battalion, South Lancs Regiment, 19 and 20 October 1918.

*extraordinary welcome. The Band of the Battalion performed in the Square of the town much to the satisfaction of the inhabitants.*²⁶

During these final stages of the campaign there are various references within unit diaries to the warm welcome given by Belgian civilians to the British soldiers. Stationed for a time in reserve at Herseaux, the senior command of 41 Brigade attended a banquet given in honour of the brigade by the Burgomaster and local representatives:

*In a short speech the Burgomaster gave a hearty welcome to the B.G.C. and the troops under his command and thanked them as liberators.*²⁷

A few days later a team from Brigade HQ played a team of civilians at football; the result was 'a walk over' (presumably for the British).

121 Brigade recorded on 24 October 1918:

At 16.30 the Mayor and Council of CROIX attended at Brigade Headquarters for the purpose of presenting the Brigadier-General Commanding with an address of thanks for freeing the inhabitants of ROUBAIX and CROIX from the

²⁶ War Diary, 2nd Battalion, South Lancs Regiment, 11 November 1918.

²⁷ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, 23rd and 27th October 1918.

*Germans. They also intimated that they had made the Brigade Commander a free Citizen of CROIX.*²⁸

The address fills a side of paper, with an initial paragraph describing the sufferings of the civilian population under German rule. The list includes forced labour, deportation for work purposes, loss of property, the taking of hostages and other deprivations and restrictions. The document goes on to praise the 'valour and bravery of the... British' for freeing the town and its people from the 'boche'; ending with the bold:

*Vive la 121st Brigade! Vive son General!*²⁹

On 25 October, bands from the British army, including 105 Brigade (35th Division) had performed for the citizens of Courtrai.³⁰ Two days later, 90 Brigade (30th Division) recorded that:

*At the request of the inhabitants a detachment of one Officer and 25 Other Ranks from each Battalion attended a thanksgiving service in Aelbeke Church, to celebrate their deliverance from the enemy.*³¹

²⁸ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade.

²⁹ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *AN ADDRESS to Brigadier-General G.C. Stubbs, D.S.O. commanding the 121st Brigade of Infantry, CROIX, October 24th 1918*; it is not clear when or how the copy, which is dated 24 October 1918, was produced, having been first (presumably) translated. The war diary also includes a typed extract (in French) from the Municipal Council's formal record or register of the special meeting and presentation. General Stubbs was awarded the freedom of the city and the title of 'Honorary Citizen of the Ville de Croiz'.

³⁰ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade.

³¹ TNA WO95/2338, War Diary of 90 Infantry Brigade.

Arrangements were not always quite so formal. Troops from 5/Cameron Highlanders had the opportunity to bathe and 'get cleaned up', prior to being paid and proceeding 'to fraternize with the people they had liberated a week before'.³²

Where enemy resistance had caused troops to assault a town or village, then the opportunity of being liberated was potentially a very dangerous experience for civilians, as well as the soldiers. Second Army took steps to emphasise the importance of minimising the risk of casualties amongst the local population resulting from its operations. However, the defensive fire from German positions as British forces moved forward did not always discriminate between soldiers and civilians:

*[At Wattrelos] there was street fighting before the town was cleared of enemy rear guards, and casualties were inflicted on the advancing troops and civilians from the heavy bombardment of gas and high-explosive shells to which the town was subjected.*³³

There were also instances when war and peace co-existed – daily life rolled on as normal while the war passed it by:

A curious feature of this period of the operations was the attitude of the Belgian farmers who lived within range of the enemy's fire. Apparently oblivious to the dangers that surrounded them, they continued to occupy their farms, and to till

³² TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

³³ Nicholson et al, East Lancs, p. 558.

*their lands from sunrise to sunset, indifferent (at any rate outwardly) to the efforts of their allies to restore to them the freedom of their native land.*³⁴

As the advance proceeded, increasing efforts were made to interview civilians in order to obtain intelligence on German troop dispositions, movement and the morale of the enemy troops. The war diary of 14th Division included a list of individual civilians interviewed during October.³⁵ The report states that several civilians were questioned, most reporting that the Germans intended to withdraw immediately to their frontier. It also refers to the Mayor of Herseaux, who had been released from prison ten days previously after seven months confinement for an unknown crime.³⁶

As the liberation of Flanders gathered pace, allied forces moved into formerly occupied territories while an increasing number of civilians sought to make their way through the enemy lines. Army Intelligence Officers were taking steps to obtain information about the enemy from these civilians, while the Germans were attempting to forcibly evacuate civilians from areas in the path of the advance. The enemy was preparing new defensive lines in order to create the time and space for a planned withdrawal in the direction of the German frontier; an allied advance along the coast

³⁴ Nicholson et al, East Lancs, p. 558.

³⁵ Examples include Maurice Courcelles ('Forcibly evacuated from Minove on 1 October 1918; managed to escape...'), Edmond Delcroix ('Forcibly evacuated on 1 October 1918...'), Evarist Cluyse (Recently escaped from Brussels...): TNA WO95/1877, 14th Division General Staff, October – December 1918; it is interesting to note that the original typed report has been proofed or corrected – the name of each civilian is crossed out and the words 'a civilian' or 'another civilian' written in pencil; the intention was probably to produce a corrected report which was anonymised in order to protect the previously named individuals should the report fall into enemy hands.

³⁶ TNA WO95/1877, 14th Division General Staff, October – December 1918; the Mayor describes the morale of the German soldiers as 'completely broken' particularly those who had returned from leave – these reported that they could not obtain sufficient food to exist upon at home and had they not taken some food with them they would have starved.

could outflank the withdrawal and threaten the cohesion of the German armies. The morale of German troops was not good; obviously effected by the series of reverses along the Western Front, and made worse by news (and some first-hand experience of soldiers on leave) of the conditions being experienced by their families and neighbours back in Germany.

A report by the CO of 23/Middlesex suggests that there was a residue of ill-feeling by some German troops towards the Belgian people. On 25 October, a report on operations by the battalion records that the German artillery had fired gas shells into a village and, as villagers moved away into the open, they were subject to machine gun fire. There is no further comment on the incident and neither the village nor any witnesses are named - there is no other information to confirm the incident. One can only speculate on what factors, if the description of the event is correct, could have caused what would now be called a war crime. There may have been some particular circumstances which had led to animosity from the Germans, not that there could have been any just cause for the action.³⁷ Earlier, on 17 October, following its capture that day by British forces, the Germans had used gas at the Cuerne. The town was 'full of civilians who had no masks', this being considered 'one more instance of the kind of enemy we have to deal with'.³⁸

³⁷ TNA WO95/2639/3, War Diary of 23rd Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, *Report On Operation of the 23rd Middlesex Regiment on 22nd., 24th and 25th October, 1918.*

³⁸ TNA WO95/1771/4/5, War Diary of 27 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations 28th September-28th October 1918.*

Arrangements were required for the Army to be able to direct civilians to sources of support and to have authorities available to take responsibility for their welfare. The following orders were issued by 36th Division, which had spent much of its campaign operating alongside French and Belgian forces:

Civilians

*The Divisional Belgian Liaison Officer, Lieut. R.G. KRIEGLINGER, who will be located at Advanced Divisional Headquarters, and the D.A.P.M. [Deputy Assistant Provost Marshal] will be informed at once if any civilians are found. The D.A.P.M. will make the necessary arrangements for escorting civilians.*³⁹

The risk to local Belgians remained as the fighting moved eastwards. On 6 November, 41 Brigade noted that 'DOTTIGNIES shelled during the afternoon, 3 civilians killed and 2 soldiers wounded'.⁴⁰

One of the practical problems presented to Second Army was that of refugees moving to liberated areas without having anywhere to live; often taking up accommodation needed for troops. These problems had occurred as early as 15 September, with the success of the initial attacks east of Ypres. 14th Division was deployed south east of Ypres:

³⁹ TNA WO95/2509, War Diary of 109 Infantry Brigade, 36 (*Ulster*) Div. Administrative Instructions No. 39, 19.10.1918.

⁴⁰ TNA W095/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade.

*Difficulty in accommodation will be overcome when Belgian Refugees are moved from Billets allotted to Troops. Tents will be drawn... and returned as billets become available.*⁴¹

Once the Armistice came into force then the movement of civilians, amidst concerns for their welfare, became a priority for the Army; 41st Division noted that on 12 November:

*Posts were established at bridge-heads within [124] Brigade boundaries, and the main roads leading from the North and East, for the examination of civilians and refugees passing through our lines.*⁴²

There are various references within unit war diaries to the praise paid to Second Army by the Belgians, and by their King. On 5 November, 9th Division attended a parade at Hulste Aerodrome, where its troops were inspected by King Albert together with the Queen and II Corps Commander Jacobs. In his address to the assembled soldiers the King paid tribute to the achievements of the Division (which had operated for much of the campaign along the right flank of the Belgian Army); he stated that he had prior knowledge of the Division:

⁴¹ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade, S.30/19A, *Further Administrative Notes to 42nd Infantry Brigade Order No.17.*

⁴² TNA WO95/2642, War Diary of 124 Infantry Brigade, *Report on Operations from Nov. 1st to the commencement of the Armistice at 11.a.m. Nov. 11th. 1918*; these actions were planned for 12 November.

*... [having] followed the career of the 9th Scottish Division since the Battle of Loos... during recent operations the 9th Division had worked in closest liaison with his army in recovering a vast stretch of his beloved country... [he] hoped that members of 9th Division would return happily to his country after a victorious peace.*⁴³

It being Flanders it is perhaps no surprise that the event took place in wet weather. However ‘...in spite of rain the inspection was a great success’.⁴⁴

Fall Out: The Ending of the *Groupe d’Armées des Flandres*

*... Wartime cooperation [is] continually fraught with tension and mutual suspicion. The economic theory of coalitions emphasizes the incentives for each country to hold back and wait for its partners to do the job in hand.*⁴⁵

Less than two months previously Douglas Haig had been pleased to see Second Army join the coalition army group under King Albert; however, by the end of October, he became demonstrably exasperated with the delay in returning Second Army to the BEF and his command.⁴⁶ While the five British Armies had now advanced to form a

⁴³ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders; the accompanying music from the band of 9th Division included the National Anthem of Belgium and the Scottish pipe march *The Barren Rocks of Aden*.

⁴⁴ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

⁴⁵ M. Harrison, ‘Industry and the Economy’, in D.R. Stone, ed., *The Soviet Union At War 1941-1945* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010), p. 39.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Greenhalgh has included valuable descriptions and commentaries on these events in her books *Victory Through Coalition*, pp. 254-261, and *Foch in Command*, pp. 454-457.

coherent forward line '...Haig only controlled four of them'.⁴⁷ Foch's desire was to see King Albert enter Bruges at the head of a joint coalition force, only to be met by Haig's insistence that Second Army had fulfilled its agreed task. There have been various reasons put forward for Haig's insistence on bringing Second Army out of the GAF coalition at this time, including from Haig himself; but these have not explained the absolute determination with which he pursued this goal, even to the point of threatening to resign his command of the BEF unless his demand was complied with. There were a number of factors influencing Haig's thinking at the time, which combined to cause him to engage in brinkmanship with Foch. Undoubtedly the level of stress under which this man was operating was immense. To fully understand his motives it is necessary to consider the argument within the context of the German attempts to secure an armistice, and the discussions on this within the allied military and political leaderships.⁴⁸

Following the ceasefire agreed with Bulgaria on 29 September, the German leadership had begun a process to seek a ceasefire, initially through an approach to President Wilson of the USA. At a meeting of the European leaders on 8 October, Foch provided a note on the essential terms which he believed the ceasefire agreement should contain. These included liberation of the occupied territories including Alsace-Lorraine; allied occupation of the left bank of the Rhine (as security for the demand for reparations) and bridgeheads across the river to prevent any

⁴⁷ Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 332.

⁴⁸ The sources for a description of these processes include: Terraine, *To Win A War*, pp. 177-184, 193-200, 207-226; Stevenson, *Backs To The Wall*, pp. 509-534; (from the German perspective) R.M. Watt, *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Germany: Versailles and the German Revolution*, (London: The Literary Guild, 1969), pp. 32-38,

resumption of hostilities by the Germans; plus various requirements regarding the retention and safeguarding of materiel and infrastructure consequent upon the withdrawal of the German Army. Foch showed his paper to Haig on 10 October who recorded his views in his diary:

*I remarked that the only difference between his (Foch's) conditions and a general surrender is that the German Army is allowed to march back with its rifles, and officers with their swords...*⁴⁹

Haig's CGS, General Lawrence, was concerned that the Germans still retained the ability to counter-attack; the British Army would have to shoulder the main response and could expect little assistance from the French. On this subject Haig remained optimistic, doubting the enemy's ability to launch a strong attack and confident that the allies were facing a beaten army; no reference is made regarding the French Army. It should also be noted that Haig had wired Foch the previous evening making reference to British Second Army, recommending to the Marshal:

*... my advance on the battle front should now be between the Scheldt and Sambre with the object of joining hands with my Second Army and the other troops under King of the Belgians...*⁵⁰

109-110, 170-172; (Douglas Haig's recorded views) Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries*, entries for October and November 1918.

⁴⁹ Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries*, pp. 471-2.

⁵⁰ Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries*, p. 471.

While the meaning is somewhat ambiguous regarding whether control of Second Army resides with Haig or King Albert, this choice of words displays no obvious concerns about the command arrangements existing at that time. Four days later, the Battle of Courtrai opened. Haig wrote in his diary:

[15 October]

The Second Army did very well today... The French divisions now in Flanders are reported not to be fighting. The Belgians, on the other hand, have done splendidly.

[16 October]

General Cavendish [attached to King Albert's staff] writes last night that French troops in Flanders are not fighting at all. They take no interest in 'Flanders for the Belgians!' Also the King now seems only anxious to stop his offensive and rest on his laurels.⁵¹

Suddenly it seems that Haig had developed two concerns regarding the deployment and disposition of Second Army: it had taken the lead in the fighting undertaken by the GAF, without the expected strength of support from the French;⁵² while he acknowledged that the Belgian Army was proving an effective force, he had doubts (which were not new) about Albert's commitment to a sustained offensive.

⁵¹ As recorded in Terraine, *To Win A War*, pp. 203-4.

⁵² In practical terms, Second Army had achieved the original task for which Haig had agreed its release to the GAF, that of securing the left bank of the Lys, by the close of the second day of the Battle of Courtrai: See

On 18 October Haig telephoned Foch to make his request that Second Army should now be returned to his command.⁵³ That same day he travelled to London for a meeting of the British War Cabinet, having had a further discussion with Lawrence about the terms of an armistice. The latter had given Haig a note which argued that the conditions should not be too demanding because it was in Great Britain's interest to bring the war to a conclusion. Throughout, Haig had been convinced that the war could and should be ended in 1918, and he argued this at the meeting on 19 October when asked by Lloyd George for his views on the armistice terms:

I replied that they must greatly depend on the answers we give to two questions:

- 1. Is Germany now so beaten that she will accept whatever terms the Allies may offer?*
- 2. Can the Allies continue to press the Enemy sufficiently vigorously during the coming winter months as to cause him to withdraw so quickly that he cannot destroy railways, roads, etc.?*

The answer to both is in the negative. The German Army is capable of retiring to its own frontier, and holding that line if there should be any attempt to touch

Dewar, *Haig's Command, Vol. II*, pp. 330-3; and **Map 6A** (taken from Dewar's book) which shows the relative progress made by the British, French and Belgian forces during the first two days of fighting.

⁵³ TNA WO32/5102, (General, Code 86(A)), *Field Marshal Haig requests return of 2nd British Army to his command from the King of the Belgians*: this phone call is confirmed in a subsequent letter, 25 October 1918, from Haig to the Secretary of the War Cabinet.

*the honour of the German people, and make them fight with the courage of despair.*⁵⁴

Haig then gave his opinion of the state of the allied armies. While the British Army was more efficient than it had ever been, the hard fighting meant it faced issues around the reinforcements needed for its losses, such that morale could be at risk. He was concerned that the French Army was 'worn out and has not been fighting latterly'.⁵⁵ In conclusion he pointed out that the French and American Armies were not capable of taking part in the immediate allied offensive (to take advantage of the fading capabilities of the enemy at that particular time) which would be needed to defeat the German Army in the field. In his subsequent diary entry, Haig summarised the views he presented on the British forces:

The British alone might bring the enemy to his knees. But why expend more British lives – and for what?

...The British Army has done most of the fighting latterly, and everyone wants to have done with the war, provided we get what we want. I therefore advise that we only ask in the armistice for what we intend to hold, and that we set our faces against the French entering Germany to pay off old scores. In my

⁵⁴ Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries*, p. 475; these views were shared by the German military command but no one on the allied side at that stage knew of the split between the German military and the new political leaders in Germany, which would in due course lead to the acceptance of armistice terms close to an 'unconditional surrender' - Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 211.

⁵⁵ Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries*, p. 475.

*opinion, under the supposed conditions, the British Army would not fight keenly for what is not really its own affair.*⁵⁶

It was against this background that Haig returned to France. Foch had now set out his view of the strategic priorities for all the allied forces in a letter 'Directive No. 4925' to Army Commanders dated 19 October.⁵⁷ This would presumably have been waiting for Haig's attention when he arrived at GHQ.

The letter required the GAF (including Second Army) to 'march in the general direction of Brussels... forcing the major river lines: ESCAUT – DENDER'. To the south, the four British Armies (with French First Army) were to maintain their current objectives which would also 'assist the advance of the Flanders Army Group' through 'action on the flank'. These orders suggest that Foch saw the ongoing operations of the remaining British Armies aiding the drive through Belgium.⁵⁸

It was with this confirmation of Foch's aims that Haig attended a subsequent meeting with the Generalissimo on 24 October. He was now deeply suspicious of French motives. Furthermore, he believed that the excessive demands of the French regarding armistice terms would mean a continuation of the fighting, the brunt of

⁵⁶ Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries*, p. 475; Terraine, *To Win A War*, pp. 211-3.

⁵⁷ TNA WO32/5102, (General, Code 86(A)), *Field Marshal Haig requests return of 2nd British Army to his command from the King of the Belgians*; letter from 'F. Foch' to 'Commandement en Chef des Armées Alliées', *DIRECTIVE GENERALE No. 4925*, 'G.Q.G.A., le 19 Octobre 1918'. The full translated text, which sets out Foch's strategic objectives for the Belgian, British, French and American forces, is included in Appendix D.

⁵⁸ TNA WO32/5102, (General, Code 86(A)), *Field Marshal Haig requests return of 2nd British Army to his command from the King of the Belgians*; letter from 'F. Foch' to 'Commandement en Chef des Armées Alliées', *DIRECTIVE GENERALE No. 4925*, 'G.Q.G.A., le 19 Octobre 1918'.

which would have to be borne by his troops.⁵⁹ The most obvious practical illustration of Haig's nightmare was occurring now in Flanders – with British Second Army fronting an army group in which the French formations appeared to be failing and the Belgian King seemed increasingly reluctant to commit his own forces because of the risks of heavy casualties and the impact of the fighting on his people and the fabric of the country. Now, Foch's objectives for the GAF and Second Army went beyond the original line of the Lys. Haig was also bolstered in his opinions on the armistice proposals by a meeting on 23 October with General Pershing, commander of the American forces in France. In Haig's opinion, Pershing agreed with his views on the 'state of Enemy, and state of allied Armies, and as to what our demands should be'.⁶⁰ The Army Council in the War Office also shared Haig's opinions.⁶¹

Having already made an initial request the previous week, the issue was pursued by Haig at a meeting with Foch on 24 October, prior to a conference of the Commanders-in-Chief the following day. The meeting was primarily to discuss the terms of an armistice with the Germans but Haig also used the opportunity to ask for the immediate return of Second Army to his command. On the former matter, Haig perceived Foch's reasoning in support of the occupation of German territory as

⁵⁹ The British Ambassador in Paris, the 17th Earl of Derby, recorded a summary of the dispute between Haig and Foch in his diary, based upon a conversation with the Secretary of State for War, Viscount Alfred Milner: D. Dutton, ed. *Paris 1918: The War Diary of the British Ambassador, the 17th Earl of Derby* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), pp. 293-4, 25 October 1918.

⁶⁰ Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig Diaries*, p. 478.

⁶¹ Stevenson, *Backs To The Wall*, p. 523.

'political not military',⁶² and he remained concerned that the Allies would demand conditions that they could not enforce.⁶³

His request regarding Second Army was met with a refusal by Foch and, after discussion, an agreement between them to refer the matter to the British Government.⁶⁴ Haig recorded an outline of the argument and the reasoning for his request in his diary:

We then dealt with the question of the Second Army which I asked last week should be again placed under my orders. On the 9th September I agreed that it should co-operate under the King of the Belgians for a specific purpose, namely, to cover the right of the Belgian Army on the River Lys, and enable the Belgians, supported by the French, to advance on Bruges and Ghent. That phase of the operation is over, and all the five Armies of which the BEF is composed are either along or approaching the line of the Scheldt and are confronted with the same problem, viz., the passage of that river. The manner in which the line of the Scheldt can most easily be forced is to cross it in its upper course where my Fourth, Third and half of the First Armies have already crossed it. From Oudenaarde downwards the minimum number of troops should be employed as a menace. To force a passage there, in the face of hostile opposition, would be most costly.

⁶² Terraine, *To Win A War*, pp. 215-6.

⁶³ Haig's views were not shared by CIGS, General Sir Henry Wilson, or Viscount Milner, who both supported a tougher line: Stevenson, *Backs To The Wall*, p. 523; or by the Earl of Derby: Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 294.

⁶⁴ Terraine, *To Win A War*, pp. 225-6.

Foch declines to return the Second Army to me because he says of the political value of having the King of the Belgians in command of an Allied Army, when he re-enters his capital, Brussels! His real object is to use the British Second Army to open the way for the 'dud' divisions (of which the rest of the King's Army is composed) and ensure that they get to Brussels. France would then get credit for clearing Belgium and putting the King back in his capital. De Goutte is nominally Chief of Staff to King Albert: really he is the Army Commander.

I explained the military reason why the Second army must now be under my orders. If there were political reasons requiring the Second Army to remain under King Albert, then the British Government must direct me on the subject. Until I was so informed, I must continue to view the situation from a military standpoint, and insist on the return of the Second Army without delay. Foch asked me to submit my request in writing...

I am disgusted at the almost underhand way in which the French are trying to get hold of a part of the British Army – and so ungenerous too, because in the first instance, I handed over all the troops of that Army at once to operate under the French Staff of the King of the Belgians, without raising the smallest difficulty... I told [Foch and Weygand] a few 'home truths'... the British Army

*has defeated the Germans this year and I [alone] am responsible to the British Government for the handling of the British troops not Foch.*⁶⁵

On 25 October Haig wrote two letters setting out his arguments for the return of Second Army to his command.⁶⁶ In his short letter to Foch, Haig summarised the terms of his agreement to the deployment of Second Army in Flanders, this being the employment of two divisions 'under the command of His Majesty the King of the Belgians' to cover the flank of the GAF in its eastern advance; and the use of Second Army to exploit any resulting successes. As we have seen, there had been no secondment or similar of any British Divisions to the GAF; rather, Second Army had operated as part of a combined Army Group, recognising its responsibilities for the Belgian right flank, and co-operating in the achievement of agreed strategic objectives (although Plumer had reserved for himself the decisions on Army operations consistent with these).

Haig pointed out that with the heavy commitment of his other British Armies,

It was well understood that... the Second Army was not to be committed to any other operation than that of clearing the ground up to the LYS River. The whole

⁶⁵ G. D. Sheffield, and J. Bourne, ed., *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), *Thursday 24 October*, pp. 478-9. Haig's position is also summarised by the Earl of Derby following a meeting between the two on 26 October 1918: Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 295-6.

⁶⁶ TNA WO32/5102, (General, Code 86(A)), *Field Marshal Haig requests return of 2nd British Army to his command from the King of the Belgians*: letter, 25 October 1918, from Haig to 'The Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces in France'; letter, 25 October 1918, from Haig to the Secretary of the War Cabinet. The full text of both letters is included in Appendices E1 and E2.

scope of the operation had as its objective the 'clearing of the Belgian coast and the country between the coast and the River LYS'.

Haig must have known that by this time, Second Army was up to ten miles beyond the Lys and preparing to tackle the Scheldt. His letter concluded:

This has now been accomplished and I request that the Second Army be forthwith returned to my command. If, as I understand, further operations by the Army of Flanders have as their objective the capture of BRUSSELS, this can be equally attained by the co-operation of all the British Armies including the Second Army operating under my control.

The reference here to 'Army of Flanders' indicates that Haig was well aware of Second Army's increased role within the Army Group. His comments also demonstrate his concern that if Plumer continued to remain with the GAF then the critical British role in the further liberation of Belgium would be overlooked, while credit went to King Albert and the French.

This interpretation is confirmed by Haig's second letter, a longer letter to the War Cabinet, enclosing copies of his letter to Foch and the 19 October 'Directive No. 4925' from the latter.⁶⁷ Haig proceeds to restate his commitment to co-operation with French forces, giving examples of temporary detachments he has made of British

units, 'on the AISNE in May and on the MARNE in July'.⁶⁸ Such arrangements were 'of a purely temporary nature' and the units were 'to be returned on the completion of the specific operation in hand'; this agreement had also applied to Second Army and the GAF.

He then reviews the achievements of Second Army,⁶⁹ pointing out that it had 'successfully' provided flank protection and secured the left bank of the River Lys, taking 'the heaviest share of the work in driving the enemy back' and incurring 'some 22,000 casualties'. He also highlights the 'considerable casualties' resulting from the 'series of important attacks [by First, Third and Fourth British Armies] on a wide front against positions of vital importance to the enemy' held by 'a considerable number of his best troops'. Haig then emphasises the main point of his letter to Foch, namely, that the drive of Second Army to force the Rivers Scheldt and Dendre 'can be equally well undertaken under my [Haig's] control'; and so allow him to 'balance the casualties so that their incidence may not fall unduly on the British forces'.

This is Haig's central concern. As his penultimate paragraph describes, he sees that 'the brunt of the offensive operations has fallen on the British troops' and 'Owing to

⁶⁷ TNA WO32/5102, (General, Code 86(A)), *Field Marshal Haig requests return of 2nd British Army to his command from the King of the Belgians*; letter from 'F. Foch' to 'Commandement en Chef des Armées Alliées', *DIRECTIVE GENERALE No. 4925*, 'G.Q.G.A., le 19 Octobre 1918'; see Appendix D.

⁶⁸ In the interests of balance it should be pointed out, as Haig does not, that there were occasions when French forces were placed under British command. A current example was Debeney's formation, deployed under Rawlinson and Fourth Army, as noted by the Earl of Derby at the time (Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 293).

⁶⁹ Haig again makes specific reference to 'two divisions [attacking] in conjunction with the Belgian Army' which, as referred to previously, did not reflect Plumer's orders on the deployment of Second Army at the start of the Battle of Ypres. In his conversation with Lord Derby on 26 October 1918 (Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 295) Haig actually explains that while he had been requested originally to place two British divisions under Albert he had offered to transfer the full Second Army. However, somewhat peculiarly, most of his references to this decision only describe the deployment of two divisions.

our lack of effectives this cannot be allowed to continue much longer'. Crucially, regarding the position of Second Army,

It is therefore most necessary that I should exercise the greatest care in engaging the five Armies of which the British Expeditionary Force is composed. The responsibility for this can alone rest on me, and ought not in the case of any portion of the British forces to be delegated to any foreign Commander, of no matter how high a rank.⁷⁰

[My emphasis.]

Thus Haig sought the support of the War Cabinet in bringing Second Army back under his command – allowing him to manage all the remaining resources of the BEF, particularly its troops, as effectively as possible. Importantly, the letter does state his commitment to carrying out Foch's overall aims and 'instructions' in the latter's 19 October letter.⁷¹ This is evidence that Haig continued to hold respect for Foch's position and his direction, crucial to the eventual resolution of this particular disagreement between the two men.

Haig's concerns were taken up by Sir Henry Wilson as CIGS. An internal covering note 28 October 1918, attached to Haig's letters, records that:

⁷⁰ Letter, 25 October 1918, from Haig to the Secretary of the War Cabinet, p. 2.

⁷¹ Haig, despite the strength of his disagreement with Foch over the command of Second Army, makes clear that he is 'anxious to carry out Marshal Foch's wishes and instructions to the full' – he has no problem in using the term 'instructions' thereby showing that he continues to acknowledge and respect the *Generalissimo's* authority.

No action on this to be taken at present.

*CIGS has gone to discuss it & has a copy.*⁷²

Haig was apparently unaware of this action. On 26 October Haig met the Earl of Derby, Britain's Ambassador in Paris, and asked him to try and intercede via the French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau. He emphasised his strength of feeling through the threat of resignation. If his government would not support him then Haig intended 'to be asked to be relieved of his command'.⁷³

27 October Haig wrote formally to Foch in terms which turned the argument into one which was directly linked to his authority – that the refusal to return Second Army directly undermined his position as Commander of the BEF.⁷⁴ His letter was no doubt also influenced by the outcomes from the conference of allied commanders on 25 October. There he had been a dissenting voice, as the final armistice proposals were in accord with the views of Foch, supported by the other commanders: 'nothing less than unconditional surrender, but without actually using that phrase'.⁷⁵

Haig's reasoning continued to be heavily influenced by his belief that the British Army was carrying the weight of the fighting and making most progress; that the French forces were not pulling their weight; that the increased casualty rates resulting from

⁷² TNA WO32/5102, (General, Code 86(A)), *Field Marshal Haig requests return of 2nd British Army to his command from the King of the Belgians; Minute Sheet No. 1, 121/France/3035.*

⁷³ As recorded by the Earl of Derby: Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 293, diary entry for 26 October 1918. See also Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, p. 258.

⁷⁴ Haig to Foch, 27 October 1918, referred to in Sheffield and Bourne, *Douglas Haig War Diaries*, p. 479, footnote.

⁷⁵ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 218.

the open and offensive warfare being waged, would mean increased complaints from London and exacerbate the problem of reinforcements. Elizabeth Greenhalgh has attributed Haig's strength of feeling to '... resentment [over the British Army carrying the main weight of the fighting], pessimism over casualties, and jealousy [over King Albert making a triumphal entry into Bruges] – together with, perhaps, pique at the memory of having had the French First army removed from his command in August.'⁷⁶ This assessment is unjustly harsh on Haig. He had shown genuine concern at the disproportionate share of the fighting being undertaken by British forces, which was increasingly evident in Second Army's changed role within the GAF. He was also worried about the consequences of the casualty rate and believed that he could manage this more efficiently if he reassumed command of all the British Armies. This was also why he did not support the submission of ceasefire proposals which the Germans would feel unable to accept, thereby prolonging the war. The evidence of personal jealousies or a desire for the limelight influencing his views is limited – Haig's actions and demeanour following his return to Britain after the Armistice do not indicate that this was a factor in his dispute with Foch. He had confirmed in writing his agreement to the overall authority and direction set by Foch. There were also plenty of times during the Hundred Days when Haig could have chosen to lead a triumphal British Army through a liberated major town or city. If his personal feelings were a contributory factor – and this is perfectly possible – then this was more likely linked to his perception that the British Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, attached more weight to Foch's opinions and views than they did to those of Haig. For

⁷⁶ E. Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2005), p.258.

example, his reaction to the faint praise in the telegram from Lloyd George on 9 October, which was written following Foch's report to the Prime Minister of the British Army's recent victories.⁷⁷

With regard to Haig's pessimism concerning the fighting abilities of the French Army, Greenhalgh acknowledges that while 'relations between Degoutte and Plumer were said to be of the best... the Belgians were critical of the French units who were not fighting well'.⁷⁸

The degree of feeling in the dispute that arose between Haig and Foch over the question of Second Army can seem disproportionate unless the broader context of the proposed terms for the armistice is considered, alongside Haig's assessments of the allied armies. Although he makes no mention of the armistice terms in his 25 October letters,⁷⁹ the crucial issue was that Second Army's position within the GAF and the circumstances in Flanders, represented in microcosm Haig's broader concerns about the situation on the Western Front and the state of play regarding the armistice discussions at that particular time.

Some blame for the dispute has been directed at the GHQ staff, and CGS Lawrence, given the latter's pessimistic views on continuing the war, the pressures on British forces, and the state of the German Army. 'Lawrence was reported as intending to

⁷⁷ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 200-1.

⁷⁸ Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, p.255.

oppose 'with all his force' the retention of Second Army under Albert's command'.⁸⁰ Sheffield refers to Haig 'ascribing to Foch devious political motives for keeping Plumer under the command of the King of the Belgians'⁸¹; he quotes Haig as viewing Foch's refusal to transfer Second Army back to the BEF command as striking 'at the very foundation of my [Haig's] position'.⁸²

On 27 October, Lord Derby met at breakfast with CIGS, General Henry Wilson, and Secretary of State for War, Viscount Milner. The latter was able to report that the Cabinet supported the return of Second Army to Haig's command and that the issue was to find a method acceptable to all parties for arranging this. That morning, at his meeting with Clemenceau, Lord Derby pursued Haig's request. Despite confiding that he and Foch 'were not on the best of terms', Clemenceau had expressed his support for Haig and undertook to discuss the issue with Foch at a meeting that afternoon.⁸³

Haig was sceptical:

*[Clemenceau] would settle the question if Foch was in a reasonable mood! It seems that Clemenceau and Foch are not on good terms. Foch is suffering from a swelled head and thinks himself another Napoleon! So Clemenceau has great difficulties with him now.*⁸⁴

⁷⁹ The letters were written on the same day as the conference of allied commanders, at which Haig had appeared isolated in his concerns at setting armistice terms which were close to an unconditional surrender (and which the Germans might therefore feel compelled to reject).

⁸⁰ Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, p. 255.

⁸¹ Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 332.

⁸² Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 332, reference Haig's manuscript diary 24 October 1918; Haig to Foch, 27 October 1918, Haig's papers 132.

⁸³ Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 297, diary entry for 27 October 1918.

⁸⁴ Sheffield and Bourne, *Douglas Haig War Diaries*, p. 481-2.

Haig's doubts reflect Derby's conversation that morning with Clemenceau – and the latter duly reported back to Derby that Foch had proved to be 'immovable' on the issue.⁸⁵ Foch had also complained that Haig had not supplied his reasons for the return of Second Army. Derby saw this point as a possible way of allowing the Generalissimo to maintain his authority while agreeing to Haig's request – which now had the crucial support of the British government. That evening Derby and Wilson persuaded Haig to write 'a private and conciliatory letter to Foch' setting out his case (though Haig complained that this he had already done).⁸⁶

The responsibility for finally resolving the dispute is claimed by the CIGS, Henry Wilson, who met with Foch on 28 October to deliver Haig's letter. Terraine describes how:

In the end it fell to Foch's old friend, Sir Henry Wilson, to persuade the Generalissimo. They met... at Foch's headquarters. Wilson recorded: 'I had rather a stormy meeting with Foch, but I think I was able to put my case strongly but quietly'.⁸⁷

Greenhalgh also believes that the 'stormy words' between Wilson and Foch were the turning point.⁸⁸ In his biography of Plumer however, Powell credits Milner with

⁸⁵ Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 298, diary entry for 27 October 1918.

⁸⁶ Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 298, diary entry for 27 October 1918.

⁸⁷ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 226.

⁸⁸ Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, p. 257.

bringing 'pressure to bear upon Clemenceau' which then led to Foch conceding.⁸⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Haig's subsequent report to Derby suggested that it was Haig's own meeting with Foch which had delivered a 'satisfactory' conclusion.⁹⁰

Their meeting on 28 October had proved to be a cordial coming together over 'tea and cakes' initiated by Foch (though Haig pointed out that he never 'took tea!'). The agreement was for Second Army to complete its pending operation to advance to the Scheldt, at which point command would transfer back to Haig. Despite the strong feelings displayed by Haig, in the end the issue was perhaps one of a lower priority for Foch.⁹¹

In a note back to London on 29 October, Wilson, in his own inimical style, summarised the resolution of the dispute:

*The little trouble about 2nd Army is completely removed and we are sailing in a summer sun with steady fair and gentle breezes.*⁹²

This message was relayed that same day to the War Cabinet.⁹³

⁸⁹ Powell, *Plumer*, p. 277-8.

⁹⁰ Dutton, ed., *Paris 1918*, p. 300, diary entry for 28 October 1918

⁹¹ This point, within a concise exposition of the dispute, its causes and resolution, and the views of the main protagonists, is made in Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, pp. 254-61.

⁹² TNA WO32/5102, (General, Code 86(A)), *Field Marshal Haig requests return of 2nd British Army to his command from the King of the Belgians*; memo from Sir Henry Wilson to P.S. to C.I.G.S., *B.L.662 October 29th H.W. Personal*.

⁹³ Handwritten notes on Henry Wilson's memo (TNA WO32/5102).

The one person's views missing from this narrative are those of the Commander of Second Army. None of the texts make any mention of Plumer's opinion given that there are no personal papers to refer to. No-one, including Haig, seems to have thought to consult him directly. Given his pragmatic approach to his responsibilities, and his loyalty to his Commander-in-Chief, it is probable that Plumer simply got on with the job in hand. In practical terms, the Second Army completed its drive to the Scheldt and then continued with preparations to assault the enemy across the river (offset by the German's retirement 8-10 November). Greenhalgh concludes: 'It is unlikely that Plumer's Second Army would have done anything differently if it had remained under King Albert's command in the GAF'.⁹⁴

Plumer had not been present at the conference of British Army commanders held on 31 October; Second Army returned to Haig's command four days later.

*At 1 p.m. on the 4th November, one hour after the Second Army had reverted to the command of Sir Douglas Haig, General Plumer visited him at G.H.Q. and received his orders to reconnoitre actively, follow the Germans with advanced guards if they withdrew, and be prepared to attack and cross the Schelde on or about the 11th November, by which date the commander of the Second Army said he could be ready.*⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, p. 258; though a subsequent failure to agree the armistice might have led to very different developments.

⁹⁵ Edmonds, *Official History*, Vol. V, p. 451; TNA WO158/212, Second Army Operations, 1 October 1918 – 20 January 1919, GHQ OAD 950: 3 November 1918.

On 6 November Haig met with Degoutte, who was still operating as Chief of Staff to King Albert. The meeting discussed Haig's proposal to force the passage of the Scheldt:

... by my Fifth and Second Armies on Monday next [11 November]...

De Goutte quite agreed with me, and said he would co-operate on the same day.⁹⁶

[My emphasis].

Second Army was back within the BEF and under Haig's command.

⁹⁶ Sheffield and Bourne, *Douglas Haig War Diaries*, p. 484.

Conclusion

British Second Army, on its own initiative, took the lead in the *Liberation Offensive* in Flanders in the Hundred Days.

Its formations systematically assaulted a series of positions defended by well-sited machine guns and artillery. In part, this application of heavy weaponry reflected the lower number of troops available to the Germans, although the problem of units operating below their theoretical fighting strength also applied to Second Army. Similarly, both sides possessed troops of variable quality, which had implications for tactics and organisation. Together with the nature of the terrain being defended, the Germans were forced to position their defenders well forward. Previously they had adopted a series of defensive lines, with the British attackers forced to enter a 'killing ground' beyond a thinly-manned first line of defence. The changed situation certainly helped Second Army. The artillery support allowed its infantry, upon breaking through the first and main line of defence, to enter into open ground. It was only when the Germans were able to execute planned retirements that the defenders could block the British advance – hence the persistent emphasis in the orders issued by Plumer for the retreating troops to be harassed by every means possible. There are constant references in the British operational reports of the Germans withdrawing and of resistance stiffening. In this the Germans were helped considerably by the terrain.

The nature of the Flanders' geography was ideally suited to defence. The Germans generally held higher ground with clear sight lines, particularly at the start of the campaign, and made very effective use of available cover and buildings. The clever use of demolitions also proved to be a stumbling block for attacking troops. Initially, the British were attacking over ground destroyed by earlier fighting. This terrain, pock-marked by shell craters and war debris, hindered forward movement and caused delays in transport, supplies and supporting artillery. It provided excellent opportunities for creating defensive positions quickly and successfully, providing ample sites for machine gun nests and snipers.

As the advance progressed, the British troops entered ground with which they were unfamiliar. Maps varied in their availability and quality; RAF reconnaissance was hindered by variable flying conditions. The terrain was divided by canals and rivers, obstacles which aided the defensive yet had to be crossed by the attackers. There are many examples within unit diaries and histories of river and canal crossings, either via careful pre-planning or hasty improvisation. In either case the actual method of getting troops across the water was complemented by effective tactics and deployment in order to secure and defend an initial bridgehead. A short example of a battalion operation is given in the regimental history of the Loyal North Lancs Regiment:

At 9.30 on the 17th [October 1918] 'B' Company of the [2nd Battalion, Loyal North Lancs] crossed the river [Lys] near Royal Farm – one man at a time – by

means of an improvised raft, and established posts in a semi-circle covering the crossing place. An hour later 'D' Company was ordered to cross and advance on Lauwe, supported by Lewis Gun fire by 'A' [Company]; and by 2pm Lauwe was occupied, and on the arrival of 'C' company a defensive flank was formed facing north-east between the Courtrai and Arbeke roads.¹

Reliable intelligence on the strength and position of the enemy, and whether the resistance came from retreating forces or through an established defence line, was also variable. The valuable ability of RAF reconnaissance to assist was regularly undermined by poor weather conditions – particularly significant in Flanders. Here the problems of rain and fog, exacerbating the difficulties of transport and communications, were acute on a number of occasions. What the *Official History* calls 'the usual difficulties of the supply of advancing troops' were exacerbated by the Flanders terrain and climate, creating major challenges for the GAF and British Second Army. The roads in Flanders, already poor in terms of both quality and quantity, became virtually impassable in bad weather. These were totally inadequate for the transport requirements of Second Army, but the supply of forward troops was in general maintained throughout the advance, as one regimental history makes clear, referring to the 'wonderful work' of the transport services:

The railhead was far behind, the roads were bad, every bridge had been destroyed, and the distances that had to be covered to reach [the battalion]

¹ Wylly, *Loyal North Lancs*, p. 151.

*increased almost daily by about ten miles. Yet on no single occasion did the supply of daily rations fail to arrive.*²

As noted, there was heavy use of gas shells by both sides during the fighting in Flanders, creating a further cause for transport delay:

*During offensive operations, it was often necessary to cross contaminated ground, with all the inherent hazards such activity entailed...*³

Plumer's attention to the problems of logistics led to innovative forward planning. Effective use was made of railway lines with these extended forward towards the new front line at the earliest opportunity. Units were encouraged to consider flexible arrangements for ensuring lines of supply, including the use of mules where appropriate. The supply by air of advance units cut off from support was a particular innovation used.

Maginniss has summarised the successful logistic support of the British Army during the Hundred Days as 'robust and innovative... capable of supporting an advance equating to an average of twenty eight miles per month'.⁴ These terms reflect the best

² Nicholson et al, East Lincs, p. 559.

³ Lieutenant-Colonel. C. H. Maginniss, 'Heads of Steel: Logistic Support to the BEF's Mobile All Arms Battle: July-November 1918', *The Royal Logistics Corps Review 2008*, pp. 165-180, p. 172; he quotes from Falls, *36th (Ulster) Division*, p. 279, referring to '... the section of the Divisional Train bringing up its wagons through valleys wreathed and stinking with gas...'

⁴ Maginniss, 'Heads of Steel', p. 174.

performance of Second Army formations, with Maginness noting that ‘... between 8-10 November, Second Army advanced an amazing twenty-two miles’.⁵

The pace of the advance brought its own problems. One was the fatigue of the front line units. British Second Army made a number of changes in troop disposition during the advance, in order to try and maintain a degree of freshness in its attacking forces. There was much emphasis upon training and in particular, being aware of the implications of the changed nature of the fighting taking place. However the fighting did fall disproportionately upon units, demonstrated by the casualty figures in the tables below:

⁵ Maginness, ‘Heds of Steel’, p. 174; he then adds that ‘Whilst these distances were exceeded by the 50 miles per month of the fully mechanized Allied Armies in France in the period June 1944 to February 1945, they were higher than the average monthly advance in Italy between September 1943 and May 1945 [25 miles per month]. These were impressive achievements for a semi-mechanized Army’ (p. 174).

Summary of weekly battle casualties - by Corps**The Final Advance in Flanders**

Compiled from weekly operations reports produced by Second Army HQ

- Source: WO 158/218

| Week commencing | 21 Sept | | 28 Sept | | 5 Oct | | 12 Oct | |
|------------------------|----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|
| Formation | O | OR | O | OR | O | OR | O | OR |
| Army troops | - | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 13 |
| II Corps | 4 | 145 | 154 | 1874 | 90 | 3190 | 95 | 2271 |
| X Corps | 14 | 183 | 30 | 627 | 19 | 425 | 54 | 868 |
| XV Corps | 7 | 168 | 72 | 1179 | 19 | 382 | 23 | 249 |
| XIX Corps | 29 | 332 | 47 | 711 | 95 | 2807 | 46 | 306 |
| Total | 54 | 829 | 303 | 4392 | 224 | 6869 | 219 | 3707 |

| Week commencing | 19 Oct | | 26 Oct | | 2/9Nov | |
|------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|
| Formation | O | OR | O | OR | O | OR |
| Army troops | - | - | 1 | 3 | - | 7 |
| II Corps | 104 | 2423 | 81 | 1314 | 46 | 763 |
| X Corps | 24 | 564 | 20 | 229 | 10 | 102 |
| XV Corps | 10 | 164 | 14 | 93 | 14 | 232 |
| XIX Corps | 64 | 1632 | 55 | 1133 | 46 | 754 |
| Total | 212 | 4679 | 172 | 2772 | 116 | 1958 |

Summary of total battle casualties – Second Army

The Final Advance in Flanders

Compiled from weekly operations reports produced by Second Army HQ

- Source: WO 158/218

| Formation | Total battle casualties | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| | 21 Sept – 15 November 1918 | |
| | The Final Advance in Flanders | |
| | O | OR |
| Army Corps | 3 | 30 |
| II Corps | 574 | 11980 |
| X Corps | 171 | 2998 |
| XV Corps | 159 | 2467 |
| XIX Corps | 382 | 7675 |
| TOTAL | 1289 | 25150 |

The units serving under II Corps, operating on the left wing of the Army and alongside Belgian or French forces, bore the heaviest load. The following message was sent to the 36th Division, by Lieutenant-General Jacob of II Corps, following the Battles of Ypres and Courtrai:

The 36th (Ulster) Division has been fighting continuously since the 28th September in the operations in FLANDERS. The spirit, dash and initiative

*shown by all ranks have been splendid and beyond all praise. The leadership displayed by... Commanders could not have been better. The conditions under which the men have had to fight have been and still are very trying, but nothing seems to stop [the] Division...*⁶

This particular role of II Corps was also recognised at an even higher level, reflecting the importance of the contact point during operations between Second Army and the Belgian or French forces to its left:

*Marshal FOCH visited the Army Commander today and asked him to send his congratulations to the II Corps and to the 9th, 29th and 36th Divisions for their splendid work in the operations since the 14th October...*⁷

The variable strength on paper of the units comprising Second Army, and issues such as the reconstituted divisions and the nature of the replacement troops,⁸ has been described in Chapter Two. However, it is also evident that the three divisions which fought under II Corps for the two principal battles, 9th (Scottish), 36th (Ulster) and 29th (the one Regular Army Division), were of proven ability. Terraine described them as

⁶ Written into: TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, 23rd October; the message continues: *When the history is written of what the Division has done in FLANDERS during the past month it will prove to be a record of magnificent fighting and wonderful progress, for during this period an advance has been made of about 25 miles over the worst of the country and under the heaviest machine gun fire ever experienced in this war. This advance has entailed constant fighting but the 36th Division has overcome every obstacle and has proved itself one of the best fighting divisions in the Army, well commanded and well staffed.*

⁷ Written into: TNA WO95/2504, War Diary of 108 Infantry Brigade, 23rd October.

⁸ Writing a few years after the end of the war, G.A.B. Dewar pointed out that ‘... the six British divisions which took the main part in the Flanders offensive on the British side had suffered in the period between March 21 and July 15, 1918, an average of 6250 casualties per division’: Dewar, *Haig’s Command Vol. II*, p. 337, note 1.

'...three very good divisions indeed'.⁹ It was by design that these formations bore the brunt of the fighting at the centre of the coalition force and proved capable of punching through the main centre of German resistance east of Ypres and subsequently through Courtrai.

It has been calculated that the ten divisions of Second Army registered an average success rate of 55.7 per cent for opposed attacks during the Final Advance in Flanders. For comparison purposes, the success rates during the Hundred Days for the British divisions in Third (seventeen) and Fourth (nine) Armies were 64.4% and 70.7% respectively. The lower rate for Second Army can be explained by the identified problems for logistics and artillery support as a consequence of the weather and terrain; together with the strength of enemy resistance associated with the strategic importance of the Channel coast for the German command. Allowance should also be made for the overall weaker composition of Second Army at the start of the campaign, although two of the Divisions rebuilt from cadre (30th and 34th) were amongst its most successful. It should also be noted that of the seven British Divisions which had an outright failure rate of 25% or more, only one (41st Division) was with Second Army.¹⁰

⁹ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 203.

¹⁰ For an analysis of the performance of British Divisions during the Hundred Days, and the supporting methodology for the calculation of 'success rates', see P. Simkins, 'Co-Stars or Supporting Cast?: British Divisions in the 'Hundred Days', 1918', in P. Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 50-69. The same author has highlighted the turnaround in the performance of the 35th Division, which was one of the more successful Second Army Divisions during the final campaign, despite a previous history of problems and failures – key to this was the opportunity to plan and carry out a series of attacks as a complete Division (P. Simkins, 'Each One A Pocket Hercules: The Bantam Experiment and the Case

Within Second Army, the average success rate was equalled or bettered by the 30th, 34th, 35th and 36th Divisions and, most notably, by the remarkable 9th (Scottish) Division; the latter was shown to have had a success rate of 93% against opposition, making it the third most successful of all the British Divisions on the Western Front.¹¹ It is notable that these five Divisions were deployed across the Second Army front and not concentrated in one or two Corps.

Second Army also made the best use of the troop resources available to it. Hence the solid performance of 40th Division, a scratch formation made up from Garrison Guard Battalions, deemed 'semi-mobile', and initially only capable of holding a quiet sector of the line. For most of the campaign it secured the Army's right flank, ensuring that touch was maintained with 59th Division, Fifth Army. While not involved in a major set-piece attack, its patrols and advance guards continually harassed the retreating Germans, and took every opportunity to push forward through weakening defences up to and eventually beyond the Scheldt. As part of XV Corps, it helped provide the firm pivot for Second Army to swing round upon the enemy's defence line.

The issue of the high casualty rates in the Hundred Days campaign, affecting all the British armies involved including Second Army, should be placed in context. The nature of the fighting is that of a modern war, a war of movement with the killing being carried out by a plethora of large and small machines, dwarfing the exposed

of the 35th Division', in Sanders Marble, ed., *Scraping The Barrel: The Military Use of Substandard Manpower 1860-1960* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 79-104).

infantryman. In considering the high troop losses, the common perception re-emerges of failings by senior commanders; comparison is also made with the lower overall British casualty figures for the Second World War. On closer examination a different picture emerges. Max Hastings points out that:

Much-diminished Western allied losses [in 1939-45] reflected not better leadership than that of the earlier conflict [1914-18], but the fact that the second time around, the Russians bore the overwhelming burden of necessary sacrifice. On the only occasion that a large Anglo-American army went head to head with the Wehrmacht on a limited front, in Normandy in 1944, some infantry rates of loss were briefly comparable with those of 1916, until the German line was broken and Eisenhower's armies could exploit their terrific mobile capacity, such as did not exist in World War I.¹²

The different character of the two Wars, as experienced by the British Army, is explored by Corrigan:

From beginning to end of the First war, the bulk of the British army was fighting the main enemy in the main theatre of war (the Western Front)...

¹¹ This 93% success rate for 9th Division was greater than the average success rate for the Dominion divisions: 72.5%, (four Canadian Divisions), 70.7% (five Australian Divisions), 64.5% (New Zealand Division). Simkins, 'British Divisions', p.56.

¹² M. Hastings, *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War in 1914* (London: William Collins, 2013), pp. 551-2.

In terms of men deployed, and in the intensity of the fighting, the British army was far less involved in the Second War...

*Hence British army casualties between 1939 and 1945 were considerably less than those between 1914 and 1918, and miniscule compared to those of the Russian army, which spent most of the Second War fighting the main enemy on land.*¹³

John Ellis has shown that when allowance is made for the smaller share of British troops in World War II who were deployed in combat units, compared with the situation in World War I, the casualty rates for each War become very similar.¹⁴

...Most fighting in World War II [by British and USA forces] was done by a remarkably small proportion of troops whose casualties were very high...

If you were an officer, the outlook was even bleaker...

*... in World War II [officer casualties] tended to be proportionately higher than in World War I.*¹⁵

¹³ Corrigan, *Mud, Blood*, p.70; he points out that between the evacuation of the British Army from Europe in 1940 and the Normandy invasion of 1944, British forces were deployed in theatres such as North Africa, Crete and the Far East, where they did not face the main body of the German Army. In this section of his book, pp. 52-72, he seeks to debunk the common myth of 'the lost generation' resulting from the casualty figures for the First World War.

¹⁴ J. Ellis, *The Sharp End of War: The Fighting Man in World War II* (London: David & Charles, 1980), pp. 156-169; Ellis also lists key actions and battles during World War II which involved very high casualty rates for the British combat units involved – examples include certain actions at the Battle of El Alamein, assaults during the Italian campaign and at the Anzio beachhead.

Second World War casualty rates were also reduced through advances in medical science.¹⁶

In general it can be shown that:

*Being issued with a rifle and being told to close with the enemy was about as dangerous during World War II as during World War I.*¹⁷

As Sheffield concludes:

*In 1945, as in 1918, high intensity warfare took a fearful toll of soldiers' lives.*¹⁸

Most Second Army units were not at effective strength. The end of month figures for 12th Battalion Norfolk Regiment (31st Division) are one example:¹⁹

| | <u>Officers</u> | <u>Other Ranks</u> |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 30 June | 36 | 780 |
| 31 July | 40 | 956 |
| 31 August | 29 | 786 |
| 30 September | 36 | 784 |
| 31 October | 42 | 800 |

¹⁵ Ellis, *The Sharp End*, pp. 162-4.

¹⁶ Ellis, *The Sharp End*, pp. 170-2; the key areas of medical progress were antibiotics (penicillin and sulpha-drugs) and the use of blood transfusions.

¹⁷ S. Bungay, *Alamein* (London: Aurum Press, 2003; original hardback edition, 2002), p. 199.

This study has looked at the quality of the troops making up the formations in Second Army. In the event their performance seems to have surprised and impressed their commanders, given many of them were young conscripts or men re-classified as fit for front line duty from other deployments. Brigadier-General Pereira (GOC, 43 Brigade), in his subsequent report on the opening day of the Battle of Ypres, referred to:

... the fine fighting spirit of the men. Although looked down on before the fight as 'B' men, of an inferior type to the 'A' men they showed all the energy, keenness and fighting spirit of 'A' men, and though they may not be physically capable of undergoing the same hardships for a long strain, I feel the utmost confidence in them, and that, if some allowance is made for physical disabilities by giving them more rest than the 'A' men they will hold their own with the latter when it comes to fighting.²⁰

In 1927 one writer commented:

In view of the results attained [by Second Army during the final campaign] the spirit, the fitness, and the power of endurance of all ranks had proved to be remarkable. The more remarkable when we remember that the forces had

¹⁸ Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, p. 230.

¹⁹ Records of 31st Division, TNA WO95/2366.

²⁰ 42 Brigade, *Report on Operations September 28th 1918* (from TNA WO95/1876 War Diary of 14th Division: General Staff).

*been bled white five months before, and the ranks were filled up with recruits, many being mere boys.*²¹

In his study of a particular draft of conscripts, Tim Lynch has shown that,

*There is a tendency to assume that by this stage of the war the ranks were filled with war-weary volunteers and reluctant conscripts waiting only for the end of the war but, with no end in sight, the men arriving at the front could still show high levels of motivation.*²²

Lynch concludes that:

*... the war-winning army of 1918 was largely made up of teenage conscripts who formed the largest force Britain had ever put into the field and, at that time, the most professional and capable army it had ever known. Despite devastating losses, battalions of soldiers who in 1917 would have been regarded as too young to serve formed and re-formed to keep pressing home the attack and never lost cohesion, never followed the examples of the French, Russian and German armies by mutinying, and never lost their motivation to fight.*²³

²¹ Brice, *The Battle Book of Ypres*, p. 49.

²² T. Lynch, *They Did Not Grow Old: Teenage Conscripts on the Western Front, 1918* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Spellmount (The History Press), 2013), p. 202.

²³ Lynch, *Teenage Conscripts*, p. 230.

Corrigan has concluded that the conscripts 'made a vital contribution to the war'.²⁴

There does not appear to have been any conflict between the existing troops and the new arrivals, despite the different origin of their service:

*As men arrived in their units the exigencies of war, shared by all, volunteer and conscript alike, soon welded men together into one battalion family...*²⁵

The scrutiny of war diaries for this study supports these conclusions on the performance of British troops in 1918. The records show that field commanders had mastered the necessary tactics to harness the potential of the combined arms available to them – and that their troops, volunteer or conscript, veteran or teenager, had the training and commitment to make the model work on the battlefield.

Second Army troops also had to cope with unfamiliar terrain and adapt to a type of warfare with which they were unfamiliar. As the advance proceeded, the increasing number of civilians in the area, liberated and remaining in situ, or taking the opportunity to move to other areas, hindered the operation of artillery (due to the risk of civilian casualties) and exacerbated the problems of movement on the roads. It was also necessary to bring forward additional supplies for the many civilians who faced starvation.²⁶

²⁴ Corrigan, *Mud, Blood*, p.74.

²⁵ Corrigan, *Mud, Blood*, p.74.

²⁶ Falls, *36th (Ulster) Division*, p. 279.

British Second Army had no tanks (though use was made of French tanks towards the end of October), and therefore relied heavily upon the effectiveness of its artillery. The use of a creeping and/or rolling barrage, linked to counter-battery neutralisation of enemy artillery sites, and the targeting of key defensive positions and communications links, were all regular features of attacks. For the British forces in the GAF, there was rarely any preliminary bombardment, in order to maximise the potential of surprise. Second Army Artillery Instructions No 1, 20 September 1918, authored by Lt-Col C R Newman, referred to the importance of preserving secrecy, and gave as an example, the successful attack on the Clercken-Paschendaele ridge in September 1918.

Attacks usually took place before dawn, to take advantage of early mist as a means of evading the full impact of enemy machine guns. Plumer frequently insisted upon the use of smoke shells as a means to provide as much screening as possible for his infantry. Gas shells were used to disorientate the defenders. Feint attacks were staged in order to try and identify enemy positions and forecast the likely response to an assault.

The range of the original artillery barrage often limited the length of the initial advance. We regularly see Second Army making contingency plans to bring forward supporting artillery with the initial attack, in order that advance forces can subsequently push onto second and third objectives during the course of a day.

The war diary of 7/Seaforth Highlanders for 25 October includes words of praise for the field artillery of 9th Division, highlighting the:

*accurate and effective shooting... always come as far forward as possible... [enthusing the infantry by] coming into action beside them.*²⁷

However the German policy of putting the majority of its defenders in the front line did mean that once this was broken through then the attackers could then manoeuvre over more open ground. We then see the application of small unit tactics, with local commanders using their initiative to exploit the initial breakthrough. Increasingly the nature of the fighting became localised to individual farms and villages. British troops became engaged in forms of what can be termed 'street-fighting' more familiar in subsequent conflicts. The British were able to deploy their sections of infantry, equipped with rifles, grenades, Lewis guns and small mortars, to good effect.

The evidence presented in this study has shown various examples of the infantry unit's art of attack. Lynch provides a very clear picture of assault tactics in operation:

In order to make the best use of the firepower available to them, every section needed to be able to work together to concentrate their fire at the same time. Once in position, the men would open with a fierce volley of all weapons to try to gain fire superiority over the defenders. Usually this would lead to an equally fierce response followed by a slackening of the fire by both sides as the initial

*shock wore off, then by bursts from one side, then the other. It was up to the platoon commander to judge the level of fire coming from the defenders so that when he felt that their response was slackening (because of casualties or weapons failures, for example), he would order the riflemen into the final assault as the Lewis gunners and rifle bombers kept up covering fire. If the attack was successful, it would be necessary to regroup and make ready to defend against a possible counter-attack, and to be aware of what was happening to the platoons to either side and be prepared to assist them if necessary.*²⁸

Much of the campaign was of a stop-start nature, with British units pursuing a withdrawing enemy to the point where the latter would turn and attempt to halt the advance, mainly through machine gun fire and artillery barrages. This pattern of manoeuvre can be termed 'staccato',²⁹ to reflect the stop-start rhythm of the advance as troops met apparently unlinked and unpredictable points of resistance. The result was the frequent pauses made by the advance troops of Second Army, before fire support or flank deployments could be carried out. The following comments are from a summary of the campaign by 107 Brigade (36th Division, II Corps), covering the period 28 September to 28 October 1918:

²⁷ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders.

²⁸ Lynch, *Teenage Conscripts*, pp. 180-1.

²⁹ *Staccato*... with each sound or note sharply detached or separated from the others (Concise Oxford Dictionary).

The operations were of a trying and exhausting nature. Opposition chiefly met was machine gun fire, against which our Infantry showed courage and fighting qualities of a high order.

The constant movement, entailing 'digging in' in many cases, was a test of endurance of a severe nature, and all ranks 'carried on' in a manner indicative of a high morale and confidence in our superiority over the enemy.³⁰

The need for devolved command was crucial in this more fluid type of warfare. Second Army continually emphasised the need to keep close up to the enemy as he retreated:

[The Army had the] policy of harassing the Germans without intermission, even though the main advance might be temporarily held up owing to the difficulty of getting supplies forward across the devastated regions in the wake of the pursuers, and the desire to avoid needless casualties. These harassing tactics, in the conditions of open warfare now prevailing, gave ample scope for initiative and skill on the part of company and platoon commanders...³¹

Other steps taken to support the infantry included the forward use of field guns, taking on machine gun nest over open sights. This was only possible due to the effective neutralisation of enemy artillery, and through the exercise of initiative on the ground

³⁰ TNA WO95/2502/1, War Diary of 107 Infantry Brigade, *Narrative of Operations carried out by the 107th Inf. Bde. 28.9.1918. to 28.10.1918.*, (signed off by the Brigade Commander).

³¹ Whalley-Kelly, *Ich Dien*, p. 66.

by Battalion and Company commanders. Peter Simkins has emphasised the obvious point that:

*The BEF's ability in the 'Hundred Days' to overcome such a wide variety of tactical obstacles and challenges – ranging from set-piece operations to street fighting and canal crossings on improvised rafts – would simply not have been possible without good junior leadership.*³²

These 'obstacles and challenges' had confronted Second Army, requiring variations in the tactics adopted. In his study of Third Army,³³ also made up of British formations (plus the New Zealand Division), Jonathan Boff concludes that it was 'diversity and flexibility, rather... than a set "formula for success"' which led to that Army's achievements.³⁴ While there are many common features to the successful attacks made by Second Army during the Flanders offensive, its front line officers also had to make immediate and practical decisions in response to changing circumstances.³⁵

The campaign also saw close co-ordination between the arms of infantry, artillery and RAF. This was not always successful, mainly due to the impact of weather and terrain, and frustrated by the limited technical developments in communications.

³² Simkins, 'British Divisions', p.65.

³³ J. Boff, 'Combined Arms During the Hundred Days Campaign, August-November 1918', *War in History*, 2010, 17(4), pp. 459-477, online at <http://wih.sagepub.com/content/17/4/459>.

³⁴ Boff, 'Combined Arms', p. 477.

³⁵ It should be noted that there were some particular differences between the circumstances of Second and Third Armies, requiring of a longer and more considered discussion. Briefly, Third Army (the largest of the British Armies) was twice the size of Second Army; it had regular access to support from the Tank Corps (when Second Army units had support from French tanks this was largely a success); there were some variations over the course

When this co-operation could take place the results were a successful attack, and fewer casualties. The numerical superiority enjoyed by the RAF was a significant advantage, when the weather allowed. Writing to Plumer after the Battle of Ypres, Gillain emphasised the valuable support provided to the Belgian Army by Second Army artillery and the 'glorious and fruitful exploits' of the RAF.³⁶

Advance infantry units were frequently reinforced by sections of support weapons to provide direct fire support when facing strengthened enemy positions. This combined arms approach was a regular feature of operation by Second Army and the other formations within the BEF; it would be commonplace in the Second World War. The exact arrangements and the command and control structures to manage the deployment were varied between different battalions, brigades or divisions. The most radical organisation was that of 'Brigade Groups', implemented by 30th Division during the Battle of Courtrai. Each group comprised the brigade's three infantry battalions together with units drawn from division support arms; under the overall command of, and named for, the brigade commander. Such a formation would subsequently be more commonly recognised and described as a *Battlegroup*. A more typical arrangement was to deploy one or more support weapons' teams with a company or battalion for a particular operation or period of time; with orders detailing the respective command and reporting responsibilities of the infantry and support units' commanders. For instance, in the same battle, 120 Brigade had a Stokes mortar

of both Armies' campaigns with regard to the terrain features encountered and the consequent organisation of the German defences.

team attached to each of its battalions;³⁷ there are many similar examples quoted throughout this study.

As part of an Army Group, and officially subordinate to Belgian (or, in practice, French) control, Plumer was not able to operate independently. However, despite its initial role of flank guard, the performance of the Second Army was such that it subsequently became the strike force for the GAF. In this the Army was not assisted by the command arrangements – it became clear very quickly that Plumer had no confidence in Degoutte, the French Chief of Staff, and looked to follow his own informed instincts in plotting the deployment and operations of his Army; while ever mindful of securing outcomes that supported the coalition forces operating to his left. During the Battle of Ypres, Powell comments that ‘The fatuous orders that emanated from Degoutte’s headquarters continued to plague Plumer’.³⁸ Despite this, the evidence indicates that King Albert developed a strong confidence in his British ally, much of this due to the assistance provided to the Belgian Army at both operational and planning levels. The British forces impressed their allies at both command level and in the field.

Within the war diary of 15/West Yorkshires (31st Division) there is a copy of a letter passed down from HQ Second Army via brigade, for the attention of all troops. Dated 3 October 1918, it is from Major-General Gillain, Chief of Staff of the Belgian Army, to

³⁶ Letter from Chief of Staff, Belgian Army to General Plumer, British Second Army, 3 October 1918; a copy is included with the War Diary of 15th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment (Prince Of Wales’ Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum). Translated into English from the original French.

³⁷ TNA W095/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Brigade Instructions No. 3, 7th October 1918*.

General Plumer, following the cessation of the Battle of Ypres.³⁹ It is quite long, the type fills an A4 page, and it pays warm tribute to the performance of the British forces during the battle. The cooperation between II Corps (on the Belgian right flank) and the Belgian forces is acknowledged and General Jacob is named. The support of British artillery and the RAF is also acknowledged. The length and tone of the letter goes well beyond that required for the sake of formality. It suggests genuine feelings of gratitude and respect from the Belgians for their British allies and their leader.

Philpott has praised the success of the coalition:

*Although the Flanders offensive was not without friction in the field and behind the lines, after four years' experience this was easily overcome, and in comparison with what had gone before the offensive must be seen as a model of allied military cooperation.*⁴⁰

When considering the strength and quality of the enemy facing Second Army and the GAF, there are conflicting factors to consider. In general, the advantages presented by the weather and terrain to troops on the defensive, allied to the heavy small arms and artillery available, offset to a considerable degree the disadvantages of variable troop quality and lower troop numbers of the German forces in Flanders. It is important to stress that British Second Army was itself beset with problems of troop

³⁸ Powell, *Plumer*, p. 275.

³⁹ Letter from Chief of Staff, Belgian Army to General Plumer, British Second Army, 3 October 1918; a copy is included with the War Diary of 15th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment (Prince Of Wales' Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum). Translated into English from the original French.

quality and the rate of casualties during the campaign meant that obtaining replacements was a continual headache. The problems of transport and supply, and the ongoing challenge of attempting to move artillery forward to support infantry attacks further beset the Army. At the strategic level, the Army had to conform to coalition requirements, and to plan and pace its advance with its allied neighbours. All this, whilst adjusting to a new form of warfare. Casualty lists were high but this does not appear in general to result from failures in planning or command. This was a product of the firepower available to the armies of this time, and the lack of technology to counter this.

We know that Haig was firm in his view that the opportunity to agree an armistice should be seized. He believed that German resistance would only stiffen as the Allies approached the borders of Germany, with consequent loss of life for allied troops; not to mention the destruction that warfare leaves in its wake. It is unlikely that Second Army could have sustained its advance, not least because of the high casualty rate and the likelihood of increasing logistical difficulties as winter weather approached. Progress would have required the close co-operation of the fresher Belgian Army, as the latter became more familiar with the tactical and operational demands of open warfare in 1918. However, King Albert would not have been prepared to allow the increasing death toll of soldiers, and civilians too, alongside the laying waste of much of his country as enemy defence solidified in advance of the borders of Germany. The World War II experience would support such conclusions.

⁴⁰ W. J. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front 1914-18* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p. 159.

However, it is to Second Army's credit that it found various ways of addressing or coping with the majority of the problems which confronted it during the Hundred Days. In early 1918 Plumer is quoted as complaining that his troops 'are untrained, with indifferent officers and although as brave as possible they simply don't know their business'.⁴¹ This was not the case during the final months of the war. During this period the techniques and set-piece operations of Second Army became routinely successful - its advance progressed in an almost irresistible manner. There is no doubt that, as Peter Simkins concludes:

The circumstances in Flanders in the autumn of 1918 allowed 'a rolling series of limited-objective and all-arms attacks to be conducted on an almost daily basis. As a leading proponent and practitioner of [such tactics], Plumer surely deserves considerable credit for his contribution to the BEF's 'learning curve' and his part in the eventual German defeat'.⁴²

David Stevenson notes that the success of the 'Flanders offensive', within the series of allied attacks at the end of September, was 'particularly impressive' to the German military command.⁴³ Nick Lloyd points out that the breakthrough at Ypres on 28 September, following allied victories to the south, was the final blow for the German Chief of Staff, Ludendorff. He finally came to recognise that the German Army faced defeat and that an armistice must be actively pursued:

⁴¹ Wilson, Diary, 17 April 1918, Wilson Papers, IWM.

⁴² Simkins, *Herbert Plumer*, p. 159.

The heavy British attacks around Cambrai and the crossing of the Canal du Nord were bad enough, but now his northern flank had been broken and there seemed little in the way to prevent the Allies from liberating all of Belgium...

*The breakthrough in Flanders seems to have been the point at which Ludendorff's will broke.*⁴⁴

Terraine has pointed out the strategic importance of the taking of Courtrai and the wheel eastwards of Second Army's right flank, which offered the prospect of taking the key city of Lille (but with the French Government seriously concerned at the prospect of the city suffering the devastation of a fight to take it):

*The good progress of the Second Army now made possible a further advance by... Fifth Army, which linked King Albert's Army Group in Flanders to Haig's in the centre... Plumer's success on the 14th [October] carried the Second Army well past the Lille fortifications, and Prince Rupprecht at once authorized withdrawal...*⁴⁵

The Battle of Courtrai, whilst virtually ignored in the historiography of the Hundred Days, delivered a number of strategic gains both for the GAF and the allied armies generally, making a wider contribution towards the winning of the war. On 17 October,

⁴³ Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 512.

⁴⁴ Lloyd, *Hundred Days*, p. 177-8.

Second Army liberated the important industrial towns of Turcoing and Roubaix (north-east of Lille). On the same day, the Belgian Army cleared the port of Ostend, a place of symbolic importance to its country, which also released an important new route for the delivery of supplies (though the harbour was found to be blocked and port installations damaged). Two days later, Second Army took Courtrai itself, while the Belgians finally secured Bruges. This victory, together with the capture that day of Zeebrugge, meant that the northern coastline was finally liberated.⁴⁶ Terraine has written vividly of the scale of the achievement:

*The great goal of the Flanders offensive of 1917 was gained, the U-boat bases were abandoned, and the Allied left could rest upon the Dutch frontier, which was, in fact, reached next day. More than 12,000 prisoners and 550 guns had been taken by King Albert's Group since 14 October – about half of the prisoners and over 200 guns by the British Second Army. Belgium was becoming a country again, and the raptures of the people of Bruges when their king returned revealed the failure of the German attempt to exploit the divisions of Flemings and Walloons...*⁴⁷

There is another dimension regarding Plumer's handling of the campaign that is worthy of note. Much has been written regarding the influence of Haig on the planning

⁴⁵ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 204.

⁴⁶ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 204-5.

⁴⁷ Terraine, *To Win A War*, p. 205.

and management of operations by his Army commanders throughout the war.⁴⁸

Bidwell and Graham summarise the position as:

*Haig insisted that the commander at each level was entirely responsible for making tactical plans within the framework of his [Haig's] own general scheme... The channel of communication between GHQ and the Armies that it directed was further impeded by Haig's tendency to be inarticulate in describing his plans and to overawe not only his subordinate commanders by brusqueness but also his own staff.*⁴⁹

Chapter Two referred to Haig's refusal to support Plumer's initial plan to attack directly towards Wytschaete and Messines. However, once placed within the Army Group and subject to a different chain of command, Plumer was able to carry out his planning, strategy and tactics, largely free from the influence of Haig. Such opportunities had not been possible during Messines and the subsequent battles of Autumn 1917; or in the resistance to the German assault in Spring 1918. The evidence is that he welcomed and exploited this freedom, particularly once he felt confident in the abilities of his troops. Given his dissatisfaction with the leadership and staff work within the GAF, these feelings of independence allowed Plumer to direct his part of the campaign along strategic lines that he had determined. He was also in the position of believing himself able to fall back upon the support of Haig, given

⁴⁸ There is not the space to open the debate here and it would have to include a very long list of commentators; for initial reference please see the titles by writers such as Bidwell and Graham, Griffith, Millett and Murray, Prior and Wilson, and Travers, in section IV b. *Printed Sources: Books – resources, weaponry, organization and tactics*, in the appended Bibliography.

Haig's suspicion of both the French and Belgian priorities for the campaign in Flanders, should there be any significant challenge to his approach. Thus it can be concluded that the achievements of Second Army, in terms of strategy and tactics, were very much the result of Plumer's leadership.

Summarising Second Army performance during the October phase of operations, Gary Sheffield acknowledges that while 'Plumer's role was to protect the flank of the Belgians... the French proved sluggish...' whereupon:

Plumer interpreted his orders liberally and drove on over the Lys, eventually taking Courtrai on the 19th. This helped trigger a German retreat to the south... Orders were given [by Ludendorff] to hold on to the Belgian coast... as bargaining chips in negotiations to end the war... With that hope dashed, Ludendorff ordered the evacuation of these areas, suddenly no longer militarily tenable. The German decision to abandon the coast meant that Britain had achieved one of the principal aims for which it had gone to war in the first place.⁵⁰ [My emphases].

The victories of Second Army during the Hundred Days were far, far more than the beating of an already defeated enemy. They represent successes which should rank as some of the finest within the annals of the British Army.

⁴⁹ Bidwell and Graham, *Fire-power*, p. 72; the authors then proceed to look in more detail at Haig's influence on key battles during the war.

⁵⁰ Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 329.

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British Second Army and Coalition Warfare in Flanders in the Hundred Days, 1918

University of Birmingham
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Appendix A

Orders of Battle:

British Second Army

13 March – 11 November 1918

**Belgian, French and German forces
September-November 1918**

Dennis Williams

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Belgian, French and German forces: September-November 1918

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Notes:

1. Where there are apparent differences between any of the sources for the British Army, I have opted for the information from Becke as the authority – unless a Division or Battalion record provides conclusive evidence – I have tried to ensure that any unresolvable contradictions are noted.
2. All the names listed for British Second Army are those soldiers in post from the time of General Plumer's return as GOC of Second Army i.e. from 13 March 1918 onwards.
3. All the dates listed refer to 1918 unless otherwise stated.

British Army acronyms and abbreviations used in this paper

Note: For numbering the different units of the British Army I have in general applied the convention of alternating at each level between ordinal and integer numbers, with roman numerals for corps, full spelling for armies, i.e. 1st Battalion, 2 Brigade, 3rd Division, IV Corps, Fifth Army. I may slip from this convention on occasion, for example when quoting from a source.

| | |
|------------|--|
| AA | Anti-Aircraft |
| AADC | Anti-Aircraft Defence Commander |
| AA and QMG | Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General |
| ADC | Aide de Camp |
| AD Signals | Assistant Director Signals |
| ADVS | Assistant Director Veterinary Services |
| ASC | Army Service Corps |
| BGGS | Brigadier General General Staff |
| BGRA | Brigadier General Royal Artillery |
| CE | Chief Engineer |
| CHA | Commander Heavy Artillery |
| CinC | Commander in Chief |
| DA and QMG | Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General |
| DDMS | Deputy Director Medical Services |
| DDOS | Deputy Director Ordnance Services |
| DDR | Deputy Director Remounts |
| DDS | Deputy Director Signals |
| DDST | Deputy Director Supply and Transport |
| DMS | Director of Medical Services |
| DDVS | Deputy Director Veterinary Services |
| GAF | <i>Groupe d'Armees des Flandres</i> (Army Group, Flanders) |
| GHQ | General Headquarters |
| GOC | General Officer Commanding |
| HQ | Headquarters |
| MGGS | Major General General Staff |
| MGRA | Major-General Royal Artillery |
| MT | Mechanical Transport |
| NCO | Non-Commissioned Officer |
| RA | Royal Artillery |
| RE | Royal Engineers |
| RGA | Royal Garrison Artillery |
| RHA | Royal Horse Artillery |

A1 British Second Army Order of Battle: The German Offensive in Flanders
The Battles of the Lys: 09 – 29 April 1918

GOC General Sir H C O Plumer*

Major-General General Staff Major-General J S J Percy

IX Corps

XV Corps

XXII Corps

4 Tank Brigade – 4th, 5th and 13th Tank Battalions (Lewis Guns)

French XXXVI Corps

French II Cavalry Corps

* From 13 November 1917 until 10 March 1918 Plumer was CinC of British forces in Italy; General Sir H S Rawlinson was CinC of Second Army during this period. Second Army was designated Fourth Army on 20 December 1917. Plumer resumed command on 13 March 1918 and it was redesignated Second Army on 17 March 1918.

(1) The Battle of Messines 1918: 10 – 11 April 1918

IX Corps

9th Division

19th Division

25th Division*

49th Division

62nd Brigade (21st Division)

88 Brigade (29th Division)

100 Brigade (33rd Division) (11 April)

108 Brigade (36th Division)

* less 74 Brigade

(1A) The Loss of Hill 63: 10 – 11 April 1918

IX Corps

7 Brigade (25th Division)

(2) The Battle of Hazebrouck: 12 - 15 April 1918

IX Corps

33rd Division

34th Division**

XV Corps*

31st Division

34th Division**

40th Division

50th Division**

1st Australian Division**

86, 87 Brigades (29th Division)

Composite Brigade (39th Division)

- composite force (Schools, Pioneers, Entrenching, Refit Battalions)

2nd Cavalry Division (Reserve)

*Transferred from First Army to Second Army with effect from noon 12 April 1918

0800 on 12 April 1918: 50th Division transferred from **XV Corps to XI Corps, First Army

1800 on 12 April 1918: 34th Division transferred from **XV Corps** to **IX Corps**

12 and 13 April 1918: 1st Australian Division transferred from Fourth Army to **XV Corps**

(2A) The Defence of Nieppe Forest: 12 - 15 April 1918

XV Corps

29th Division

31st Division

1st Australian Division

(3) The Battle of Bailleul: 13 - 15 April 1918

IX Corps

19th Division

25th Division

34th Division

49th Division

59th Division

71 Brigade (6th Division)

South African Brigade (9th Division)

88 Brigade (29th Division)

100 Brigade (33rd Division)

108 Brigade (36th Division)

XXII Corps

9th Division

62 Brigade (21st Division)

4 Tank Brigade – 5th Tank Battalion (Lewis Guns)

(3A) Tactical Incident: The Defence of Neuve Eglise

IX Corps

100 Brigade (33rd Division)

148 Brigade (49th Division)

(4) The First Battle of Kemmel Ridge: 17 - 19 April 1918

IX Corps

19th Division 25th Division

33rd Division 34th Division

49th Division (less 146th Brigade) 59th Division

71 Brigade (6th Division)

89 Brigade (30th Division)

108 Brigade (36th Division)

Wyatt's Force

- under Brigadier General L J Wyatt (116 Brigade, 34th Division)
- approximately 1500 strong (1400 rifles and 12 machine guns)
- hastily formed from various units (IX Corps Details) from 13 April

James' Force

- under Brigadier General C H L James (177 Brigade)
- approximately 2,000 strong, from 59th Division
- served from 16-19 April under 49th Division

XXII Corps

9th Division 21st Division

Composite Brigade (39th Division)

146 Brigade (49th Division)

4 Tank Brigade – 4th, 5th and 13th Tank Battalions (Lewis Guns)

French 28th, 34th and 133rd Divisions

French Cavalry 2nd, 3rd and 6th Divisions

(5) The Second Battle of Kemmel Ridge: 25 - 26 April 1918

XXII Corps

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| 9 th Division | 21 st Division |
| 25 th Division* | 49 th Division |
| 71 Brigade (6 th Division) | |
| 89 Brigade (30 th Division) | |
| Composite Brigade (39 th Division) | |
| XXII Corps mounted troops | |

*Although at rest, the 25th Division was ordered to assist the French when the French 28th Division was driven off Mont Kemmel – the 25th was transferred from IX Corps to XXII Corps on 26 April

4 Tank Brigade – 4th, 5th and 13th Tank Battalions (Lewis Guns)

Detachment d'Armee du Nord (French Army)
(had taken over the IX Corps front by the morning of 21 April)

CinC General de Mitry

II Cavalry Corps

| | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 3 rd Cavalry Division | 6 th Cavalry Division |
| 28 th Division | 154 th Division |

XXXVI Corps

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2 nd Cavalry Division | 34 th Division |
| 133 rd Division | |

(6) Battle of the Scherpenberg: 29 April 1918

XXII Corps

| | |
|--|---------------------------|
| 6 th Division | 21 st Division |
| 25 th Division | 39 th Division |
| 49 th Division | |
| 9 th Division – South African Brigade | |
| 30 th Division – 89 Brigade | |
| 4 th Tank Brigade – 4 th , 5 th and 13 th Tank Battalions (Lewis Guns) | |

Detachment d'Armee du Nord (French Army)

II Cavalry Corps

| | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 2 nd Cavalry Division | 3 rd Cavalry Division |
| 39 th Division | 154 th Division |

XXXVI Corps

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 34 th Division | 133 rd Division |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|

Subsequent Actions

The Action of La Becque: 28 June 1918

First Army

XI Corps – 5th Division

Second Army

XV Corps – 31st Division*

*31st Division placed under XI Corps, First Army for this operation

The Capture of Meteren: 19 July 1918

Second Army

XV Corps – 9th Division

A2 British Second Army Order of Battle: The Advance in Flanders
Operations 18 August – 6 September 1918

30 June XIX Corps relieved French XIV Corps
8 July X Corps relieved French XVI Corps

On the 18 August 1918 the Second Army held a front of 19 miles, from south of Vieux Berquin to north-east of Ypres

18 August Capture of Outtersteene Ridge XV Corps
29th Division – 87 Brigade

18 August Capture of Hoegenacher Ridge XV Corps
9th Division

1 September Capture of Neuve Eglise X Corps
30th Division - 89 Brigade

2 September Capture of Wulwweughn X Corps
30th Division – 21 Brigade

4 September Capture of Ploegsteert and Hill 43 XV Corps
29th Division – 86 and 88 Brigades

GOC General Sir H C O Plumer

Major-General General Staff Major-General J S J Percy

II Corps

Lieutenant General Sir C W Jacob

14th Division

34th Division*

35th Division **

49th Division***

American 30th Division****

* Transferred to XIX Corps between 28-30 August

**Transferred to II Corps from XIII Corps on 1 September

*** Left the Corps on 27 August

**** Left the Corps on 1 September

X Corps*

Lieutenant General R B Stephens

30th Division

36th Division

*X Corps had remained in the back area since the conclusion of the battle of Ypres 1917; on 8 July 1918 with 30th, 35th and 36th Divisions, it took over part of the Second Army front, relieving the French XVI Corps

XV Corps

Lieutenant General Sir B deLisle

9th Division

29th Division

31st Division

40th Division

XIX Corps*

Lieutenant General Sir H E Watts

6th Division**

41st Division

American 27th Division***

34th Division****

* On 30 June 1918 XIX Corps (6th and 41st Divisions), then with Fourth Army, took over part of the Second Army front, relieving the French XIV Corps

** Left the Corps on 1 September

*** Left the Corps on 4 September

**** Transferred from II Corps between 28-30 August

A3 British Second Army Order of Battle: The Final Advance in Flanders
28 September – 11 November 1918

By September 1918, the British Second Army held a sixteen mile front line in Flanders. This ran from west of Armentieres, at a junction with the River Lys, stretching northwards to just above the town of Ypres; there it linked to the right of the Belgian Army

GOC General Sir H C O Plumer

Major-General General Staff Major General J S J Percy

II Corps

Lieutenant General Sir C W Jacob

9th Division

29th Division

36th Division

X Corps

Lieutenant General R B Stephens

30th Division

34th Division

XV Corps

Lieutenant General Sir B deLisle

14th Division

31st Division

40th Division

XIX Corps

Lieutenant General Sir H E Watts

35th Division

41st Division

A4 Order of Battle: Groupe d'Armees des Flandres – Battle of Courtrai

GOC Albert, King of the Belgians

Chief of Staff General Degoutte (France)

British Second Army
General Plumer
4 Corps / 10 Divisions

French II Cavalry Corps
General Robillot
3 Divisions

Belgian Southern Groupement
Lieutenant-General Biebuyck
3 Belgian Divisions
1 French Division (164th)

Belgian Northern Groupement
Lieutenant-General Michel
3 Belgian Divisions
1 Belgian Cavalry Division

French VII Corps*
General Massenet
French VII Corps
2 Divisions

French XXXIV Corps*
General Mudant
French XXXIV Corps
3 Divisions

plus

- 2 Belgian Divisions holding Yser defences from Dixmude
- 4 Belgian Divisions resting behind the Yser

*On 19 October, the new French Sixth Army under General de Boissoudy entered the line. This consisted of VII and XXXIV Corps plus XXX Corps (5th and 132nd Divisions, under General Peney)

4.1 Order of Battle: British Corps 1918

Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*

Headquarters

Corps cavalry

Headquarters Corps Heavy Artillery

Heavy Trench Mortar Battery RGA

Cyclist Battalion

Sharpshooters Group

Corps Signal Troops:

Corps Signal Company

Air-Line Sections, Motor, 2

Cable Sections, 2

Corps M T Column:

Corps Troops MT Company

Divisional MT Companies, 4

Heavy Artillery ASC Company

Medium Ordnance Mobile Workshop

Light Ordnance Mobile Workshop

Area Employment Company

4.2 Order of Battle: British Division 1918

Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*
Becke, *Orders of Battle*

Headquarters
Infantry Brigades 3
 Each of 3 Battalions
 With 36 Lewis Guns per Battalion
Trench Mortar Battalion
 3 Batteries
 8 x 3” Stokes Mortars per Battery
Artillery Brigades 2
 Each of 3 x 18-pounder and 1 x 4.5-inch howitzer batteries
Trench Mortar Batteries, RA 2
 6 x 2” Trench Mortars per Battery
Ammunition Column
Field Companies, RE 3
Signal Company
Pioneer Battalion
 With 12 Lewis Guns
Machine Gun Battalion
 4 Companies
 Each with 16 Vickers Heavy Machine-Guns
ASC 4
Field Ambulances 3
Mobile Veterinary Section
Employment Company

4.3 Composition of a Battalion: British Army 1918

In March 1918 when Plumer returned to the Western Front, the British Army was completing the required reorganisation of Divisions following manpower restrictions; briefly, Divisions would be made up of ten Battalions, one of which would be its Pioneer Battalion; the remainder were deployed as three Brigades of three Battalions (previously, a Division was composed of four Brigades).

Battalion Headquarters

Commanding Officer: Lieutenant-Colonel
Second-in-Command: Major
Adjutant: Lieutenant or Captain
Quartermaster: Lieutenant or Captain

Officer of Royal Army Medical Corps

Regimental Sergeant-Major

Sergeants: Quartermaster
Orderly Room Clerk
Drummer
Cook
Pioneer
Shoemaker
Transport
Signaller
Armourer (Ordnance Corps)

Corporal/Private: Royal Army Medical Corps
Medical Orderlies
Signallers
Pioneers
Drivers
Stretcher-bearers
Officers' Batmen

4 Companies (Major or Captain)
of 4 Platoons (Subaltern: Lieutenant or Second Lieutenant)
of 4 Sections (each of an NCO plus 12 men)

4.4 British Second Army: Troops (September – November 1918)

Artillery:

Heavy Batteries: 16 (6, 60-pounder guns per battery = 96 guns)
 Brigades RGA: Mobile, 3 Mixed, 5 8-inch, 3
 9.2-inch, 4 Army, 2
 Siege Batteries:

| Guns | Batteries | Total Guns |
|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| 6-inch howitzer | 36 | 198 |
| 6-inch gun | 7 | 28 |
| 8-inch howitzer | 8 | 48 |
| 9.2-inch howitzer | 9 | 52 |
| 9.2-inch gun | 1.5 | 3 |
| 12-inch howitzer | 9 | 18 |
| 15-inch howitzer | 1 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 71.5 | 348 |

Total: 87.5 heavy and siege batteries; 444 heavy guns and howitzers

Anti-Aircraft: 18 sections of 13-pounder guns,
 6 sections of 3-inch guns = 48 guns
 Field Artillery Brigades: 8

Engineers:

Special Projector Companies 6
 Mortar Corps 1
 Army Troops Companies 10
 Siege Company 1
 Tunnelling Companies 4
 Electrical & Mechanical 1
 Boring Section (Water) 1
 Army Workshop Company 1
 Field Survey Battalion:
 Sound ranging Sections 5
 Observation Groups 5
 AA Searchlight Sections 10
 AA Searchlight Company 1
 Pontoon Park 1
 Advanced RE Parks 2
 Transportation (Works) Company 1
 Signal Service:
 Cable Sections 2
 Air Line Sections 3

| | | | | |
|--|----|--------------------------|---|----|
| Light Railway Signal Company | | | | 1 |
| Signal Construction Company | | | | 1 |
| Area Signal Detachments | | | | 7 |
| Pigeon Service: | | | | |
| Mobile Lofts (1 motor) | | | | 14 |
| Fixed lofts | | | | 12 |
| Infantry: | | | | |
| Battalions | | | | 3 |
| Machine-Gun Battalions | | | | 4 |
| Military Police: Traffic Control Units: | | | | |
| Company | 1 | Squadron | | 1 |
| Army Service Corps: | | | | |
| Pontoon Park (MT) | | | | 1 |
| Army Troops MT Company | | | 1 | |
| Auxiliary (Petrol) Company | | | | 1 |
| Mobile Repair Unit (MT) | | | | 1 |
| Workshop for AA guns | | | | 1 |
| Water Tank Company | | | 1 | |
| Medical: | | | | |
| Motor Ambulance convoys | | | | 4 |
| Casualty Clearing Stations | | | | 12 |
| Advanced Medical Stores Depots | | | | 3 |
| Mobile Laboratories | 4 | Mobile X-Ray Units | | 2 |
| Mobile Dental Unit | 1 | Stationary Hospital | | 1 |
| Sanitary Sections | 12 | Sanitary Squads | | 5 |
| Veterinary: | | | | |
| Evacuating Stations | | | | 3 |
| Ordnance: | | | | |
| Mobile Workshops (heavy, medium, light) | | | | 3 |
| Gun Park | 1 | Officers' Clothing Depot | | 1 |
| Forestry Units: | | | | |
| Companies | | | | 2 |
| Labour Corps: | | | | |
| Companies | | | | 31 |
| Area Employment Companies | | | | 12 |
| Area Employment (artisan) Companies | | | | 2 |
| Chinese companies | | | | 14 |
| Army Printing and Stationery Services: | | | | |
| Advanced Photographic Section | | | | 1 |

4.5 British Second Army 1918: Headquarters

Note: All the entries below for British Second Army and its constituent units describe its composition from 13 March 1918 onwards (when General Plumer resumed as GOC). Details of unit postholders are listed for the period of the attachment of their unit to Second Army during 1918 and the unit's involvement in the main actions which Second Army fought.

'Fourth Army' was redesignated as Second Army on 17 March 1918

| | |
|--|--|
| GOC | General Sir H C O Plumer |
| Major-General General Staff | Major General C H Harington* From 29 April 1918 Major-General J S J Percy |
| Deputy-Adjutant and Quartermaster-General | Major General A A Chichester* |
| Major-General Royal Artillery | Major General C R Buckle* |
| Chief Engineer | Major General Sir F M Glubb* |
| Anti-Aircraft Defence Commander | Lieutenant General H W Hill |
| Deputy Director Signals | Colonel A B R Hildebrand* From October 1918 Colonel H C Smith |
| Deputy Director Supply and Transport | Brigadier General F M Wilson** |
| Deputy Director Ordnance Services | Colonel H S Bush** |
| Director of Medical Services | Major General R Porter From 8 April 1918 Major General S G Moores |
| Deputy Director Veterinary Services | Colonel F W Hunt** |
| Deputy Director Remounts | Colonel W E Matchem** |
| GHQ: | |
| 13 March 1918 | Cassel |
| 14 April 1918 | Blendecques (2½ miles S by E of St Omer) |
| 1 September 1918 | Cassel |
| 23 October 1918 | Chateau Ternynck, Roubaix |

* Transferred with Plumer to Italy and returned with him to the Western Front.

** From Fourth Army.

SECOND ARMY ARTILLERY [Major General Buckle]

By November 1918 almost all corps artillery had been concentrated at army level.

11 Army Brigade RFA 83 84 85 D Batteries

23 Army Brigade RFA 107 108 C D Batteries

28 Army Brigade RFA A 123 124 65 Batteries

38 Army Brigade RFA A 24 72 D Batteries

64 Army Brigade RFA A B C D Batteries

96 Army Brigade RFA 407 408 409 410 Batteries

113 Army Brigade RFA A B C D Batteries

119 Army Brigade RFA A B C D Batteries

2 Brigade RGA 177 250 352 66 Batteries

3 Brigade RGA 48 112 88 268 152 21 Batteries

4 Brigade RGA 131 2/1N Midland 223 301 261 129 Batteries

6 Brigade RGA 109 114 111 245 227 42 Batteries

10 Brigade RGA 150 159 113 226 Batteries

33 Brigade RGA 31 279 298 221 Batteries

36 Brigade RGA 140 151 155 353 1Aust 2Aust Batteries

43 Brigade RGA 147 190 351 154 Batteries

59 Brigade RGA 37 335 350 30 Batteries

64 Brigade RGA 100 101 102 61 Batteries

65 Brigade RGA 115 202 21 118 Batteries

70 Brigade RGA 282 285 405 151 Batteries

77 Brigade RGA 9 26 116 119 286 191 Batteries

86 Brigade RGA 141 1/1Wx 203 324 Batteries

87 Brigade RGA 154 156 194 219 Batteries

99 Brigade RGA 15 157 217 12 Batteries

HQ 25 Brigade RGA

HQ 72 Brigade RGA

7 Siege Battery RGA (4 x 6"guns)

29 Siege Battery RGA

187 Siege Battery RGA

193 Siege Battery RGA

479 Siege Battery RGA

526 Siege Battery RGA

528 Siege Battery RGA

546 Siege Battery RGA

45 Siege Battery RGA (2 x 9.2" railway guns)

Section 53 Siege Battery RGA (1 x 9.2" railway gun)

85 Siege Battery RGA (2 x 12" howitzers)

375 Siege Battery RGA

2 Battery Royal Marine Artillery

22 Siege Battery RGA (2 x 12" railway howitzers)

63 Siege Battery RGA

82 Siege Battery RGA

104 Siege Battery RGA

359 Siege Battery RGA

381 Siege Battery RGA

4 Siege Battery RGA (1 x 15" howitzer)

The Bermuda RGA

H AA Battery RGA

J AA Battery RGA

R AA Battery RGA

T AA Battery RGA

U AA Battery RGA

SECOND ARMY ENGINEERS [Major General Glubb]

By November 1918 all Corps engineers had been brought under army command.

6 Siege Company R Mon RE

20 Army Troops Company RE

134 Army Troops Company RE

136 Army Troops Company RE

138 Army Troops Company RE

141 Army Troops Company RE

145 Army Troops Company RE

167 Army Troops Company RE

214 Army Troops Company RE

235 Army Troops Company RE

236 Army Troops Company RE

245 Army Troops Company RE

289 Army Troops Company RE
554 Army Troops Company RE
556 Army Troops Company RE
557 Army Troops Company RE
573 Army Troops Company RE
171 Tunnelling Company RE
173 Tunnelling Company RE
184 Tunnelling Company RE
255 Tunnelling Company RE
3 Canadian Tunnelling Company RCE
Section, 196 Land Drainage Company RE
354 Electrical & Mechanical Company RE
2 Advanced RE Park
3 Advanced RE Park
10 Advanced RE Park
2 Army Workshop Company RE
4 Field Survey Battalion RE
7 Pontoon Park
220 Transportation (Works) Company RE
AA Searchlight Sections-1 11 24 28 31 40 64

4.6 British Second Army 1918: Corps

II Corps

Operations: The Advance in Flanders The Final Advance in Flanders

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| GOC | Lieutenant General C W Jacob |
| BGGS | Brigadier General S H Wilson From 27 October 1918 Brigadier General C Bonham-Carter |
| DA and QMG | Brigadier General R M Foot |
| BGRA | Brigadier General A D Kirby |
| CHA | Brigadier General D F H Logan |
| CE | Brigadier General C Godby |
| AD Signals | Lieutenant Colonel C V Monier-Williams From 27 August 1918 Lieutenant Colonel E de W H Bradley |
| DDMS | Colonel S G Moores From 1 April 1918 Colonel G St C Thom |
| ADVS | Lieutenant Colonel J J Griffith |

IX Corps

Operations: The Battles of the Lys

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| GOC | Lieutenant General A Hamilton Gordon until 13 September 1918, with temporary replacements 16-21 July 1918 Major General Sir R D Whigham 22-29 July 1918 Major General H W Higginson 10-12 September 1918 Major General E P Strickland |
| BGGS | Brigadier General W J Maxwell-Scott |
| DA and QMG | Brigadier General J C Harding Newman |
| BGRA | Brigadier General G Humphreys |
| CHA | Brigadier General G B Mackenzie |
| CE | wef 6 April 1918 Brigadier General G S Cartwright |
| AD Signals | Lieutenant Colonel H W Edwards |
| DDMS | Colonel J B Wilson |
| ADVS | Lieutenant Colonel E B Bartlett |

X Corps

Operations: The Advance in Flanders The Final Advance in Flanders

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| GOC | Lieutenant General Sir T L N Morland wef 15 April 1918 Lieutenant General Sir W N Congreve (temp) wef 15 April 1918 Lieutenant General Sir W E Peyton wef 15 April 1918 Lieutenant General R B Stephens |
| BGGS | Brigadier General A R Cameron wef 2 July 1918 Brigadier General W J Maxwell-Scott (temp) wef 13 July 1918 Brigadier General C Evans |
| DA and QMG | Brigadier General W K Legge |
| BGRA | Brigadier General G Gillson wef 12 September 1918 Brigadier General W P Monkhouse |
| CHA | Brigadier General H O Vincent wef 11 July 1918 Brigadier General A H Ollivant |
| CE | Brigadier General G H Boileau |
| AD Signals | Lieutenant Colonel F A Iles wef 12 May 1918 Lieutenant Colonel R F B Naylor |
| DDMS | Colonel R L R MaCloud |
| ADVS | Lieutenant Colonel G P Knott |

XV Corps

Operations: The Battles of the Lys
The Advance in Flanders
The Final Advance in Flanders

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| GOC | wef 12 April 1918 Lieutenant General Sir H de B De Lisle |
| BGGS | Brigadier General H H S Know wef 12-24 August 1918 Brigadier General G H N Jackson (temp) |
| DA and QMG | Brigadier General G R Frith |
| BGRA | Brigadier General B R Kirwan |
| CHA | Brigadier General C W Collingwood |
| CE | Brigadier General C W Singer |
| AD Signals | Lieutenant Colonel N Harrison |
| DDMS | Colonel G A Moore |
| ADVS | Lieutenant Colonel E M Percy |

XIX Corps

Operations: The Advance in Flanders **The Final Advance in Flanders**

On 30 June 1918 XIX Corps (6th and 41st Divisions) took over part of the Second Army front, relieving the French XIV Corps

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| GOC | Lieutenant General H E Watts |
| BGGS | Brigadier General C N MacMullen |
| DA and QMG | Brigadier General A G Moir |
| BGRA | Brigadier General W B R Sandys |
| CHA | Brigadier General C G Pritchard wef 15 April August 1918 Brigadier General F A Wynter |
| CE | Brigadier General A G Bremner (wounded 22 March 1918) wef 24 March 1918 Brigadier General H Biddulph wef 6 June 1918 Brigadier General E N Stockley |
| AD Signals | |
| DDMS | Colonel H J Pocock wef 7 June 1918 Colonel J D Alexander |
| ADVS | Lieutenant Colonel C E Steel |

XXII Corps

Operations: The Battles of the Lys

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| GOC | Lieutenant General Sir A J Godley |
| BGGS | Brigadier General C W Gwynn |
| DA and QMG | Brigadier General A E Delavoye |
| BGRA | Brigadier General E W M Powell |
| CHA | Brigadier General A S Jenour |
| CE | Brigadier General A E Panet |
| AD Signals | Lieutenant Colonel W T Dodd |
| DDMS | Colonel C M Begg |
| ADVS | Lieutenant Colonel A W Mason |

A5 British Second Army: Divisions March – November 1918

The **Divisions** highlighted in **bold type** belonged to the Second Army which fought through the Hundred Days.

6th Division

9th (Scottish) Division

14th (Light) Division

19th (Western) Division

21st Division

25th Division

29th Division

30th Division

31st Division

33rd Division

34th Division

35th Division

36th Division

39th Division

40th Division

41st Division

49th Division

50th Division

59th Division

1st Australian Division

American 27th Division

American 30th Division

4th Tank Brigade

6th Division

(Regular Army Division)

Major General T Marden

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| The Battle of Bailleul | 71 Brigade (under 25 th Division on 13 April 1918, then 49 th Division, IX Corps, Second Army) |
| The First Battle of Kemmel | 71 Brigade (under 49 th Division, IX Corps, Second Army) |
| The Second Battle of Kemmel | (XXII Corps, Second Army) |
| The Battle of the Scherpenberg | (XXII Corps, Second Army) |
| The Advance to Victory | (Fourth Army) |
| Battles of the Hindenburg Line | (IX Corps, Fourth Army) |
| The Final Advance in Picardy | (IX Corps, Fourth Army) |

16 Brigade

1st Battalion, the Buffs
1st Battalion, the King's (Shropshire Light Infantry)
2nd Battalion, the York and Lancaster
16th Trench Mortar Battery

18 Brigade

1st Battalion, the West Yorkshires
11th (Service) Battalion, the Essex
2nd Battalion, the Durham Light Infantry
18th Trench Mortar Battery

71 Brigade

9th (Service) Battalion, the Norfolks
1st Battalion, the Leicesters
2nd Battalion, the Sherwood Foresters
71st Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

11th (Service) Battalion (Midland Pioneers), the Leicesters
No 6 Machine Gun Battalion
II Brigade, RFA
XXIV Brigade, RFA
6th Divisional Ammunition Column
X.6, Y.6 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
12th, 459th, 509th Field Companies
6th Signals Company
16th, 17th, 18th Field Ambulances
6th Divisional Train ASC (17, 19, 23, 24 Companies)
209th Divisional Employment Company
6th Mobile Veterinary Section

9th (Scottish) Division
(New Army Division)

From 4-12 March, 16-24(1400 hours) March 1918 (Acting)

Major-General H H Tudor

From 13-15, 24(1400 hours)-27 March 1918

Major-General C A Blacklock

From 28 March 1918

Major-General H H Tudor

The Battle of Messines
The Battle of Bailleul
The First Battle of Kemmel
The Second Battle of Kemmel
The Advance in Flanders
The Final Advance in Flanders
The Battle of Ypres 1918
The Battle of Courtrai

On 26-27 October, the Division was relieved by 31st Division and moved back to reorganise.

26 Brigade

Brigadier-General J Kennedy

From 27 July 1918

Brigadier-General Hon. A G A Hore-Ruthven, VC

From 5 November 1918

Brigadier-General H G Hyslop

8th (Service) Battalion, the Black Watch
7th (Service) Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders
5th (Service) Battalion, Cameron Highlanders
26th Trench Mortar Company

27 (Lowland) Brigade

Brigadier-General W D Croft

11th (Service) Battalion, Royal Scots
12th (Service) Battalion, Royal Scots
6th (Service) Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers
27th Trench Mortar Battery

28 Brigade*

Brigadier-General J L Jack

2nd Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers (joined September 1918)
9th (Service) Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) (returned September 1918)
1st Royal Newfoundland Regiment (joined September 1918)**

South African Brigade***

2nd Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers (April-September 1918)
9th (Service) Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) (April-September 1918)
1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th Battalions, South African Infantry

Division troops

9th (Service) (Pioneers) Seaforth Highlanders
No 9 Machine Gun Battalion
No 11 Motor Machine Gun Battery****
L, LI Brigades RFA
X9, Y9 Medium Mortar Batteries
9th Ammunition Column
63rd, 64th, 90th Field Companies
9th Signals Company
27th, 28th, South African (up to 13 September 1918), 2/1st East Lancs (from 20 September 1918)
Field Ambulances
9th Divisional Train ASC (104, 105, 106, 107 Companies)
212th Divisional Employment Company
21st Mobile Veterinary Section

* The Brigade was broken up on 6 May 1916 and reformed on 11 September 1918

** The Battalion joined the 28 Brigade on 13 September 1918, having been attached to GHQ since 29 April 1918; this was initially a temporary attachment because as late as 15 September 1918, Brigadier-General Jack was still expecting 10th Battalion, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders to be placed with the Brigade

*** The Brigade reported to 9th Division from 22 April 1916 to 13 September 1918. On 24 April 1918, due to heavy casualties, 1st, 2nd and 4th Battalions were amalgamated – forming the South African (Composite) Regiment; they were reformed by 1 September 1918. The 9th (Service) Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) was transferred to the Brigade in April 1918 to bring it up to strength; it was restored to 28 Brigade in September 1918

**** Joined Division from 7 October to 7 November 1918

14th (Light) Division
(New Army Division)

Major-General V A Couper

From 22 March 1918

Major-General W H Greenly

From 27 March 1918

Major-General Sir V A Couper

From 31 March 1918

Major-General P C B Skinner

In the Battle of St Quentin and the Battle of the Avre, actions forming part of the first Battles of the Somme 1918, the Division suffered very severe casualties, losing almost 6,000 troops. XLVI and XLVII Brigades, RFA, lost all their guns. The Division was withdrawn from the line and placed on the construction of a new defensive line in the rear. On 26 April, the infantry battalions were reduced to a training cadre. Various units were temporarily attached, before the Division was moved to England for re-establishment, on 17 June 1918, before returning to France. The Division joined Second Army 2-6 July 1918. Placed under XIX Corps, it transferred to XV Corps from 2 October 1918.

The Final Advance in Flanders
The Battle of Ypres 1918

41 Brigade

Brigadier-General P C B Skinner

From 31 March 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel B J Curling (Acting)

From 3 April 1918

Brigadier-General C R P Winser

From 3 September 1918

Brigadier-General W F Sweny

18th (Service) Battalion, the York and Lancaster (joined June 1918)
29th (Service) Battalion, Durham Light Infantry (joined June 1918)
33rd (City of London) Battalion, London Regiment (joined June 1918)
41st Trench Mortar Battery

42 Brigade

Brigadier-General G N B Forster (killed 4 April 1918)

From 5-7 April 1918

Brigadier-General C R P Winser (41 Brigade, Acting)

From 7 April 1918

Brigadier-General H T Dobbin

6th (Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry) Battalion, the Wiltshires (joined as a cadre June 1918)
16th (Service) (1st City) Battalion, the Manchesters (joined as a cadre June 1918)
14th (Service) Battalion, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders (joined April 1918)
42nd Trench Mortar Battery

43 Brigade

Brigadier-General R S Tempest

From 16 September 1918

Brigadier-General G E Pereira

12th (Service) Battalion, the Suffolks (joined May 1918)

20th (Service) (Shoreditch) Battalion, the Middlesex (joined as a cadre June 1918)

10th (Service) Battalion, Highland Light Infantry (joined as a cadre June 1918, became 10th Battalion June 1918)

43rd Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

15th (Service) Battalion, Loyal North Lancs (joined June 1918)

XLVI, XLVII Brigades RFA

X14, Y14 Trench Mortar Batteries

14th Ammunition Column

61st, 62nd, 89th Field Companies

14th Signals Company

105th, 106th, 107th Field Ambulance

14th Divisional Train ASC (100, 101, 102, 103 Companies)

215th Employment Company

26th Mobile Veterinary Section

41st Divisional Workshops

No 14 Machine Gun Battalion (created March 1918, disbanded 11 April 1918)

19th (Western Division)
(New Army Division)

Major-General G Jeffreys

The Advance in Flanders

56 Brigade

1/4th (Service) Battalion, the KSLI (joined February 1918)

8th (Service) Battalion, the North Staffords (joined February 1918)

56st Trench Mortar Battery (broken up 5th February 1918, reconstructed 6th March 1918)

57 Brigade

10th (Service) Battalion, the Royal Warwicks

8th (Service) Battalion, the Royal Gloucesters

3rd Battalion, the Worcesters (joined June 1918)

9th (Service) Battalion, the Worcesters (left as a cadre June 1918)

42nd Trench Mortar Battery

58 Brigade

9th (Service) Battalion, the Cheshires

9th (Service) Battalion, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers

2nd Battalion, the Wiltshires (joined May 1918)

6th (Service) Battalion, the Wiltshires (left as a cadre June 1918)

58th Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

5th (Service) Battalion (Pioneers), the South Wales Borderers

No 19 Machine Gun Battalion

81st, 82nd, 94th Field Companies

19th Signals Company

57th, 58th, 59th Field Ambulance

19th Divisional Train ASC (154, 155, 156, 157 Companies)

220th Employment Company

31st Mobile Veterinary Section

LXXXVII, LXXXVIII Brigades RFA

X19, Y19 Trench Mortar Batteries

19th Ammunition Column

21st Division
(New Army Division)

Major General G Campbell

The Battles of the Lys
The Battle of Messines 1918 – 62nd Brigade
The Second Battle of Kemmel

62 Brigade

12th (Service) Battalion, the Northumberland Fusiliers
13th (Service) Battalion, the Northumberland Fusiliers
3/4th Battalion (TF), the Queen's
1st Battalion, the Lincolns
2nd Battalion, the Lincolns
62nd Trench Mortar Battery

64 Brigade

1st Battalion, the East Yorkshires
2nd Battalion, the South Lancashire (joined June 1918, left same month)
9th (Service) Battalion, the KOYLI
15th (Service) Battalion, the Durham Light Infantry
64th Trench Mortar Battery (formed by 19 June 1916)

110 Brigade

6th (Service) Battalion, the Leicesters
7th (Service) Battalion, the Leicesters
8th (Service) Battalion, the Leicesters (left June 1918)
1st Battalion, the Wiltshires (joined June 1918)
110th Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

14th (Service) Battalion (Pioneers), the Northumberland Fusiliers
No 21 Machine Gun Battalion
XCIV Brigade, RFA
XCV Brigade, RFA
21st Divisional Ammunition Column
X.21, Y.21 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
97th, 98th, 126th, 94th Field Companies
21st Signals Company
63rd, 64th, 65th Field Ambulances
21st Divisional Train ASC (182, 183, 184, 185 Companies)
222nd Divisional Employment Company
33rd Mobile Veterinary Section

25th Division
(New Army Division)

Major General E Bainbridge
From 4 August 1918
Major General J Charles

The Battles of the Lys
The First Battle of Kemmel
The Second Battle of Kemmel

74 Brigade

9th (Service) Battalion, the Yorkshire (joined September 1918)
2/7th Battalion, the Lancashire Fusiliers (joined June 1918, disbanded July 1918)
11th (Service) Battalion, the Lancashire Fusiliers (disbanded August 1918)
3rd Battalion, the Worcesters (left June 1918)
11th (Service) Battalion, the Sherwood Foresters (joined September 1918)
9th (Service) Battalion, the Loyal North Lancs (left June 1918)
21st (Service) Battalion (Islington), the Middlesex (joined as a cadre June 1918)
13th (Service) Battalion, the Durham Light Infantry (joined September 1918)
74th Trench Mortar Battery

75 Brigade

On 9 September 1918 the Brigade was renumbered as 236, for service in North Russia (leaving the Division). A 75 Brigade was reformed within the Division, on 17 September 1918.

1/8th Battalion, the Royal Warwicks (joined September 1918)
17th (Service) Battalion, the King's (Liverpool) (joined June 1918)
6th (Service) Battalion, the Yorkshire (joined June 1918)
13th (Service) Battalion, the Yorkshire (joined June 1918)
1/6th Battalion, the Cheshires (joined May 1918, left July 1918)
11th (Service) Battalion, the Cheshires (left as a cadre June 1918)
1/8th Battalion, the Worcesters (joined September 1918)
8th (Service) Battalion, the Border (left June 1918)
11th (Service) Battalion (1st South Down), the Royal Sussex (joined as a cadre June 1918)
2nd Battalion, the South Lancashire (left June 1918)
75th Trench Mortar Battery

7 Brigade

9th (Service) Battalion, the Devons (joined September 1918)
10th (Service) Battalion, the Cheshires (left as cadre July 1918)
13th (Service) Battalion (Wandsworth), the East Surreys (joined as cadre, June 1918, disbanded November 1918)
4th (Extra Reserve) Battalion, the South Staffordshire (left June 1918)
8th (Service) Battalion, the Loyal North Lancs
1st Battalion, the Wiltshires (left June 1918)
20th (Service) Battalion (5th City), the Manchesters (joined September 1918)

21st (Service) Battalion (6th City), the Manchesters (joined September 1918)
7th Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

8th (Service) Battalion, the Leicesters (joined as a cadre June 1918)
6th (Service) Battalion (Pioneers), the South Wales Borderers (left July 1918)
11th (Service) Battalion (St.Helens Pioneers), the South Lancashire (joined as a cadre June 1918, became Pioneers October 1918)
No 25 Machine Gun Battalion (left 23 July and returned 19 October 1918)
No 100 (Warwicks and South Notts Yeomanry) Machine Gun Battalion (joined 2 October and left 19 October 1918)
(The Divisional Artillery remained in France when the rest of the Division returned to England for re-fit after severe casualties, in June 1918)
CX Brigade, RFA (between 26 May 1918, and 4 June 1918, attached to 8th Division)
CXII Brigade, RFA (between 26 May 1918, and 21 June 1918, attached to 21st Division)
25th Divisional Ammunition Column
X.25, Y.25 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
105th, 106th, 130th Field Companies
25th Signals Company
75th, 76th, 77th Field Ambulances
25th Divisional Train ASC (182, 183, 184, 185 Companies)
225th Divisional Employment Company
37th Mobile Veterinary Section

29th Division

(Regular Army Division)

From 12 March 1918

Brigadier-General R M Johnson (Acting)

From 10-24 August 1918

Brigadier-General H H S Knox (Acting)

From 19 March 1918

Major-General D Cayley

The Battles of the Lys

(The Battle of Estaires - first phase of the Battles of the Lys – under First Army)

The Battle of Messines, 1918 (88 Brigade, with 25th Division 10 April 1918, 34th Division, 11 April 1918, IX Corps, Second Army)

The Battle of Hazebrouck (less 88 Brigade) including Defence of Nieppe Forest

The Battle of Bailleul (88 Brigade, with 34th Division)

The First Battle of Kemmel (88 Brigade)

The Advance in Flanders

Action of Outtersteene Ridge (87 Brigade)

Capture of Ploegsteert and Hill 63 (86 and 88 Brigades)

The Battle of Ypres 1918

The Battle of Courtrai

The Division was withdrawn to rest on 24 October 1918. On 7 November 1918 it transferred (via XV Corps) from II Corps to X Corps.

86 Brigade

Brigadier-General G R H Cheape

2nd Battalion, Royal Fusiliers

1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers

1st Battalion, Royal Dublin Fusiliers

86th Trench mortar Battery

87 Brigade

Brigadier-General G H N Jackson

2nd Battalion, South Wales Borders

1st Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers

1st Battalion, the Border

87th Trench Mortar Battery

88 Brigade

Brigadier-General B C Freyberg VC

4th Battalion, the Worcesters

2nd Battalion, the Hampshire

2nd Battalion, the Leinster*

88th Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

1/2nd (Pioneer) Battalion, the Monmouthshire
No 29 Machine Gun Battalion
455th, 497th, 510th Field Companies
1st London Signals Company
87th, 88th, 89th Field Ambulance
29th Divisional Train ASC (225, 226, 227, 228 Companies)
226th Divisional Employment Company
18th Mobile Veterinary Section
XV Brigade RHA, XVII Brigade RFA
X29, Y29 Medium Mortar Batteries
29th Ammunition Column

* The Battalion joined the Brigade on 23 April 1918 from 47 Brigade, 16th Division

30th Division
(New Army Division)

Major-General W Williams

The Battles of the Lys
First Battle of Kemmel (89 Brigade)
The Second Battle of Kemmel (89 Brigade)
The Advance in Flanders
The Final Advance in Flanders
The Battle of Ypres 1918
The Battle of Courtrai

21 Brigade **Brigadier-General G D Goodman**

7th Battalion, (South Irish Horse) Royal Irish
1/6th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment
2/23rd Battalion, (County of London) London Regiment
21st Trench Mortar Battery

89 Brigade **Brigadier-General Hon. F C Stanley**
From 11 April 1918
Lieutenant-Colonel G Rollo (Acting)
From 12 April 1918
Brigadier-General R A M Currie
From 27 August 1918
Lieutenant-Colonel R A Irvine (Acting)
From 15 September 1918
Brigadier-General R A M Currie

7/8th Battalion, (Service) Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers
2nd Battalion, South Lancashire
2/17th Battalion, (County of London) London Regiment
89th Trench Mortar Battery

90 Brigade ('The Grey Brigade') **Lieutenant-Colonel H S Poyntz (Acting)**
From 26 March 1918
Brigadier-General G A Stevens
From 11 August 1918
Lieutenant-Colonel R J L Ogilby (Acting)
From 18 August 1918
Brigadier-General G A Stevens

2/14th Battalion, (County of London) (London Scottish) London Regiment
2/15th Battalion, (County of London) (Prince of Wales' Own Civil Service Rifles) London Regiment*

2/16th Battalion, (County of London) (Queen's Westminster Rifles) London Regiment
90th Trench Mortar Battery

Division

6th (Service) (Pioneers) Battalion, South Wales Borderers
No 30 Machine Gun Battalion
201st, 202nd, 203rd (County Palatine) Field Companies
30th Signals Company
96th, 97th, 98th Field Ambulance
30th Divisional Train ASC (186, 187, 188, 189 Companies)
227th Divisional Employment Company
40th Mobile Veterinary Section
30th Divisional Workshops
CXLIX, CXLVIII Brigades RFA
X30, Y30 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
30th Ammunition Column

***The Battalion travelled from Egypt in June 1918, joining the Division at the start of July.**

31st Division
(New Army Division)

Major-General R Wanless O’Gowan

From 21 March 1918

Major-General R J Bridgford

From 6 May 1918

Major-General J Campbell

With XV Corps for the Final Advance in Flanders, the Division transferred to II Corps for The Action of Tiegham (31 October). On 3 November the Division was transferred into Army Reserve. On 5 November it was placed under XIX Corps.

The Battles of the Lys

(The Battle of Estaires - first phase of the Battles of the Lys – under First Army)

The Battle of Hazebrouck – including the Defence of Nieppe Forest

The Advance in Flanders

The Final Advance in Flanders

The Battle of Ypres 1918

The Action of Tieghem

92 Brigade*

Brigadier-General O De L Williams

10th (Service) (1st Hull) Battalion, East Yorkshires

11th (Service) (2nd Hull) Battalion, East Yorkshires

11th (Service) (Accrington) Battalion, East Lancashire

92nd Trench Mortar Battery

93 Brigade*

Brigadier-General J D Ingles (sick, 27 March 1918)

From 27 March 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel G H Gurney (Acting)

From 27 March 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel R D Temple (Acting)

From 5 April

Brigadier-General S C Taylor

(wounded 1 October 1918, died 11 October 1918)

From 1 October 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel A V Nutt (Acting)

From 1 October 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel A W Rickman (Acting)

From 4 October 1918

Brigadier-General G B F Smyth

15th (Service) (1st Leeds) Battalion, the West Yorkshires

18th (Service) (1st County) Battalion, Durham Light Infantry

13th (Service) (1st Barnsley) Battalion, York and Lancaster

93rd Trench Mortar Battery

94 (Yeomanry) Brigade** **Brigadier-General A Symons (sick, 3 November 1918)**
From 3 November 1918
Lieutenant-Colonel J Sherwood-Kelly VC (Acting)
From 12 November
Brigadier-General Hon L J P Butler

12th (Norfolk Yeomanry) TF Battalion, the Norfolks
12th (Ayr & Lanark Yeomanry) TF Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers
24th (Denbighshire Yeomanry) TF Battalion, Royal Welsh Fusiliers
94th Trench Mortar Battery

Division

12th (Service) (Miners) (Pioneers) Battalion, King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry
No 31 Machine Gun Battalion
210th, 211th, 212th (Leeds) Field Companies
31st Signals Company
93rd, 94th, 95th Field Ambulance
31st Divisional Train ASC (221, 222, 223, 279 Companies)
228th Divisional Employment Company
41st Mobile Veterinary Section
CLXV, CLXX Brigades RFA
X31, Y31 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
31st Ammunition Column

* 92 Composite Brigade: On 16 April 1918 it was decided that, due to the heavy casualties recently sustained, the 92 and 93 Brigades would be temporarily amalgamated and called the 92 Composite Brigade. It was broken up two days later, and the 92 and 93 Brigades were reconstituted soon after.

** 94 Brigade (originally 115 Brigade) was broken up between 11-17 February 1918 and replaced by 4 Guards Brigade; on 20 May 1918, this Brigade was transferred to GHQ Reserve. 94 Brigade was reformed on 30 May 1918 and joined 31st Division the following day. The Brigade was reconstituted on 21 June 1918 with three Battalions from 74th (Yeomanry) Division (the *Broken Spur* Division) and designated 94 (Yeomanry) Brigade.

33rd Division
(New Army Division)

Major General P Wood

The Battles of the Lys
The Battle of Messines, 1918 (100th Brigade)
The Battle of Hazebrouck
The Battle of Bailleul (100th Brigade) including the Defence of Neuve Eglise
The First Battle of Kemmel including the recapture of Ridge Wood

98 Brigade

4th (Extra Reserve) Battalion, the King's (Liverpool)
1st Battalion, the Middlesex
2nd Battalion, the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders
98th Trench Mortar Battery

100 Brigade

16th (Service) Battalion (Church Lads Brigade), the King's Royal Rifle Corps
2nd Battalion, the Worcesters
1/9th Battalion (Glasgow Highlanders), the Highland Light Infantry
100th Trench Mortar Battery

19 Brigade

1st Battalion, the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles)
5th/6th Battalion, the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles)
1st Battalion, the Queen's
19th Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

18th (Service) Battalion (1st Public Works Pioneers), the Middlesex
CLVI Brigade RFA
CLXII Brigade RFA
33rd Divisional Ammunition Column
X.33, Y.33 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
212th, 222nd, 11th, Field Companies RE (Tottenham)
33rd Signal Company RE (Tottenham)
19th, 99th, 101st Field Ambulance
33rd Machine Gun Battalion MGC
33rd Divisional Train ASC (170, 171, 173, 8 Companies)
43rd Mobile Veterinary Section AVC
230th Divisional Employment Company

34th Division
(New Army Division)

Major-General C L Nicholson

The Battles of the Lys
The Battle of Estaires
The Battle of Messines, 1918 (102nd Brigade)
The Battle of Bailleul
The First Battle of Kemmel

The Division suffered very severe casualties during its part in the defence of Kemmel, and was withdrawn and reorganised. In mid-May 1918 the Divisional infantry was reduced to a training cadre, and used for training American troops. Many reduced units were attached for short periods at this time. It was reconstituted as a full first-line Division late in June 1918

(The Battle of the Soissonnais and of the Ourcq, the Capture of Beugneux Ridge – attached to French XXX Corps)

The Advance in Flanders
The Final Advance in Flanders
The Battle of Ypres 1918
The Battle of Courtrai
The Actions of Ooteghem and Tieghem

On 1 November the Division was withdrawn into Corps Reserve.

101 Brigade **Brigadier-General R G Gore (killed, 14 April 1918)**
From 14 April 1918
Lieutenant-Colonel A Stephenson (Acting)
From 23 April
Brigadier-General W J Woodstock

15th (Service) Battalion (1st Edinburgh), the Royal Scots (left May 1918)
16th (Service) Battalion (2nd Edinburgh), the Royal Scots (left May 1918)
2/4th Battalion (TF), the Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment) (joined June 1918)
11th (Service) Battalion, the Suffolks (left May 1918)
2nd Battalion, the Loyal North Lancs (joined June 1918)
4th Battalion, Royal Sussex
101st Trench Mortar Battery (broken up 16 May 1918 and reformed 2 July 1918)

102 Brigade (Tyneside Scottish) **Brigadier-General N A Thomson**
From 21 May
Brigadier-General E Hilliam

22nd (Service) Battalion, the Northumberland Fusiliers (left June 1918)
23rd (Service) Battalion, the Northumberland Fusiliers (left June 1918)

25th (Service) Battalion , the Northumberland Fusiliers (left June 1918)
1/4th Battalion, the Lincolns (joined June 1918, left June 1918)
1/4th Battalion, the Cheshires (joined July 1918)
1/7th Battalion, the Cheshires (joined July 1918)
7/8th (Service) Battalion, the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (joined June 1918 as a cadre, left June 1918)
1/1st Battalion, the Herefordshire (joined June 1918)
102nd Trench Mortar Battery (broken up 16 May 1918 and reformed 10 July 1918)

103 Brigade (Tyneside Irish) Brigadier-General J G Chaplin
From 31 August
Brigadier-General R I Rawson

10th (Service) Battalion, the Lincolns (left June 1918)
1/5th (Dumfries and Galloway) Battalion, the King's Own Scottish Borderers (joined June 1918)
1/8th Battalion, the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) (joined June 1918)
6th (Service) Battalion, the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (joined and left June 1918)
1st Battalion, the East Lancashire (left May 1918)
1/5th (Renfrewshire) Battalion, the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders (joined June 1918)
103rd Trench Mortar Battery (broken up 16 May 1918 and reformed 1 July 1918)

Division troops

18th (Service) Battalion , the Northumberland Fusiliers (left June 1918)
2/4th Battalion, the Somerset Light Infantry (joined June 1918)
13th (Service) Battalion, the Yorkshire (joined and left as a cadre, June 1918)
13th (Service) Battalion (Wandsworth), the East Surreys (joined and left as cadre, June 1918)
2/5th Battalion, the Sherwood Foresters (joined and left as a cadre June 1918)
21st (Service) Battalion (Islington), the Middlesex (joined and left as a cadre June 1918)
8th (Service) Battalion, the King's Royal Rifle Corps (joined and left as a cadre June 1918)
9th (Service) Battalion, the King's Royal Rifle Corps (joined and left as a cadre June 1918)
1/5th Bn, the North Staffords (joined and left as a cadre June 1918)
10/11th (Service) Battalion, the Highland Light Infantry (joined and left as a cadre June 1918)
14th (Service) Battalion, the Highland Light Infantry (joined and left as a cadre June 1918)
6th (Service) Battalion, the Connaught Rangers (joined and left as a cadre June 1918)
6th (Service) Battalion, the Leinster (joined and left June 1918)
8th (Service) Battalion, the Rifle Brigade (joined and left June 1918)
No 34 Machine Gun Battalion
207th, 208th, 209th (Norfolk) Field Companies
34th Signals Company
102nd, 103rd, 104th Field Ambulance
34th Divisional Train ASC (229, 230, 231, 232 Companies)
231st Divisional Employment Company
44th Mobile Veterinary Section
34th Divisional Workshops
CLII, CLX Brigades RFA
X34, Y34 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
34th Ammunition Column

35th Division

(New Army Division – originally a bantam formation)

Major-General G McK Franks

Temporary from 27 March 1918; permanent from 7 April 1918

Major-General A Marindin

The Final Advance in Flanders
The Battle of Ypres 1918
The Battle of Courtrai
The Action of Tieghem

104 Brigade

Brigadier-General J W Sandilands

17th (Service) Battalion (1st South-East Lancs), Lancashire Fusiliers*
18th (Service) Battalion (2nd South-East Lancs), Lancashire Fusiliers*
19th (Service) Battalion (2nd County), Durham Light Infantry*
9th (Service) Battalion, the Northumberland Fusiliers (left May 1918)
104th Trench Mortar Battery

105 Brigade

Brigadier-General A H Marindin

From 26 March 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel W A W Crellin (Acting)

From 7 April

**Brigadier-General A Carton de Wiert
(Wounded 20 April 1918)**

From 20 April 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel L M Stevens (Acting)

From 7 April

Brigadier-General A J Turner

15th (Service) Battalion (1st Birkenhead), the Cheshires*
15th (Service) Battalion (Nottingham), Sherwood Foresters*
4th (Extra Reserve) Battalion, North Staffords
105th Trench Mortar Battery

106 Brigade

Brigadier-General J H W Pollard

17th (Rosebery) Battalion, Royal Scots
12th (Service) Battalion, Highland Light Infantry
18th (Service) Battalion, Highland Light Infantry*
106th Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

19th (Service) Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers**
No 35 Machine Gun Battalion
203, 204, 205 Field Companies
35th Signals Company
105th, 106th, 107th Field Ambulance
35th Divisional Train ASC (233, 234, 235 and 236 Companies)
CLVII (Aberdeen), CLVIX (Glasgow) Brigades RFA
X35, Y35 Medium Mortar Batteries
35th Divisional Ammunition Column (British Empire League) RFA

* These were the original Bantam Battalions making up the Brigades and Division since their formation

** Though not a Bantam formation, the 19/Northumberland Fusiliers had been Pioneers for the Division since its formation

36th (Ulster) Division
(New Army Division)

Major-General O Nugent

From 6 April 1918

Major-General C Coffin VC

The Battles of the Lys
The Battle of Messines, 1918 (108 Brigade)
The Battle of Bailleul (108 Brigade)
The First Battle of Kemmel (108 Brigade)
The Advance in Flanders
The Battle of Ypres 1918
The Battle of Courtrai

On 28 October the Division was relieved of frontline duty and transferred from II Corps to X Corps.
On 9 November the Division was transferred to XV Corps.

107 Brigade

Brigadier-General W M Withycombe

From 30 April 1918

Brigadier-General E I de S Thorpe

(Wounded 13 September 1918)

From 14 September 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel R H MacKenzie (Acting)

From 28 September 1918

Brigadier-General H J Brock

1st Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles
2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles
15th (Service) Battalion (North Belfast), Royal Irish Rifles
107th Trench Mortar Battery

108 Brigade

Brigadier-General C R J Griffith

From 21 May 1918

Brigadier-General E Vaughn

12th (Service) Battalion (Central Antrim), Royal Irish Rifles
1st Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers
9th (Service) Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers
108th Trench Mortar Battery

109 Brigade

Brigadier-General W F Hessey

(Injured 16 April 1918)

From 16 April 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel J E Knott (Acting)

From 21 April 1918

Brigadier-General E Vaughn (Temporary)

From 17 May 1918

Brigadier-General W F Hessey

1st Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers
2nd Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers
9th (Service) Battalion (County Tyrone), Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers
109th Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

16th (Service) Battalion (2nd County Down) (Pioneers), Royal Irish Rifles
No 36 Machine Gun Battalion
121st, 122nd, 150th Field Companies
36th Signals Company
108th, 109th, 110th Field Ambulance
36th Divisional Train ASC (251, 252, 253 and 254 HT Companies)
223rd Divisional Employment Company
36th Divisional Workshops
CLIII, CLXXIII Brigades RFA
X36, Y36 Medium Mortar (6x6inch) Batteries RFA
36th Ammunition Column

39th Division
(New Army Division)

From 20 August 1917 until killed in action on 29 March 1918; he is buried in Picquigny British Cemetery

Major General E. Feetham
From 30 March 1918 to August 1918
Major General C Blacklock

A number of Brigadiers General took acting or temporary command:
From 7-18 March 1918, when he was killed in action; he is buried in Peronne Communal Cemetery Extension

Brigadier General G Cape
From 18-23 March 1918
Brigadier General M. Hornby
29-30 March 1918
Brigadier General W. Thompson

The Battles of the Lys

The First Battle of Kemmel

The Second Battle of Kemmel

As a consequence of the Division's losses after the Spring 1918 fighting, it was not reconstituted as a fighting unit, and became a training formation for American troops arriving in France

Only those units involved in the Battles of the Lys are listed below

116 Brigade

11th (Service) Battalion (1st South Down), the Royal Sussex (left as a cadre June 1918)
13th (Service) Bn (3rd South Down), the Royal Sussex (left as a cadre June 1918)
1/1st Battalion, the Hertfordshire (left 9 May 1918)
116th Trench Mortar Battery

117 Brigade

16th (Service) Battalion (Chatsworth Rifles), the Sherwood Foresters (left as a cadre 16 August 1918)
17th (Service) Battalion (British Empire League), the King's Royal Rifle Corps (left as a cadre 16 August 1918)
16th (Service) Battalion (St. Pancras), the Rifle Brigade (left as a cadre August 1918)
117th Trench Mortar Battery

118 Brigade

1/6th Battalion, the Cheshires (left 28 May 1918)
4/5th Battalion, the Black Watch*
1/1st Battalion, the Cambridgeshire (joined 29 February 1916, left 9 May 1918)
118th Trench Mortar Battery (formed from two existing TM Sections that had existed since 7 April 1916, by 1 July 1916)

* This Battalion resulted from the amalgamation of 1/4th and 1/5th Battalions in March 1916; it became 1/4th again 6 May 1918, left 14 May 1918)

39th Division Composite Brigade

Formed on 10 April 1918 under the command of Brigadier General A Hubback after the Division suffered heavy losses - fought in the battles of the Lys, attached to XXII Corps - returned to the Division and the troops deployed to former units by 6 May 1918

- 1st Battalion (formed from remnants of 11th Royal Sussex and 1/1st Hertfordshire)
- 2nd Battalion (formed from remnants of 13th Gloucestershire and 13th Royal Sussex)
- 3rd Battalion (formed from remnants of 117 Brigade)
- 4th Battalion (formed from remnants of 118 Brigade)
- 5th Battalion (formed from remnants of all three Brigades)
- 118th Trench Mortar Battery
- No 4 (287) Company, 39th Divisional Train ASC

Division troops

- 13th (Service) Battalion (Forest of Dean) (Pioneers), the Gloucesters (left as a cadre by 6 May 1918)
- CLXXIV, CLXXXVI (H) Brigades, RFA
- 39th Divisional Ammunition Column RFA
- X.39, Y.39 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
- 132nd, 133rd, 134th Field Ambulance
- 225th, 227th, 234th Field Company (Stockton-on-Tees)
- 39th Divisional Signal Company (Empire)
- 39th Divisional Train (284, 285, 286, 287 Companies ASC)
- 236th Divisional Employment Company
- 50th Mobile Veterinary Section, AVC
- No 39 Machine Gun Battalion (Left for 40th Division 11 September 1918)

40th Division
(New Army Bantam Division)*

Major General J Ponsonby
From 3 July 1918
Major General Sir W E Peyton

The Battles of the Lys
The Battle of Estaires
The Battle of Hazebrouck

Following losses in this battle the Division was reduced to a training cadre - a major reorganisation took place, with battalions that had been Garrison Guard units joining and being converted to fighting units. Orders on 14 June 1918 stated that the formation would be a 'Garrison Division' (semi-mobile) and 'required to hold a quiet sector of the line', with training focused on that role.

Note: On 13 July, via a Divisional Order, each *Garrison* battalion in the Division had the word deleted from its title with immediate effect.

The Advance in Flanders
The Final Advance in Flanders
The Battle of Ypres 1918

During the night of 10-11 November, 29th Division (II Corps, Second Army) and 59th Division (Fifth Army) linked up in front of XV Corps, assuming responsibility for the line – XV Corps including 40th Division was withdrawn into Reserve.

119 Brigade (Welsh Bantams) Brigadier-General F P Crozier

13th (Service) Battalion (Wandsworth), the East Surreys (left as cadre June 1918)
18th (Service) Battalion (2nd Glamorgan), the Welsh (left as a cadre May 1918)
21st (Service) Battalion (Islington), the Middlesex (left as a cadre May 1918)
12th (Service) Battalion, the North Staffords (joined June 1918 as 12th (Garrison) Battalion)
13th (Service) Battalion, East Lancashire (joined 1918 as 8th Garrison Guard Battalion)
13th (Service) Battalion, Inniskilling
119th Trench Mortar Battery

120 Brigade Brigadier-General Hon. C S Heathcote-Drummond-Willoughby

From 15 March 1918

Lieutenant-Colonel R F Forbes (Acting)

From 23 March 1918

Brigadier-General C J Hobkirk

From 18 October 1918

Brigadier-General Hon. W P Hore-Ruthuen

2nd Battalion, the Royal Scots Fusiliers (joined April 1918, left April 1918)
10/11th (Service) Battalion, the Highland Light Infantry (left as a cadre June 1918)
14th (Service) Battalion, the Highland Light Infantry (left as a cadre June 1918) 14th (Service) Battalion, the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders (left April 1918)
10th (Service) Battalion, the King's Own Scottish Borderers (joined June 1918)**
15th (Service) Battalion, the KOYLI (joined June 1918)

11th (Service) Battalion, the Cameron Highlanders (joined as 6th Garrison Guard Battalion June 1918)
120th Trench Mortar Battery

121 Brigade Brigadier-General J Campbell
From 27 April 1918
Lieutenant-Colonel L Lloyd (Acting)
From 6 May 1918
Brigadier-General W B Garnett
From 17 September 1918
Brigadier-General G C Stubbs

12th (Service) Battalion, the Suffolks (left May 1918)
13th (Service) Battalion, the Yorkshire (left June 1918)***
20th (Service) Battalion (Shoreditch), the Middlesex (left as cadre May 1918)
23rd TF Battalion, the Cheshires (joined as a Garrison Battalion, June 1918)
10th Battalion, the Worcesters (joined as a training cadre June 1918, absorbed July 1918)
23rd Battalion, the Lancashire Fusiliers (joined as 23rd Garrison Battalion, June 1918)
8th (Service) Battalion, the Royal Irish (joined as 2nd Garrison Battalion, June 1918)****
121st Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

12th (Service) Battalion, the Yorkshire (left June 1918)
17th (Service) Battalion, the Worcesters (joined as a Garrison Battalion in June 1918)
No 40 Machine Gun Battalion (created March 1918, disbanded May 1918)
No 104 Machine Gun Battalion (joined 24 August 1918, left 16 September 1918)
No 39 Machine Gun Battalion (joined 11 September 1918)
224th, 229th, 231st Field Companies
40th Signals Company
135th, 136th, 137th Field Ambulance
40th Divisional Train ASC (292, 293, 294, 295 Companies)
237th Divisional Employment Company
51st Mobile Veterinary Section
CLXXVIII (Howitzer) Brigade RFA
CLXXXI Brigade RFA
X40, Y40 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
40th Ammunition Column

* Although in order to make it ready for deployment to the Western Front in 1916, it included four ‘non-Bantam’ Battalions

** The Battalion was formed as 9th Garrison Battalion, the King’s Own Scottish Borderers; it was designated as the 10th Battalion on 15 June 1918

*** The 8th (Service) Battalion, the Sherwood Foresters merged with 13th Yorkshire in April 1916

**** The Battalion was designated as 8th Battalion, the Royal Irish on 15 July 1918

41st Division
(New Army Division)

Major-General S T B Lawford

The Advance in Flanders
The Final Advance in Flanders
The Battle of Ypres 1918
The Battle of Courtrai
The Action of Ooteghem.

On 26-27 October the Division was relieved from front line duty and moved to rest around Courtrai. On 1 November the Division reoccupied part of the front line under XIX Corps; on 9 November the Division carried out a passage of the Schelde, establishing outposts on the eastern bank.

122 Brigade

Brigadier-General F W Towsey

From 8 June 1918

Brigadier-General S V P Weston

12th (Service) Battalion, (Bermondsey) East Surreys
15th (Service) Battalion, (2nd Portsmouth) Hampshire
18th (Service) Battalion (Arts and Crafts), King's Royal Rifle Corps
122nd Trench Mortar Battery

123 Brigade

Brigadier-General E Pearce Serocold

From 23 June 1918

Brigadier-General M Kemp-Welch

11th (Service) Battalion, the Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment)
10th (Service) Battalion (Kent County), Royal West Kents
23rd (Service) (2nd Football) Battalion, Middlesex
123rd Trench Mortar Battery

124 Brigade

Brigadier-General W F Clemson

From 21 June 1918

Brigadier-General R L Aldercron

10th (Service) Battalion, Queen's
26th (Service) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers
20th (Service) Battalion (Wearside), Durham Light Infantry
124th Trench Mortar Battery

Division

19th (Service) (Pioneers) (2nd Public Works) (Pioneers) Battalion, the Middlesex
No 41 Machine Gun Battalion
228th (Barnsley), 233rd (Ripon), 237th (Reading) Field Companies
41st Signals Company

138th, 139th, 140th Field Ambulance
41st Divisional Train ASC (296, 297, 298, 299 Companies)
52nd Mobile Veterinary Section
41st Divisional Workshops
CLXXXIII, CLXXXVII Brigades RFA
X41, Y41 Trench Mortar Batteries
41st Ammunition Column

49th (West Riding) Division
(Territorial Force Division)

Major General N Cameron

The Battles of the Lys
The Battle of Messines, 1918
The Battle of Bailleul including the Defence of Neuve Eglise
The First Battle of Kemmel
The Second Battle of Kemmel

146 (West Riding) Brigade

1/5th Battalion, the West Yorkshires
1/6th Battalion, the West Yorkshires
1/7th Battalion, the West Yorkshires
146th Trench Mortar Battery

147 (2nd West Riding) Brigade

1/4th Battalion, the Duke of Wellington's
1/6th Battalion, the Duke of Wellington's
1/7th Battalion, the Duke of Wellington's
147th Trench Mortar Battery

148 (3rd West Riding) Brigade

1/4th Battalion, the KOYLI
1/4th (Hallamshire) Battalion, the York and Lancaster
1/5th Battalion, the York and Lancaster
148th Trench Mortar Battery (formed 12 June 1916)

Division Troops

19th (Service) Battalion (3rd Salford) (Pioneers) , the Lancashire Fusiliers
No 49 Machine Gun Battalion
CCXLV (I West Riding), CCXLVI (II West Riding) Brigades, RFA
49th (West Riding) Divisional Ammunition Column
X.49, Y.49 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
57th , 56th (renamed from 2nd (West Riding) Field Company), 458th (renamed from 2/1st (West Riding) Field Company) Field Companies
49th Divisional Signal Company (renamed from 1st West Riding Divisional Signal Company)
1st, 2nd, 3rd (West Riding) Field Ambulance
49th Divisional Train ASC (463, 464, 465, 466 Companies) (redesignated from the 1st West Riding Divisional Train)
243rd Divisional Employment Company
1st West Riding Mobile Veterinary Section

50th (Northumbrian) Division
(Territorial Force Division)

Major General H Jackson

The Battles of the Lys

The Battle of Estaires

The Battle of Hazebrouck

The Division was subsequently withdrawn and sent to IX Corps, then on the Aisne, as this was believed to be a much quieter area - this was not the case and the Division was hit by a surprise enemy attack – after suffering particularly heavy casualties during the Battle of the Aisne, 1918, the Division was substantially reorganised.

Only those units involved in the Battles of the Lys are listed below

149 (Northumberland) Brigade

1/4th Bn, the Northumberland Fusiliers

1/5th Bn, the Northumberland Fusiliers

1/6th Bn, the Northumberland Fusiliers

149th Trench Mortar Battery

150 (York and Durham) Brigade

1/4th Bn, the East Yorkshires

1/4th Bn, the Yorkshire

1/5th Bn, the Yorkshire

150th Trench Mortar Battery

151 (Durham Light Infantry) Brigade

1/5th Bn, the Durham Light Infantry

1/6th Bn, the Durham Light Infantry

1/8th Bn, the Durham Light Infantry

150th Trench Mortar Battery

Division troops

1/7th Battalion, the Durham Light Infantry

No 50 Machine Gun Battalion

CCL (I Northumbrian), CCLI (II Northumbrian) Brigades RFA

50th (Northumbrian) Divisional Ammunition Column

X.50, Y.50 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA

7th Field Company (joined June 1915)

446th (renamed from 1st (Northumbrian) Field Company), 447th (renamed from 2nd (Northumbrian) Field Company) Field Company

50th Divisional Signal Company (renamed from 1st Northumbrian Divisional Signal Company)

1st, 3rd, 2/2nd (Northumbrian) Field Ambulance

50th Divisional Train ASC (redesignated from the 1st Northumbrian Divisional Train) (467, 468, 469, 470 Companies)

244th Divisional Employment Company

1st Northumbrian Mobile Veterinary Section

59th (2nd North Midland) Division
(2nd Line Territorial Force Division)

Major General C Romer

From 26 January 1918

Brigadier General C James

From 19 June 1918

Major General Sir R Whigham

From 28 August 1918

Major General N Smyth VC

The Battles of the Lys
The Battle of Bailleul
The First Battle of Kemmel*

In early May 1918, the infantry and pioneer battalions, brigade trench mortar batteries and machine-gun battalion were reduced to training cadre establishment. All surplus men were sent to the Base or drafted to other units. The Division was reconstituted as a 2nd-Line unit and made up to strength with Garrison Guard battalions. It was placed on rear defence construction during June 1918. The 59th was then again reconstituted as a Garrison Division, and underwent training to enable it to hold a sector of front line again. The Division took over a sector on 25th July 1918.

The Battle of Albert (the Second Battles of the Somme 1918)
The Final Advances in Artois and Flanders (XI Corps, Fifth Army)

176 Brigade (2nd Staffordshire)

25th TF Battalion, the King's (Liverpool) (joined June 1918)

4th Provisional Garrison Battalion, the Lancashire Fusiliers (joined May 1918, left as 23rd Garrison Battalion, June 1918)

4th Garrison Guard Battalion, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (joined May 1918, became 26th Battalion July 1918)

17th (Garrison) Battalion, the Royal Sussex (joined May 1918, became 17th (Service) Battalion July 1918)

2/6th Battalion, the South Staffordshire (left as a cadre May 1918)

1/5th Battalion, the North Staffords (left as a cadre May 1918)

2/6th Battalion, the North Staffords (left as a cadre May 1918)

176th Trench Mortar Battery (disbanded 8 May 1918, reformed 11 July 1918)

177 Brigade (2nd Lincoln and Leicester)

1/4th Battalion, the Lincolns (left June 1918)

2/5th Battalion, the Lincolns (left May 1918)

11th Battalion, the Somerset Light Infantry (joined May 1918)

2/4th Battalion, the Leicesters (left May 1918)

13th (Garrison) Battalion, the Duke of Wellington's (joined May 1918, left June 1918)

15th TF Battalion, the Essex (joined May 1918)

2/6th Battalion, the Durham Light Infantry (joined as Garrison Guard Bn May 1918)

177th Trench Mortar Battery (disbanded 8 May 1918, reformed 17 August 1918)

178 Brigade (2nd Notts & Derby)

35th TF Battalion , the Northumberland Fusiliers, (joined May 1918)
8th Garrison Battalion, the Royal Irish (joined as 2nd (Home Service) Garrison Battalion, April 1918, left June 1918)
11th TF Battalion, the Royal Scots Fusiliers (joined May 1918)
23rd TF (Garrison Guard) Battalion, the Cheshires (joined May 1918, left June 1918)
13th (Service) Battalion, the Duke of Wellington's (joined June 1918 as 13th (Garrison) Battalion)
1/7th (Robin Hood) Battalion, the Sherwood Foresters (left as a cadre May 1918)
2/5th Battalion, the Sherwood Foresters (left as a cadre June 1918)
2/6th Battalion, the Sherwood Foresters (left as a cadre May 1918)
178th Trench Mortar Battery (disbanded 7 May 1918, reformed 24 June 1918)

Division Troops

6/7th (Service) Battalion, the Royal Scots Fusiliers (left as a cadre June 1918)
25th (Service) Battalion (Pioneers), the King's Royal Rifle Corps (joined May 1918)
No 59 Machine Gun Battalion (created 7 March 1918, reduced to cadre and eventually disbanded May 1918)
No 25 Machine Gun Battalion (joined 23 July 1918, left 19 Oct 1918)
CCXCV, CCXCVI Brigades RFA
59th Divisional Ammunition Column
X.59, Y.59 Medium Mortar Batteries RFA
467th (renamed from 1/3rd (North Midland)), 469th (renamed from 2/2nd (North Midland)),
470th (renamed from 3/1st (North Midland)) Field Companies
59th Divisional Signal Company (renamed from 2/1st (North Midland) Field Company)
2/1st, 2/2nd, 2/3rd North Midland Field Ambulance
59th Divisional Train ASC (513, 514, 515, 616 Companies)
250th Divisional Employment Company
59th Mobile Veterinary Section

* James' Force (around 2,000 troops of 59th Division) served from 16-19 April 1918, with 49th Division, IX Corps, Second Army

A6 Second Army: Supporting and Attached Units

3rd Cavalry Division
Major General Harmon
(Joined Second Army on 9th November 1918)

The Final Advance in Flanders

6 Cavalry Brigade [Brigadier General E Paterson]
3rd Dragoon Guards
Royal Dragoons
10th Hussars
C Battery RHA
6 Cavalry Brigade Machine Gun Squadron
6 Signal Troop

7 Cavalry Brigade [Brigadier General Burt]
6th Inniskilling Dragoons
7th Dragoon Guards
17th Lancers
K Battery RHA
7 Cavalry Brigade Machine Gun Sqn
7 Signal Troop

Canadian Cavalry Brigade [Brigadier General R Paterson]
Royal Canadian Dragoons
Lord Strathcona's Horse
Fort Garry Horse
Royal Canadian Horse Artillery Brigade
Canadian Cavalry Brigade Machine Gun Sqn

IV Brigade RHA and Ammunition Column
3 Field Squadron RE
3 Signal Troop
6th, 7th, 8th Canadian Field Ambulances
13th, 14th 'A' Canadian Mobile Veterinary Sections
773 Divisional Employment Company
81 (Horse Transport) Divisional ASC
73 (Mechanical Transport) Supply Column
576 Divisional Auxiliary Company

4th Tank Brigade – 4th, 5th and 13th Tank Battalions (Lewis Guns)

XXII Corps mounted troops

1st Australian Division

American 27th Division

American 30th Division

A7 French Army: Flanders, October 1918

Detachment d'Armee du Nord (French Army)

CinC General de Mitry

French 164th Division (deployed as reserve to Belgian Army Southern Groupement)

French II Cavalry Corps General Robillot

2nd Cavalry Division

3rd Cavalry Division

6th Cavalry Division

French VII Corps General Massenet

5th Division

41st Division

French XXXIV Corps General Mudant

70th Division

77th Division

128th Division (Reserve)

On 19 October, the new **French Sixth Army** under General de Boissoudy entered the line. This consisted of **VII** and **XXXIV Corps** plus **XXX Corps (5th and 132nd Divisions)**, under General Peney)

A8 Belgian Army

By the end of 1914, the Belgian army was exhausted and decimated: only 85000 of the original 117000 soldiers of the field army and the 80000 Troupes de Forteresse reached the river Yser. Regiments that had been split on mobilisation to form a second unit had to be merged to maintain their strength. The army was desperately in need of new recruits. In a first appeal (26 October 1914) King Albert asked every Belgian male between the age of 18 and 30 to volunteer. The government in exile decided on March 1 1915, that every male between the age of 18 and 25 and living in Belgium, France or England was obliged to enlist (although there were also volunteers from Belgians living abroad); on 21 July 1916 this was extended up to the age of 40.

In addition many Belgians living in occupied territory, made the risky journey across the Belgian - Dutch border to enlist. This journey was extremely dangerous and many were shot by German patrols. Eventually the Germans erected electrified fences on the entire length of the border, although many Belgians still made the attempt. From Holland they went to England and to training camps in France.

In January 1918 the Belgian Army was reorganised: the initial brigades were abolished and each of the 6 'divisions d'armée' was to be composed of 2 'divisions d'infanterie' (each comprising 3 regiments). The cavalry division had 3 brigades with each 2 regiments, 1 group 'd'auto-canon mitrailleuses', 2 battalions of cyclists, 3 batteries of 7.5 cm canons, 1 company of engineers and a platoon of 'télégraphistes sur cycles'.

In 1918, the Belgian army had

170000 soldiers

5700 officers

38000 horses

850 artillery pieces (not including trench mortars)

(A further 30000 troops were employed in factories, hospitals etc)

On **28 September 1918** each 'division d'armée' was composed of :

Quartier Général

2 divisions d'infanterie

1 groupement léger

1 régiment d'artillerie

1 régiment du génie (2 bataillons)

1 compagnie de télégraphistes

1 peloton de projecteurs

1 peloton de T.S.F.

1 peloton de fontainiers

1 corps de transport

The Belgian Army 28 September 1918

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Commander | H.R.H. King Albert I |
| Ministre de la Guerre | Lieutenant Général Baron de Ceuninck |
| Chef d'Etat-major | Lieutenant Général C. Gillain |
| Sous-Chef d'Etat-major | Général Maglinse |
| Inspecteur de l'Artillerie | Lieutenant Général Arnould |
| Inspecteur du Génie | Lieutenant Général Baron Greindl |
| Inspecteur du Service de Santé | Lieutenant Général Mélis |
| | |
| 1' Division d'Armée | Lieutenant Général Bernheim |
| 2' Division d'Armée | Lieutenant Général Drubbel |
| 3' Division d'Armée | Lieutenant Général Jacques |
| 4' Division d'Armée | Lieutenant Général Michel |
| 5' Division d'Armée | Lieutenant Général L Rucquoy |
| 6' Division d'Armée | Lieutenant Général Biebuyck |
| Division de Cavalerie | Lieutenant General Lemercier |

Note: For the attack on 28 September, the Army was deployed in two 'groupements' or corps:

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| North Groupement | Lieutenant Général Bernheim |
| South Groupement | Lieutenant Général Biebuyck |

Troupes auxiliaires

Corps de troupes auxiliaires du Génie, (3 groupes, 46 compagnies)
Troupes d'étapes
Section de camouflage
Groupe de batteries de parc

Troupes non endivisionnées

Brigade d'Artillerie Lourde (2 régiments)
Bataillon Chemin de fer
Aviation militaire (11 escadrilles)
Aérostations militaire (3 compagnies)
Bataillon des Pontonniers
Compagnie des Projecteurs
Equipage de ponts (hipo et auto)
Groupement des colonnes automobiles auxiliaires
Service des routes

Brigade d'Artillerie Lourde

1' Régiment d'artillerie Lourde
2' Régiment d'artillerie Lourde

1 Division d'Armée

Lieutenant Général Bernheim

1' Division d'Infanterie

Général Lambert

4' Régiment de Ligne

Colonel Ouwerx

23' Régiment de Ligne

24' Régiment de Ligne

Colonel Vanniesbecq

1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction

1' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

7' Division d'Infanterie

Général Van Acker

2' Régiment de Ligne

3' Régiment de Ligne

22' Régiment de Ligne

1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction

7' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

Groupement léger

1 groupe du 3' Régiment de Lanciers (2 escadrons)

1 compagnie de cycliste

3 autos-mitrailleuses

13' régiment d'artillerie

1' régiment du génie (2 bataillons)

1 compagnie de télégraphistes

1 peloton de projecteurs

1 peloton de T.S.F.

1 peloton de fontainiers

1 corps de transport

2' Division d'Armée

Lieutenant Général Drubbel

2' Division d'Infanterie

Général Cabra

5' Régiment de Ligne

6' Régiment de Ligne

15' Régiment de Ligne

1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction

2' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

8' Division d'Infanterie

Général Detail

7' Régiment de Ligne

16' Régiment de Ligne

17^e Régiment de Ligne
1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
8^e Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

Groupement léger

1 groupe du 3^e Régiment de Lanciers (2 escadrons)
1 compagnie de cycliste
3 autos-mitrailleuses

14^e régiment d'artillerie
2^e régiment du génie (2 bataillons)
1 compagnie de télégraphistes
1 peloton de projecteurs
1 peloton de T.S.F.
1 peloton de fontainiers
1 corps de transport

3^e Division d'Armée
Lieutenant Général Jacques

3^e Division d'Infanterie Général Joostens
9^e Régiment de Ligne
11^e Régiment de Ligne
12^e Régiment de Ligne
1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
3^e Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

9^e Division d'Infanterie Général Baltia
14^e Régiment de Ligne
1^e Régiment de Ligne
4^e Régiment de Ligne
1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
9^e Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

Groupement léger

1 groupe du 2^e Régiment de Lanciers (2 escadrons)
1 compagnie de cycliste
3 autos-mitrailleuses

15^e régiment d'artillerie
3^e régiment du génie (2 bataillons)
1 compagnie de télégraphistes
1 peloton de projecteurs
1 peloton de T.S.F.
1 peloton de fontainiers

1 corps de transport

4' Division d'Armée
Lieutenant Général Michel

4' Division d'Infanterie Général Dechesne
8' Régiment de Ligne
10' Régiment de Ligne Colonel Deisser
18' Régiment de Ligne
1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
4' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

10' Division d'Infanterie Général Flebus
13' Régiment de Ligne
19' Régiment de Ligne
20' Régiment de Ligne
1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
10' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

Groupement léger

1 groupe cavalerie du 1' Régiment de Lanciers (2 escadrons)
1 compagnie de cycliste
3 autos-mitrailleuses

16' régiment d'artillerie
4' régiment du génie (2 bataillons)
1 compagnie de télégraphistes
1 peloton de projecteurs
1 peloton de T.S.F.
1 peloton de fontainiers
1 corps de transport

5' Division d'Armée
Lieutenant Général L Rucquoy

5' Division d'Infanterie Général Collyns
1' Régiment de Ligne
21' Régiment de Ligne
2' Régiment de Chasseurs a pied
1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
5' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

11' Division d'Infanterie Général Coppejans
3' Régiment de Ligne
5' Régiment de Ligne
6' Régiment de Ligne Colonel Hoonart

1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
11' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

Groupement léger

1 groupe cavalerie du 1' Régiment de Lanciers (2 escadrons)
1 compagnie de cycliste
3 autos-mitrailleuses

17' régiment d'artillerie
5' régiment du génie (2 bataillons)
1 compagnie de télégraphistes
1 peloton de projecteurs
1 peloton de T.S.F.
1 peloton de fontainiers
1 corps de transport

6' Division d'Armée

Lieutenant Général Biebuyck

6' Division d'Infanterie

Général J Collyns

1' Régiment de Carabiniers
2' Régiment de Carabiniers
3' Régiment de Carabiniers
1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
6' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

Colonel B E M Brenrer

12' Division d'Infanterie

Général Lotz

4' Régiment de Carabiniers
1' Régiment de Grenadiers
2' Régiment de Grenadiers
1 Bataillon de renfort et d'instruction
12' Régiment d'artillerie (3 groupes)

Groupement léger

1 groupe cavalerie du 2' Régiment de Lanciers (2 escadrons)
1 compagnie de cycliste
3 autos-mitrailleuses

18' régiment d'artillerie
6' régiment du génie (2 bataillons)
1 compagnie de télégraphistes
1 peloton de projecteurs
1 peloton de T.S.F.
1 peloton de fontainiers
1 corps de transport

Division de Cavalerie
Lieutenant General Lemercier

1' Brigade de Cavalerie

1' Régiment de Guides

2' Régiment de Guides

Général Baron Buffin

Colonel du Roy de Blicquy

2' Brigade de Cavalerie

4' Régiment de Lanciers

5' Régiment de Lanciers

3' Brigade de Cavalerie

1' Régiment de Chasseurs à cheval

2' Régiment de Chasseurs à cheval

1' Bataillon Carabiniers cycliste

2' Bataillon Carabiniers cycliste

Groupe Artillerie a cheval

1 Compagnie du Génie

1 peloton de télégraphistes sur cycles

Corps de Transport

A9 German Army

Sources: Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*
 TNA WO157/128, Second Army Intelligence Summaries, *September-November 1918*

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| FAR Field Artillery Regiment | Co Company |
| IR Infantry Regiment | RGR Reserve Grenadier Regiment |
| RIR Reserve Infantry Regiment | MW Trench Mortar (Minen Werfer) |
| RP Reserve Pioneers/Engineers | Ldw Landwehr |

The GAF was opposed principally by German Fourth Army (General Friedrich Bertram von Armin), which was part of Crown Prince Rupprecht's Army Group (together with Seventeenth and Sixth Armies). As of 26 September 1918, Fourth Army was deployed from north of Armentieres to the coast, comprising ten front line divisions and five reserve divisions.

German Divisions facing British Second Army: Battle of Ypres 28 September 1918

| Division | Units | Location | Comments |
|--|---|------------------------------|--|
| 12 th Bavarian | 26 th Bavarian I R 27 th Bavarian I R 28 th Bavarian I R | East of Ypres | (Mainly opposite the Belgians) Largely rested |
| 6 th Bavarian Reserve | 25 th Bavarian I R 20 th Bavarian RI R 16 th Bavarian RI R | West of Wytshaete-Messines | Fought near Bapaume in August |
| 40 th Bavarian Reserve | 181 st IR 134 th IR | South of Ypres-Comines canal | Involved in 18 July offensive |
| 11 th Reserve (Fourth Army) | 22 nd IR 156 th IR 10 th RIR | Ploegsteert | Largely rested |
| 56 th | 118 th IR 186 th IR 88 th IR | | Largely rested |
| 4 th | | | Largely rested Believed to be a good division |

Additional Divisions brought forward after 28 September

| Division | Units | Location | Comments |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| 52 nd Reserve Division | 238 th RIR 239 th RIR 240 th RIR 52 nd FAR | Molenhock Becelaere Moorslede | Moved into line on 28 September |
| 13 th Reserve Division | 100 th Res. Grenadier R | | Moved into line on or after 29 September |
| 23 rd Reserve Division | | | |
| 39 th Division | 132 nd IR 126 th IR 172 nd IR | East of Gheluvelt | |
| 6 th Dismounted Cavalry Division | 13 th Hussars 7 th Reserve Dragoons 9 th Uhlans 2 nd Cuirassiers | Ledeghem | |
| 40 th Division | 243 rd RIR | Ypres-Menin Road | Reported in line 30 September |
| 1 st Bavarian Reserve Division | 1 st Bavarian RIR 2 nd Bavarian RIR | Ledeghem | Moved into line 2 October |

German Divisions facing British Second Army: Battle of Courtrai

| Division | Units | Location | Comments |
|---|---|-----------------------|--|
| 1 st Bavarian Reserve Division | 1 st Bavarian RIR 2 nd Bavarian RIR 3 rd Bavarian RIR 201 st MW Co 1 st Bavarian RP Co | Ledeghem | |
| | 15 th RIR 100 th RGR | Dadizeele | |
| 39 th Division | 132 nd IR 126 th IR 172 nd IR 38 th Bearer Co 80 th FAR | Gheluwe | |
| 40 th Division | 181 st IR 104 th IR 134 th IR | Gulleghem & Wevelghem | Reported as reinforcements from 14 October |
| 6 th Bavarian Reserve Division | 25 th Bavarian IR 20 th Bavarian RIR 16 th Bavarian RIR | Wervicq | |
| 6 th Cavalry Division | 12 th Hussars 2 nd Dragoons 3 rd Uhlans 9 th Uhlans 170 th Ldw Brigade | Heule & Gulleghem | Reported as reinforcements from 14 October |
| 11 th Reserve Division | 22 nd IR 156 th IR 10 th RIR | Deulemont | |
| 7 th Cavalry Division | 25 th Dragoons | | Reported as reinforcements from 16 October |

British Second Army and Coalition Warfare in Flanders in the Hundred Days, 1918

University of Birmingham
Centre for First World War Studies
PhD (Part-time)

Appendix B

Maps

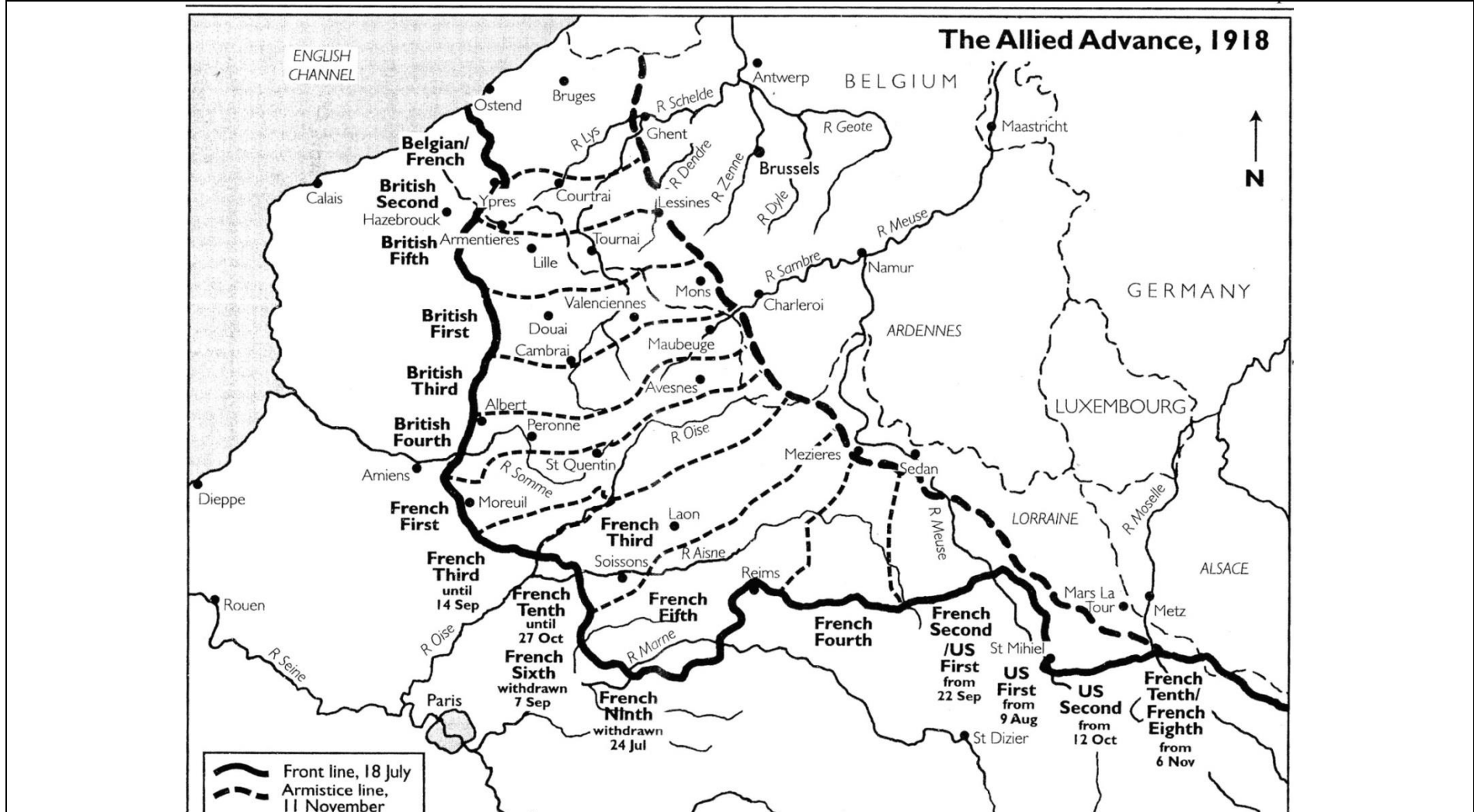
Dennis Williams

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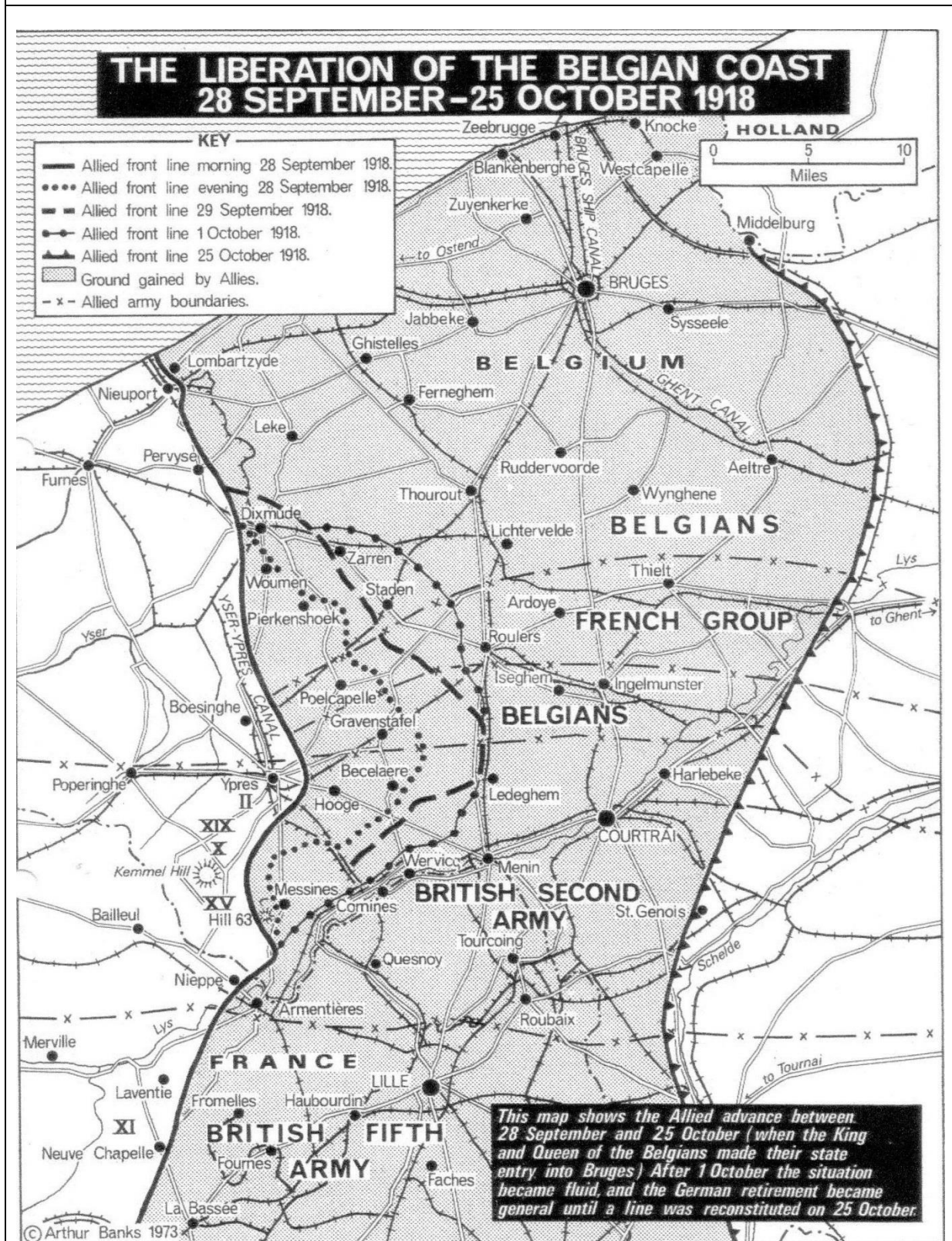
Map 1: The Allied Advance, 1918

(Harris , Amiens to the Armistice)



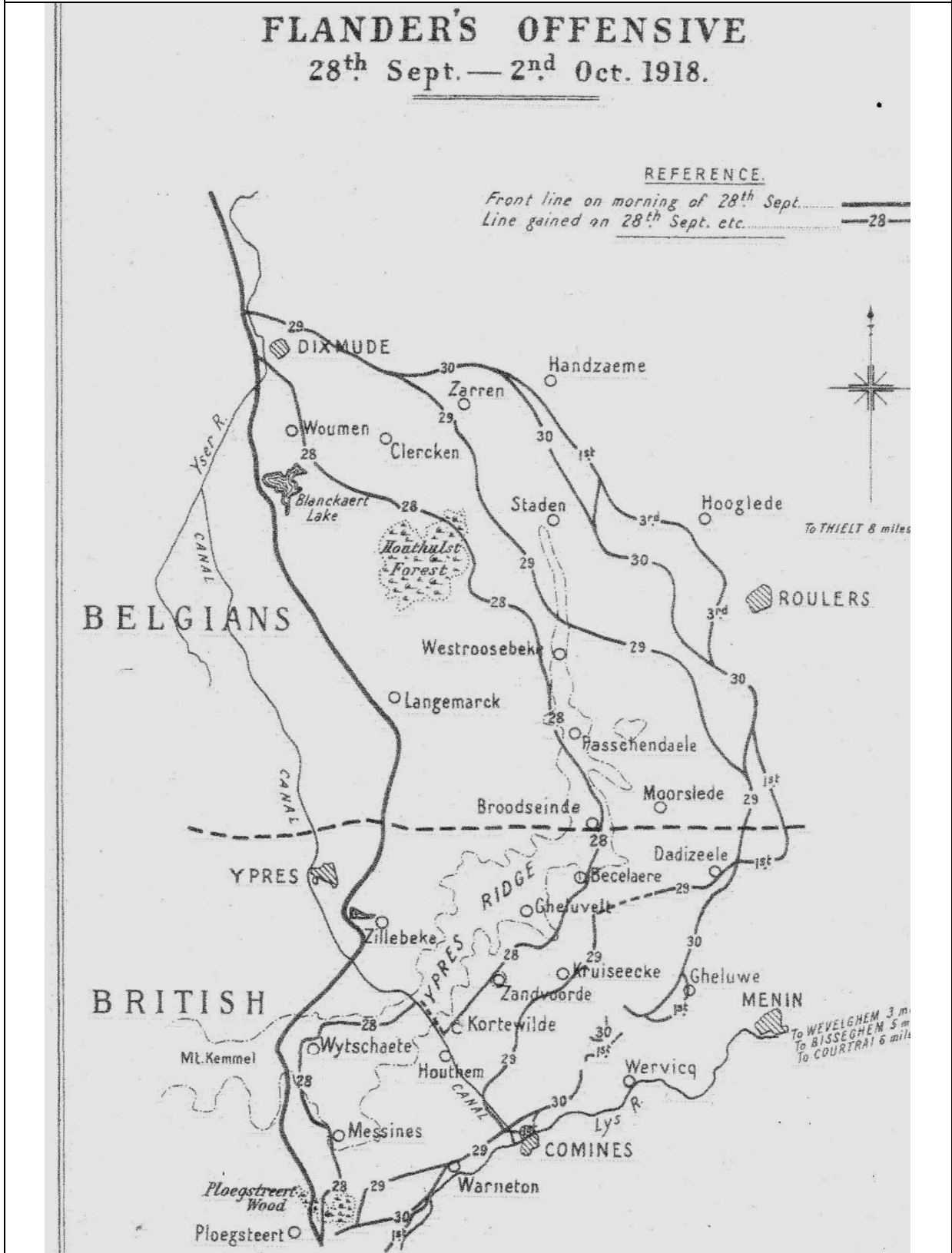
Map 2: The Liberation of the Belgian Coast, 28 September - 25 October 1918

(Banks, *A Military Atlas*)



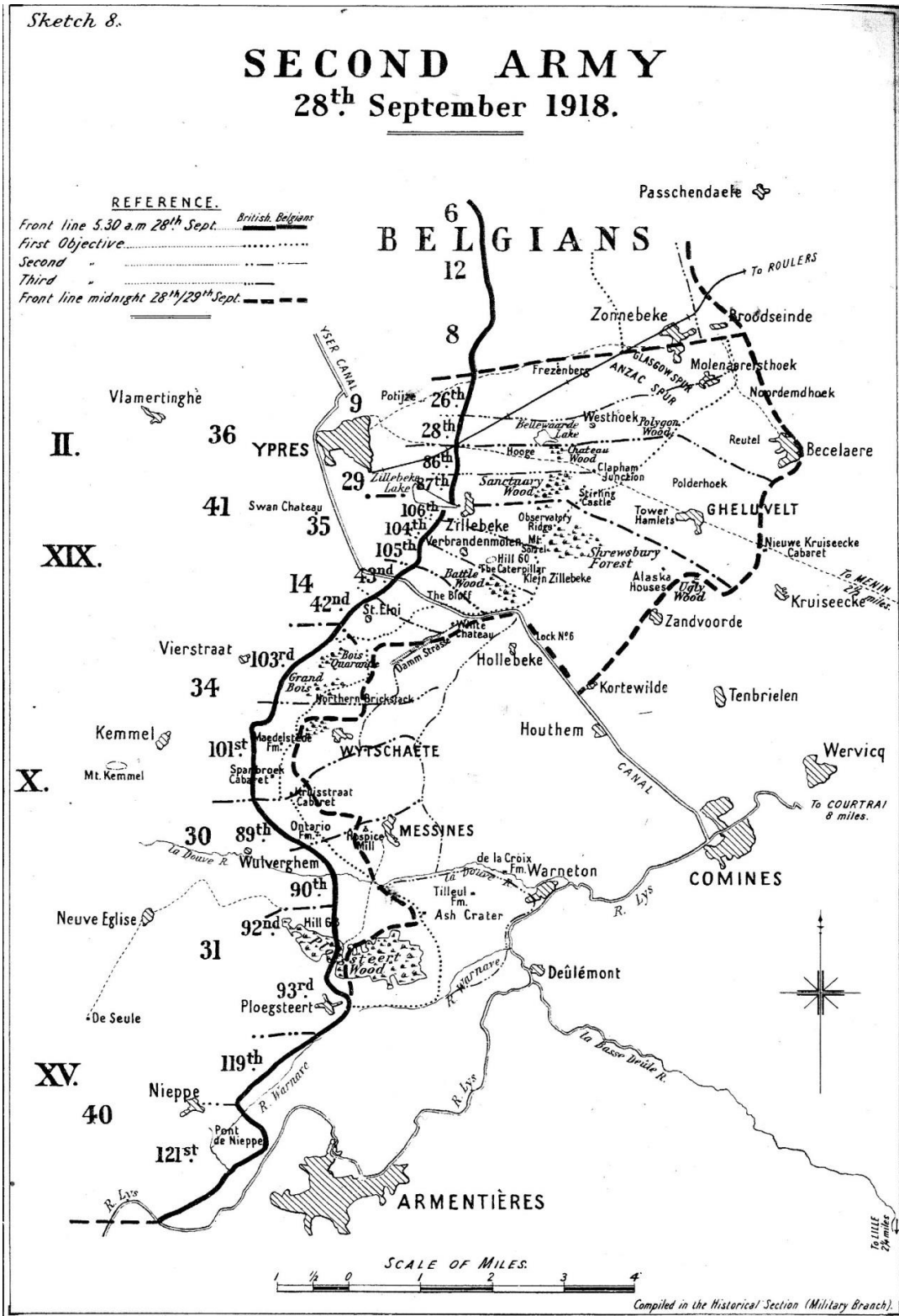
Map 3: The GAF Offensive in Flanders, 28 September – 2 October 1918

(Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*)



Map 4: British Second Army: The Battle of Ypres, 28 September 1918

(Edmonds, Official History Vol. V)



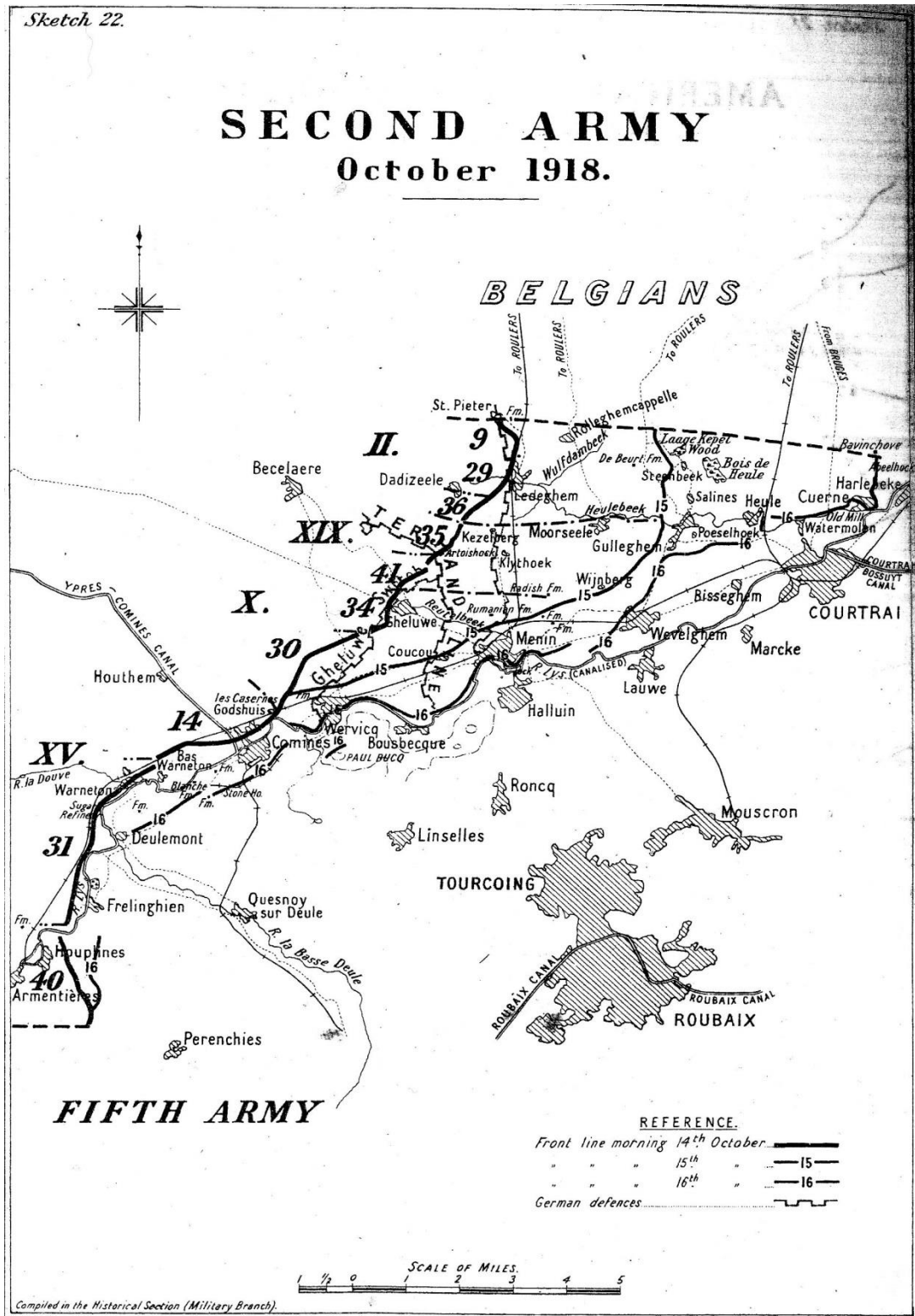
Map 5: British Second Army: The Battle of Ypres, 29 September - 3 October 1918

(Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*)



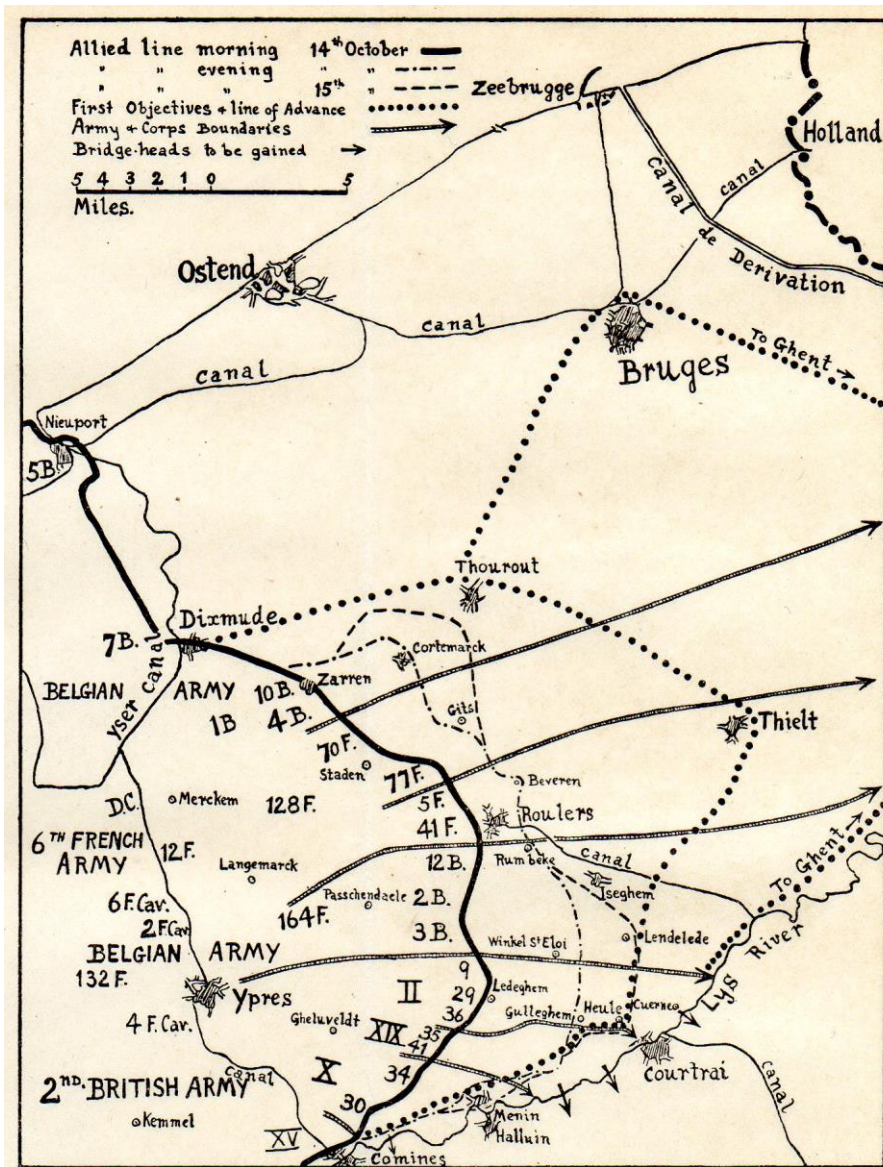
Map 6: British Second Army: The Battle of Courtrai, 14-16 October 1918

(Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*)



Map 6A: The Battle of Courtrai, 14-15 October 1918

(Dewar, Haig's Command Vol. II)

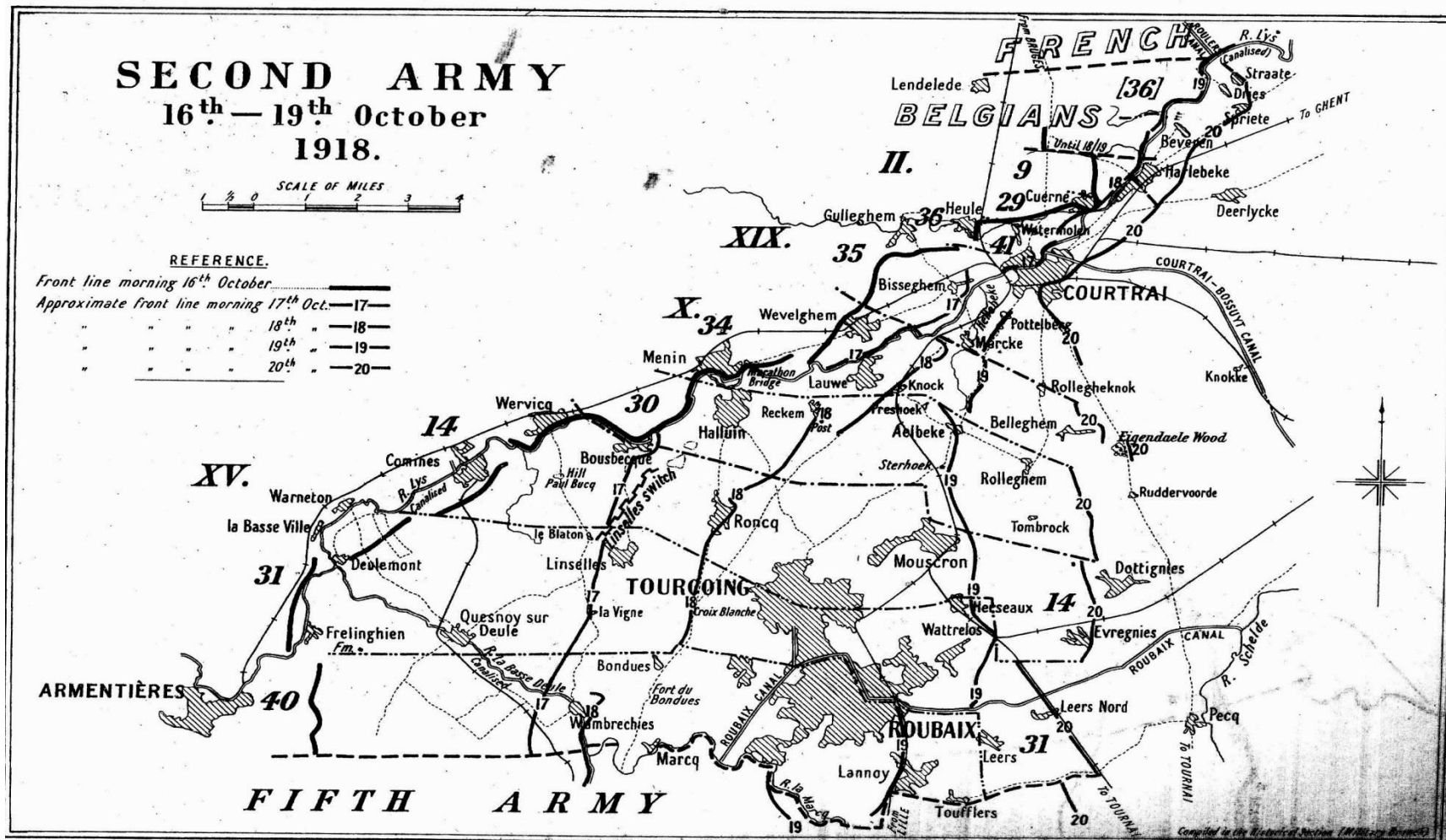


THE FLANDERS OFFENSIVE, 14TH OCTOBER 1918.
 SHOWING HOW BY THE ADVANCE AS PLANNED THE SECOND BRITISH ARMY SHOULD
 HAVE BEEN RELEASED AUTOMATICALLY WHEN IT HAD ACCOMPLISHED THE TASK
 ALLOTTED TO IT OF CLEARING THE LEFT BANK OF THE LYS OF ITS FRONT

Facing p. 332, Vol. II.

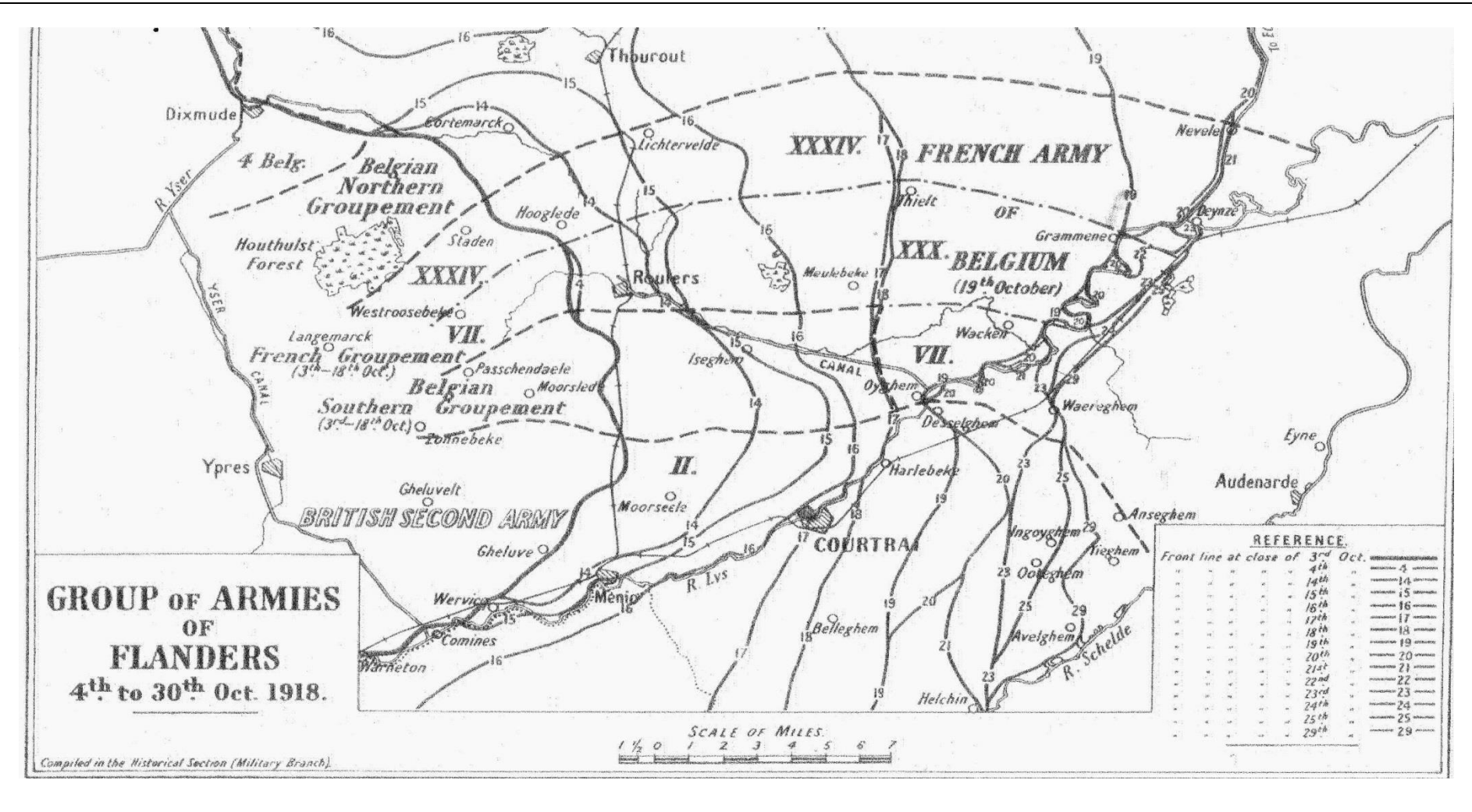
Map 7: British Second Army: The Battle of Courtrai, 16-19 October 1918

(Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*)



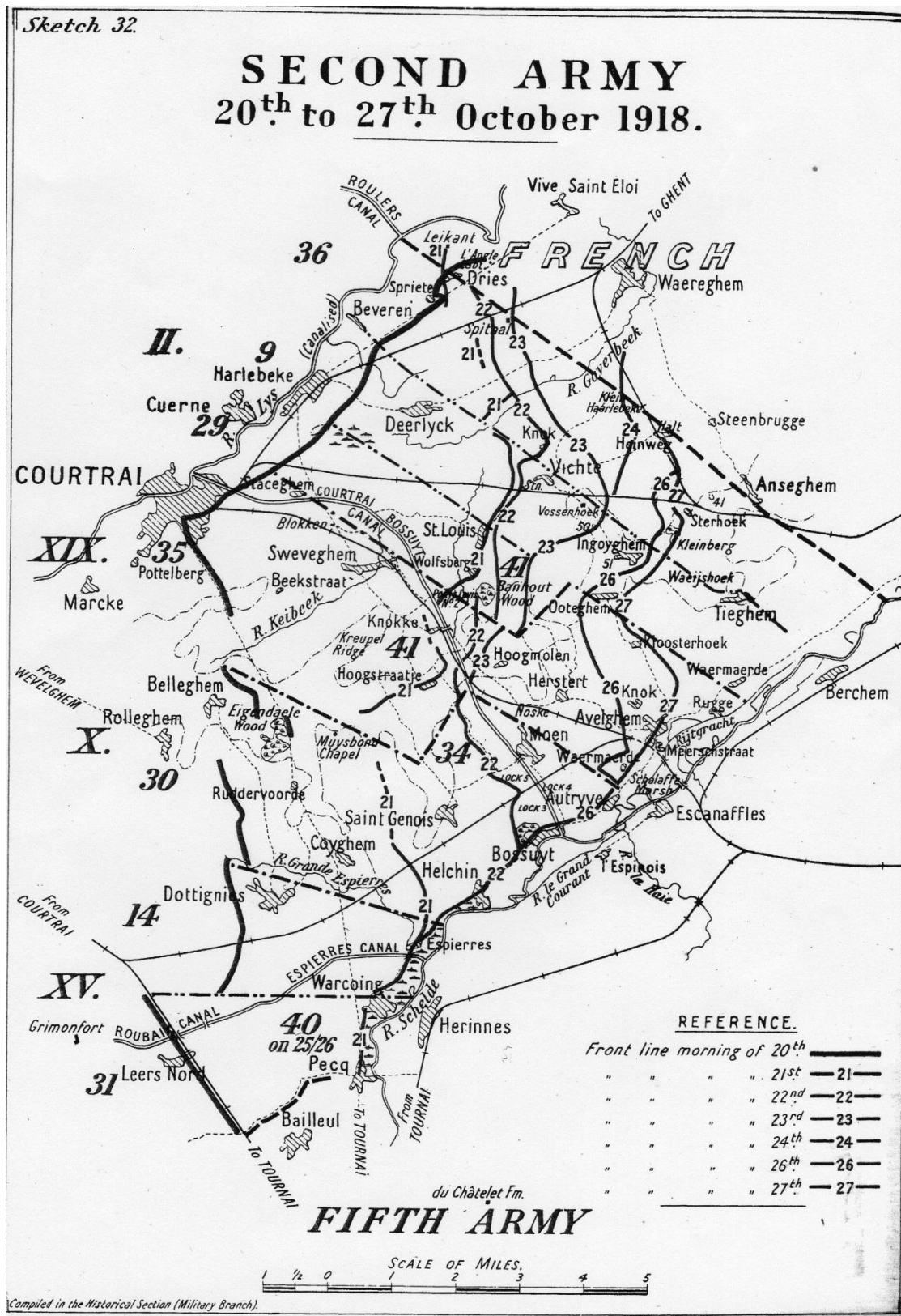
Map 8: The GAF Offensive in Flanders, 4-30 October 1918

(Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*)



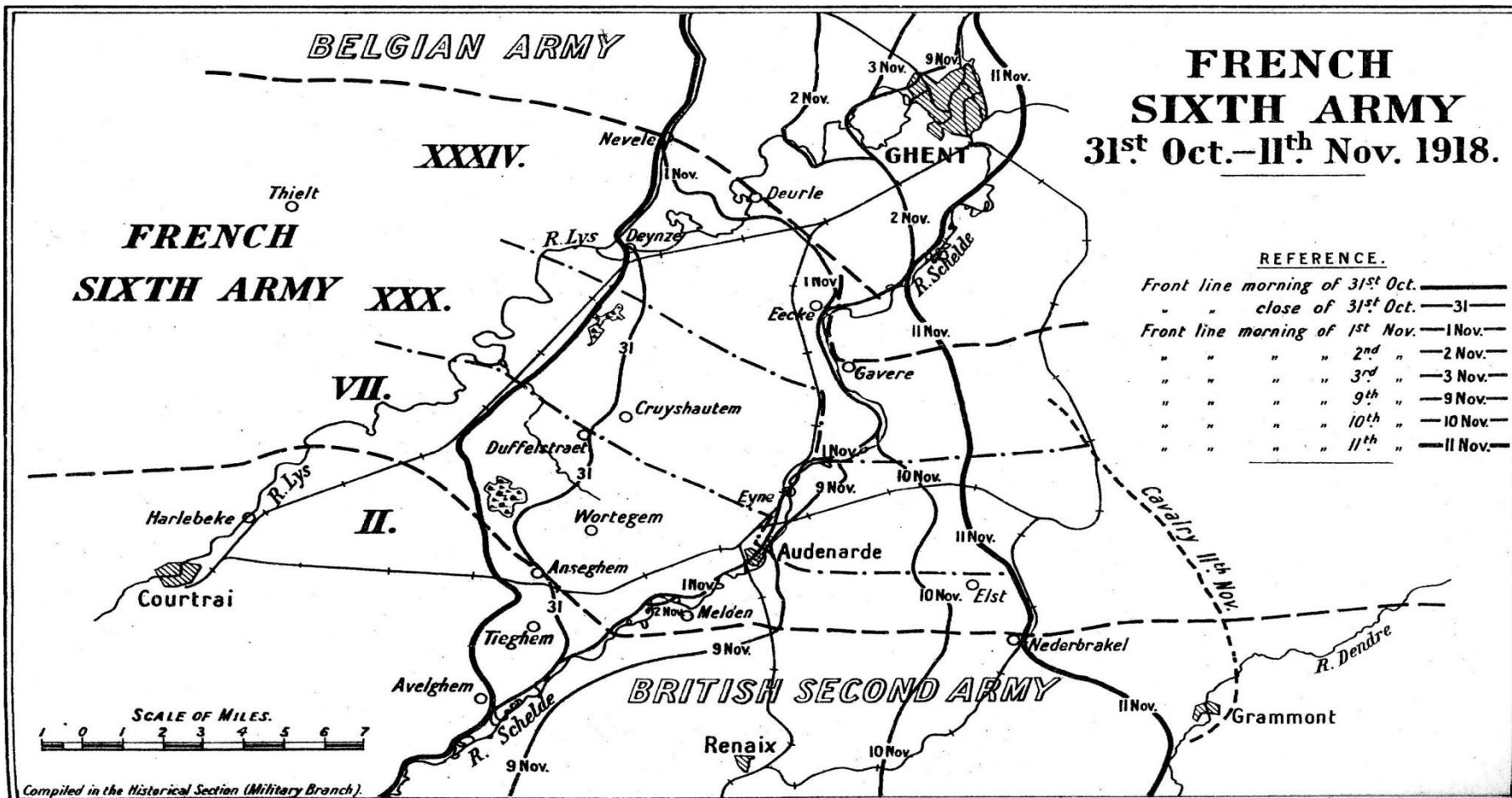
Map 9: British Second Army Operations, 20-27 October 1918

(Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*)



Map 10: The Offensive in Flanders: Allied Forces, 31 October - 11 November 1918

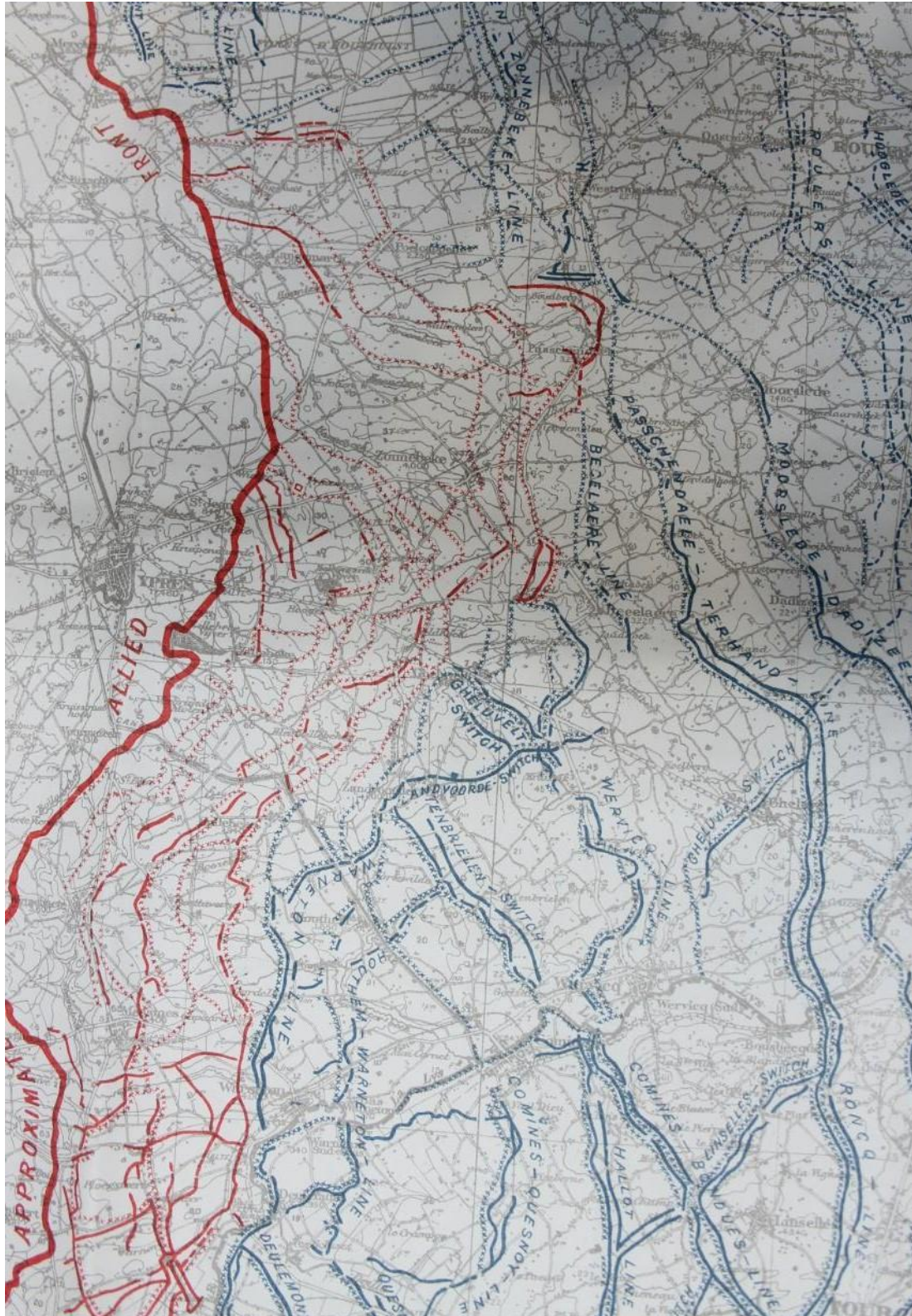
(Edmonds, *Official History Vol. V*)



Map 11: German Defences in Flanders 18 September 1918

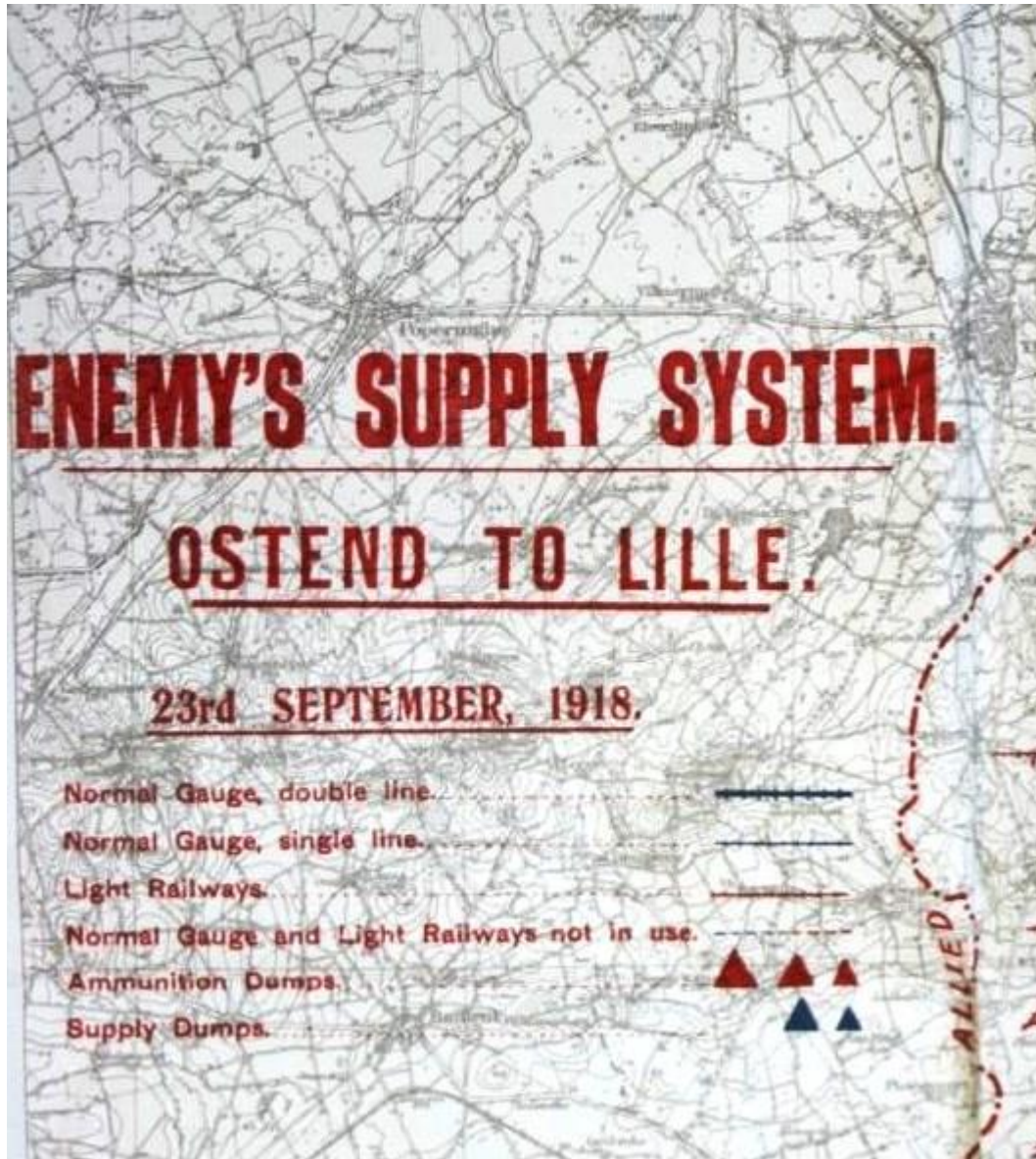
(TNA WO157/128 *Second Army Intelligence Summaries: September 1918*)

NB Lines in red show former British trench lines



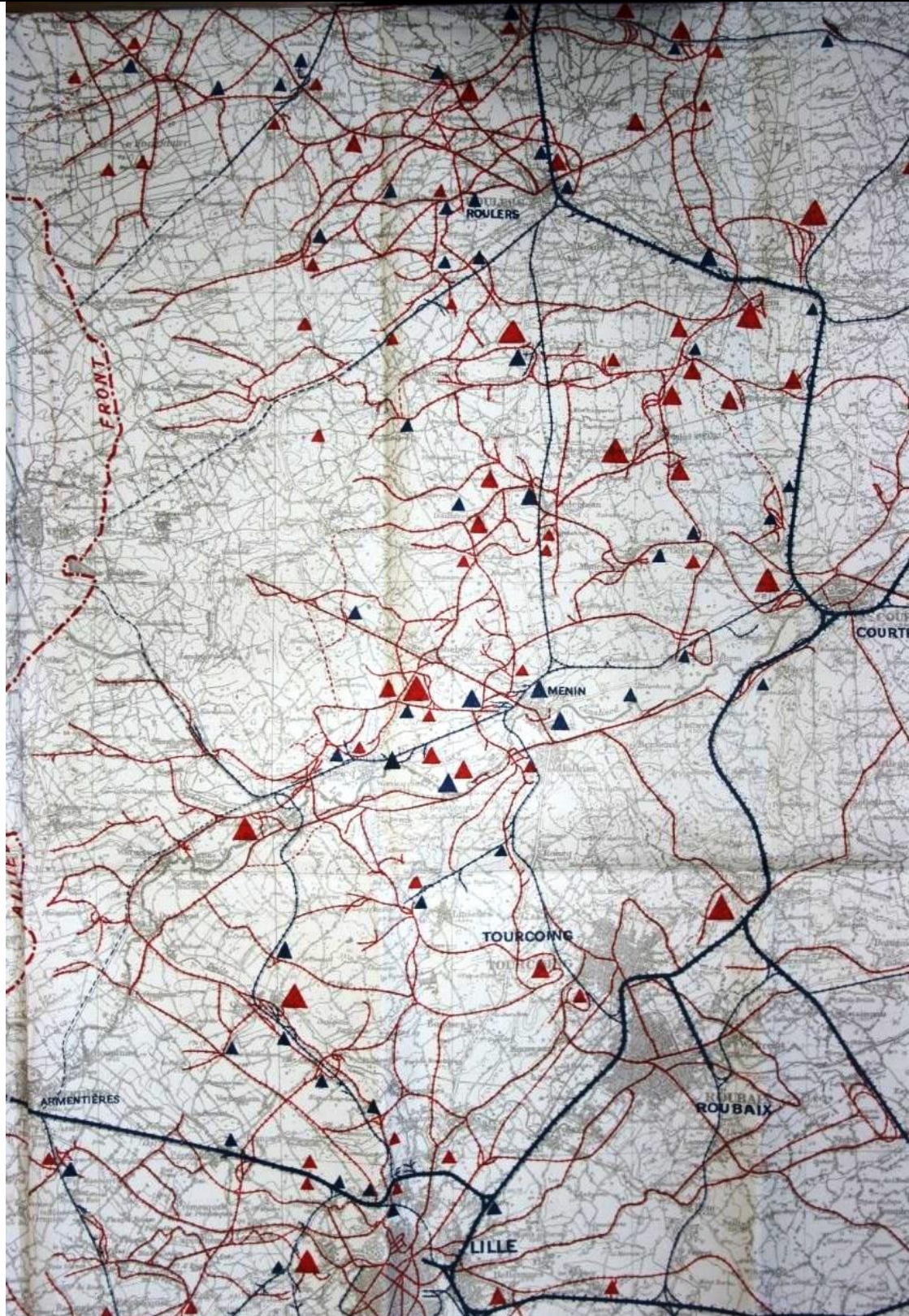
Map 12A: German Supply System: Flanders, 23 September 1918 - Key

(TNA WO153/508 *Second Army: Enemy Organisation 1918*)



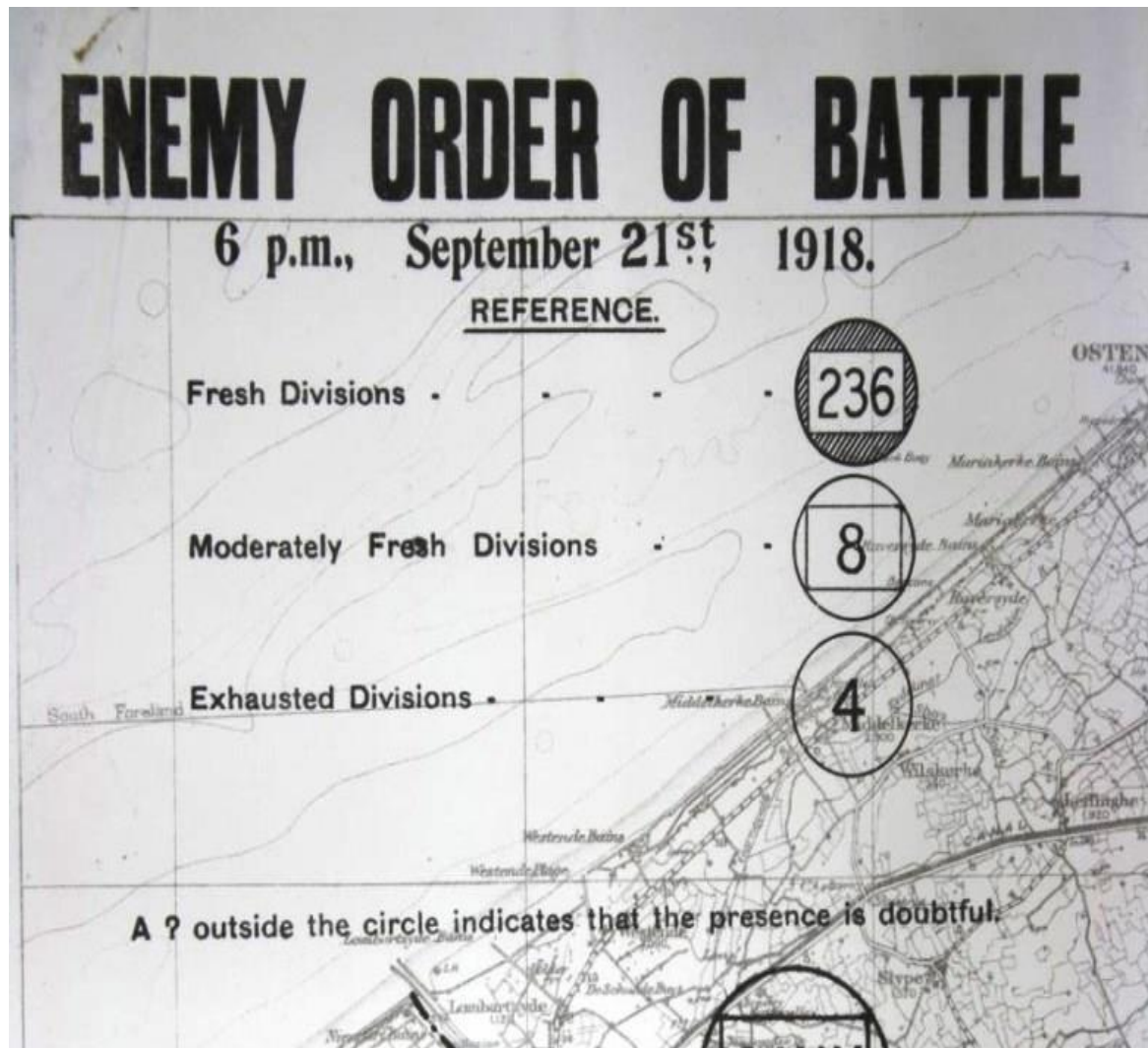
Map 12B: German Supply System: British Second Army Front, 23 September 1918

(TNA WO153/508 *Second Army: Enemy Organisation 1918*)



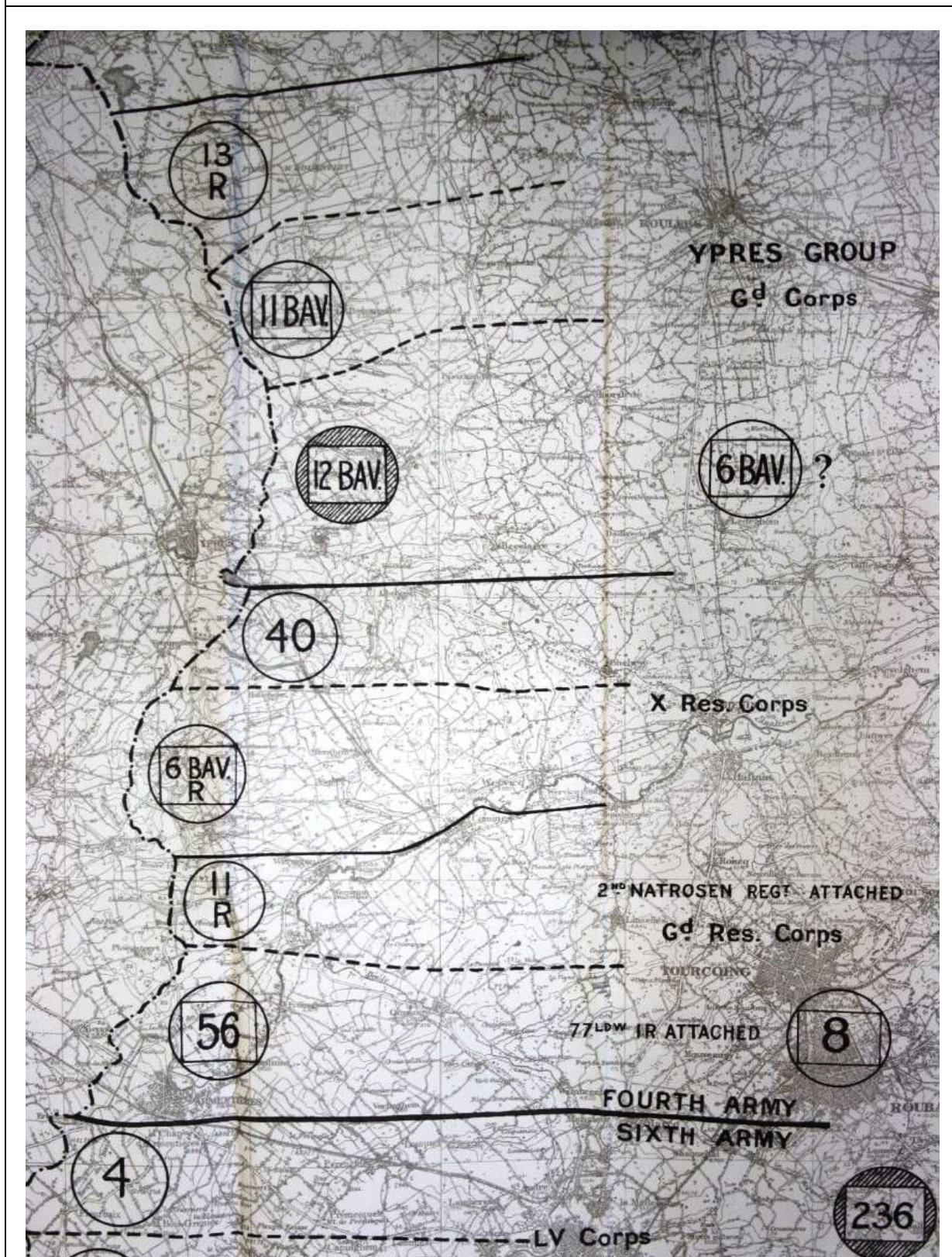
Map 13A: German Order of Battle, 21 September 1918 - Key

(TNA WO157/128 *Second Army Intelligence Summaries: September 1918*)



Map 13B: German Order of Battle: Second Army Front, 21 September 1918

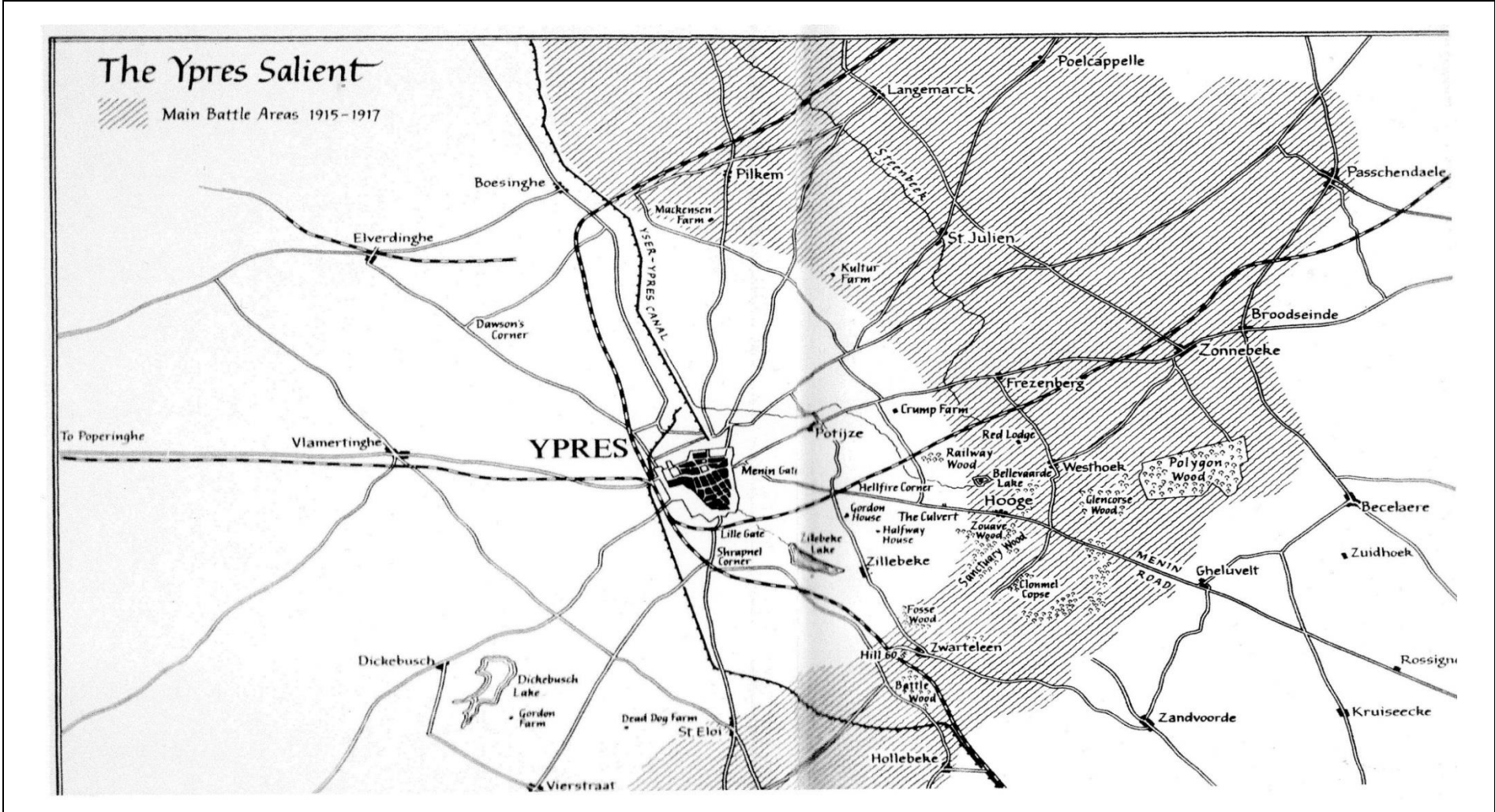
(TNA WO157/128 Second Army Intelligence Summaries: September 1918)



Appendix B Maps

Map 14: The Ypres Salient and Principal Battlegrounds 1915-1917

(M. Brown, intro., *The Wipers Times: The Complete Series of the Famous Wartime Trench Newspaper* (London: Little Books Ltd., 2006))



British Second Army and Coalition Warfare in Flanders in the Hundred Days, 1918

University of Birmingham
Centre for First World War Studies
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Appendix C

Terminology and Abbreviations

Dennis Williams

Terminology and Abbreviations

I have sought to apply the following conventions regarding terms, acronyms and abbreviations used in the text and accompanying notes; I may slip from this convention on occasion, for example when making a first reference in a chapter (despite having made a previous reference earlier in the study); or to give a better flow to the text.

- a. For numbering the different units of the British Army I have in general applied the convention of alternating at each level between ordinal and integer numbers, with roman numerals for corps, full spelling for armies, i.e. 1st Battalion, 2 Brigade, 3rd Division, IV Corps, and Fifth Army.
- b. For the names of battalions I normally use the full name for the first reference in the study, including any particular title or nickname:

For example, 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders; 12th (Norfolk Yeomanry) Battalion, The Norfolk Regiment; 12th (Miners) Battalion, The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.

For most and all subsequent references, I have used the Battalion's number and description, incorporating any popular abbreviation:

For example, 7/Seaforth Highlanders; 12/Norfolks; 12/KOYLI.

- c. Within notes and references, I have retained all the titles and terms from the original source; together with the original spellings and abbreviations (where appropriate, I have provided descriptions or explanations).
- d. Where a term or title has a commonly used abbreviation or acronym then, for the first reference, the full wording is used with the abbreviation given in brackets; the abbreviation may then be used for future references, with an allowance made for the flow of the text, for example, Commander, Royal Engineers (CRE).
- e. For dates and times I have used integer dates and the 24 hour clock, for example 18 July 1918 at 2215 hours.
- f. The spelling of place names is that used by the source, whether memoir, diary, Official History, or secondary text; where a difference occurs I have usually opted for the spelling used in the Official History and noted the discrepancy. In some cases, alternative spellings may be used by different sources, for example River Scheldt, River Schelde.

It should be noted that many locations in Flanders have alternative French and Dutch names, which can cause some confusion; for example River L'Escaut, River Scheldt. I have generally opted for the name used within the particular source or reference supporting that particular point in the study.

Common Abbreviations

– used in the text and in references

| | |
|------------|--|
| AA | Anti-Aircraft |
| AADC | Anti-Aircraft Defence Commander |
| AA and QMG | Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General |
| AASC | Anti-Aircraft Searchlight Company |
| AASS | Anti-Aircraft Searchlight Section |
| ACC | Army Cyclist Corps |
| ACME | Assistant Chief Mechanical Engineer |
| ADC | Aide de Camp |
| ADGT | Assistant Director-General of Transportation |
| ADL | Assistant Director of Labour |
| ADMS | Assistant Director Medical Services |
| ADOS | Assistant Director Ordnance Services |
| ADS | Advanced Dressing Station |
| AD Signals | Assistant Director Signals |
| ADTn | Assistant Director Transportation |
| ADVS | Assistant Director Veterinary Services |
| AEF | American Expeditionary Force |
| AMO | Assistant Medical Officer |
| APM | Assistant Provost Marshal |
| Arty | Artillery |
| ASC | Army Service Corps |
| AVC | Army Veterinary Corps |
| Bde | Brigade |
| BEF | British Expeditionary Force |
| BGGS | Brigadier General General Staff |
| BGRA | Brigadier General Royal Artillery |
| Battn | Battalion |
| Bn | Battalion |
| Cdr | Commander |
| CE | Chief Engineer |
| CGS | Chief of the General Staff |
| CHA | Commander Heavy Artillery |
| CIGS | Chief of the Imperial General Staff |
| CinC | Commander in Chief |
| CMG | Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George |
| CO | Commanding Officer |
| Coy | Company |
| CRA | Commander, Royal Artillery |
| CRE | Commander, Royal Engineers |
| DA and QMG | Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General |
| DAPM | Deputy Assistant Provost Marshal |
| DDMS | Deputy Director Medical Services |
| DDOS | Deputy Director Ordnance Services |
| DDR | Deputy Director Remounts |
| DDS | Deputy Director Signals |
| DDST | Deputy Director Supply and Transport |

| | |
|------------------|--|
| DDVS | Deputy Director Veterinary Services |
| DHQ (Div Hd Qrs) | Divisional Headquarters |
| Div | Division |
| DLI | Durham Light Infantry |
| DMS | Director of Medical Services |
| DR | Director of Remounts |
| DR | Dispatch Rider |
| DSO | Distinguished Service Order |
| EA | Enemy aircraft |
| ELR | East Lancashire Regiment |
| EYR | East Yorkshire Regiment |
| FA | Field Artillery |
| FOO | Forward Observation Officer (Artillery) |
| GAF | <i>Groupe d'Armees des Flandres</i> (Army Group, Flanders) |
| GB | Garrison Battalion |
| GGB | Garrison Guard Battalion |
| GHQ | General Headquarters |
| GOC | General Officer Commanding |
| GQG | Grand Quartier Général (French High Command) |
| GSO | General Staff Officer (three grades) |
| GSO1 | General Staff Officer (Lieutenant Colonel) |
| GSO2 | General Staff Officer (Major) |
| GSO3 | General Staff Officer (Captain) |
| HA | Heavy artillery |
| HE | High explosive (shell) |
| HQ | Headquarters |
| Hrs | Highlanders |
| IB | Infantry Brigade |
| Inf Bde | Infantry Brigade |
| KOSB | King's Own Scottish Borderers |
| KOYLI | King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry |
| KRRC | King's Royal Rifle Corps |
| LG | Lewis gun |
| Lieut | Lieutenant |
| Lt | Lieutenant |
| Lt-Col | Lieutenant Colonel |
| LTM | Light Trench Mortar |
| LTMB | Light Trench Mortar Battery |
| MG | Machine gun |
| MGC | Machine Gun Corps |
| MGGS | Major General General Staff |
| MGRA | Major-General Royal Artillery |
| MT | Mechanical Transport |
| NCO | Non-Commissioned Officer |
| OC | Officer Commanding (followed by a unit or section) |
| OHL | Oberste Heeresleitung (German High Command) |
| OR | Other ranks (i.e. NCOs and private soldiers) |
| PA | Personal ammunition |
| PM | Provost Marshal |
| QF | Quick firing |

| | |
|------|---|
| QM | Quartermaster |
| RA | Royal Artillery |
| RAF | Royal Air Force |
| RAMC | Royal Army Medical Corps |
| RAP | Regimental Aid Post |
| RE | Royal Engineers |
| RFA | Royal Field Artillery |
| RGA | Royal Garrison Artillery |
| RHA | Royal Horse Artillery |
| RWS | Royal West Sussex (Queen's) Regiment |
| SAA | Small Arms Ammunition (i.e. for infantry weapons) |
| SMLE | Short Magazine Lee Enfield (the rifle of the British infantryman) |
| SMO | Senior Medical Officer |
| TM | Trench mortar |
| TMB | Trench Mortar Battery |
| Y&L | York and Lancaster Regiment |

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Appendix D

**Letter from Foch to Allied
Commanders,
19 October 1918**

Dennis Williams

PERSONAL and SECRET

Commander in Chief
of Allied Armies

G.Q.G.A., 19th October 1918.

General Staff HQ.

1st Section.

3rd Office.

GENERAL DIRECTIVE

No. 4925.

In order to press the advantages we have made, the Allied Armies must take action as follows:

1. The Flanders Army Group will march in the general direction of Brussels; its right side towards HAL, approaching l'ESCAUT at PECQ, - la DENDER at LESSINES.

On this march, forcing the major river lines: ESCAUT - DENDER... must be combined, when necessary, with action on the flank to turn back these lines, to be carried out by the British Armies.

2. The British Armies (5th, 1st, 3rd, 4th) will advance to the South of the PECQ – LESSINES – HAL line, their right side advancing through FROIDCHAPPELLE PHILLIPEVILLE onto AGIMONT (North of GIVET).

The British Armies' main objective remains to turn back enemy forces on the ARDENNES massif which is difficult to penetrate, and to cut their main supply lines; - and at the same time, to assist the advance of the Flanders Army Group, enabling them to cross the major river lines: ESCAUT, DENDER This would otherwise prevent their advance.

- They themselves will be supported by the 1st French Army.

3. The French Armies (1st, 10th, 5th, 4th) and the 1st American Army will operate to the South of the afore-mentioned line.

Their role consists in:

- For the 1st French Army: to support the British Armies' attack by marching towards la CAPELLE, CHIMAY – GIVET, and manoeuvring to the right, to turn back enemy resistance on the SERRE – SISSONNE line;

- For the 5th, 4th French Armies and the 1st American Army: to reach the MEZIERES - SEDAN region and the upper reaches of the MEUSE, moving down the AISNE line in a two-sided manoeuvre: - on the left wing (5th French Army) in the direction of CHAUMONT – PORCIEN; - on the right wing (4th French Army & 1st American Army) in the direction of BUZANCY – LE CHESNE.

(Sd). F. FOCH

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Appendix E

**The text of two letters from
Haig to Foch, and the War
Office, 25 October 1918**

Dennis Williams

Appendix E1 Text of Letter from Haig to Foch, 25 October 1918

2

SECRET.

O.A.D. 946.

25th October, 1918.

From:-

The Commander-in-Chief,
British Armies in France.

TO:-

The Commander-in-Chief,
Allied Forces in France.

My dear Marshal,

I would point out that at the meeting at CASSEL on the 9th September, it was agreed by me that two divisions of the Second Army should be employed under the command of His Majesty the King of the Belgians for the purpose of covering the flank of the Army of Flanders operating in an easterly direction. It was further agreed that the whole of the Second Army should be used in the event of the enemy retiring from the MESSINESS Ridge, to exploit any success which might be obtained by following and pressing the German forces. It was well understood that in view of the fact that my other Armies were committed to large offensive operations further south, the Second Army was not to be committed to any other operation than that of clearing the ground up to the LYS River. The whole scope of the operation had as its objective the "clearing [of] the Belgian coast and the country between the coast and the River LYS".

This has not been accomplished and I request that the Second Army be forthwith returned to my command. If, as I understand, further operations by the Army of Flanders have as their objective the capture of BRUSSELS, this can be equally attained by the co-operation of all the British Armies including the Second Army operating under my command.

Yours very truly,

(Sd) D. HAIG.

Field-Marshal

Appendix E2 Text of Letter from Haig to the War Office, 25 October 1918

SECRET.

No. O.A.D. 947.

[Stamped: 'War Office Received 27 OCT 1918']

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS,
BRITISH ARMIES IN THE FIELD,
25th October, 1918

Sir,

I have the honour to forward for the information of the War Cabinet a copy of a letter, No. O.A.D. 946, dated 25th October, 1918, which I have addressed to Marshal Foch, requesting that the Second British Army should revert forthwith to my command.

This request was made by me by telephone on the 18th instant and again verbally to the Marshal on the 24th instant for the reasons given below, but he was not willing to accede to my demand and insisted that the Second Army should remain under the command of the King of the Belgians and continue to operate in Belgium under the latter's orders in accordance with the Directive No. 4925, of the 19th October, of which a copy is attached.

I have always recognised the necessity of making temporary detachments from the British Armies to operate with the French, and I have invariably complied with the demands of the Marshal in this respect, provided the military reasons were sufficient to justify this action. For example, during the fighting on the AISNE in May and on the MARNE in July, I detached four or five divisions on each occasion to operate with the French, and, in order to carry out a combined operation in FLANDERS, I acquiesced on the 9th September in the temporary detachment of the Second Army under the King of the Belgians. On each occasion the detachment was regarded as of a purely temporary nature, and was to be returned on the completion of the specific operation in hand.

In the case of the Second Army, this detachment was made on the 11th September, and, in accordance with Marshal Foch's instructions, two divisions were to make the initial attack in conjunction with the Belgian Army, while the whole of the Second British Army, in combination with the Belgians and a detachment of French Troops, was to exploit any success gained, and subsequently protect the flank of the Franco-Belgian forces by securing positions along the left bank of the River LYS. The Second British Army carried out these operations successfully, and in fact took the heaviest share of the work in driving the enemy back. I have not hitherto pressed for the return of this Army to my command while the operations to secure BRUGES and the line of the River LYS were in progress. This phase, however, is now completed, and the operations naturally are entering a new phase, that of forcing the passage of the River SCHELDT. The Second Army during the course of these operations has already incurred some 22,000 casualties.

The Secretary
War Office

London, S.W.1

In/

Appendix E Two letters from Haig to Foch, and the War Office, 25 October 1918

In the meantime the First, Third and Fourth British Armies have been carrying out a series of important attacks on a wide front against positions of vital importance to the enemy and to hold which he is utilising a considerable number of his best troops. These operations, though highly successful and productive of far-reaching effects, must necessarily involve considerable casualties.

The operations of the Second Army are now entering on the phase of forcing the passage of the Rivers SCHELDT and DENDRE to enable the allied troops in FLANDERS to cross those rivers in the lower reaches and facilitate an advance on BRUSSELS. I maintain that these operations can be equally well undertaken under my control and that I can thus balance the casualties so that their incidence may not fall unduly on the British forces. In this connection I would draw your attention to Directive No.4925, dated 19th October, 1918, by Marshal Foch, which shews that there is an expectation of the British attacks on the LE CATEAU front producing results which will facilitate the operations of the allies both on the south in CHAMPAGNE and on the north in FLANDERS.

While I am anxious to carry out Marshal Foch's wishes and instructions to the full, at the same time I feel compelled to consider the condition of the British Armies as a whole and generally to control the operations of those Armies in respect of the casualties incurred. So far the brunt of the offensive operations has fallen on the British troops. Owing to our lack of effectives this cannot be allowed to continue much longer. It is therefore most necessary that I should exercise the greatest care in engaging the five Armies of which the British Expeditionary Force is composed. The responsibility for this can alone rest on me and ought not in the case of any portion of the British forces [to] be delegated to any foreign Commander, of no matter how high a rank.

I wish to refer this matter to the War Cabinet as I do not consider that Marshal Foch's action is in accordance with the spirit of the instructions issued to me by the Secretary of State in his letter No.121/France/2357, dated 21st June, and I am of [the] opinion that such action is prejudicial to the welfare of the British Armies in France.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant

[signed 'D. Haig']

Field-Marshal,
Commanding-in-Chief,
British Armies in France.

British Second Army and Coalition Warfare in Flanders in the Hundred Days, 1918

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Appendix F

**Outtersteene Ridge,
18 August 1918**

Dennis Williams

Outtersteene Ridge 18 August: Preparations for attack

The chart below lists the key features of the plan of attack.¹

- **Main attack: XV Corps: 9th Division, supported by 29th Division**
 - One section of machine guns attached to each attacking battalion of 9th Division
 - Creeping barrage
 - First round: smoke shells – to be fired at Z-1 minute*
 - Infantry to advance at Z+3 minutes*
- * The timings were subsequently changed to Z+1 minute for the opening of the barrage, with troops leaving the trenches after counting to ten from the opening of fire – this was due to captured German documents which reported lessons from a previous successful attack by Second Army troops using an initial smoke barrage; therefore as soon as a smoke barrage was applied, the British front line was to be hit by artillery and machine gun fire – hence XV Corps decided on the slight alterations in timing
- Second round onwards: 25% smoke, 75% high explosive
 - Advance of 50 yards per minute
 - To halt as a protective barrage 200 yards beyond first objective (until advance resumed)
 - Four companies of machine guns to fire enfilade and creeping barrages
 - On the left flank, smoke barrage to hide attack from enemy observation
 - On the right flank, an enfilade barrage
 - plus a rolling barrage across the front of 9th Division, from right to left
 - XV Corps heavy artillery (57 guns and howitzers) to target specific enemy points
 - plus put down a final protective barrage
 - Z-hour set as 1100, with the aim of surprise
 - To conceal the assembled troops, trenches were covered with cocoa matting, with a black band painted on to represent the shadow of the trench
 - A rehearsal of the attack (27th Brigade) was carried out beforehand
 - Each battalion advanced on a two company frontage
 - Each company adopted a two platoon frontage
 - First wave in extended order
 - Subsequent waves in file
 - Achievement of the objective to be signalled by blue smoke rifle grenades
 - Red flares to be used to signal achievement of the objective to RAF patrols

¹ This summary is taken from Edmonds, *Official History Vol. IV* – plus archive sources: TNA WO95/2303, War Diary of 87 Infantry Brigade

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Appendix G

Gas Warfare in Flanders, 1918

Dennis Williams

Gas Warfare in Flanders, 1918

A striking feature of the war diaries from Second Army formations is the commonplace reference to the use of gas as one of the components of both sides' weaponry. This should not be a surprise, given that more than half of the recorded use of gas occurred during the final year of the war, and around half of the fatalities resulting from exposure to gas on the Western Front occurred in 1918.¹

It was in operations in Flanders, in the Ypres Salient in the Spring of 1915, that the Germans had been the first to make use of chemical warfare. However the British then also adopted gas as a weapon, becoming the leaders in gas warfare, such that 'the Germans never regained their early advantage'.² In his chapter on the application of chemical warfare from his book on the impact of chemistry on the war,³ Michael Freemantle discusses the development of the weapon and its effectiveness. He quotes the conclusion of Albert Palazzo that 'gas [became] 'the most effective method' of neutralising the enemy's guns and achieving fire supremacy. It also lowered the morale of the enemy and reduced their ability to resist.'⁴

Nick Lloyd describes how the deployment of gas as a weapon had become commonplace in 1918:

... The allied armies had to operate in a terrible and dangerous chemical environment... gas evoked a fear that was unlike any other weapon and had a significant effect on how the war was fought...

*By 1918 all sides had incorporated gas into their battle tactics, with both front and rear sectors regularly being deluged with gas, which poisoned the ground and caused a constant trickle of casualties.*⁵

Gas was an important feature of the fighting in Ypres and Flanders. In a lecture to troops, a Divisional Gas Officer is recorded as '... reminding his audience that the YPRES Sector has always been the enemy's gas experimental ground'.⁶

Peter Hart, writing on the warfare in 1918, summarises the gases and gas shells used by the German Army:

*The Germans were using a mixture of gases including Blue Cross, Green Cross and Yellow Cross. The Blue Cross was... a truly deadly weapon – if it had worked properly. It contained an arsenic-based compound that acted as a powerful [irritant on] the nasal and respiratory passages to cause coughing, sneezing and sometimes vomiting... When the... victim tore off his mask in an effort to breathe he would then be exposed to the deadly Green Cross shells that contained phosgene, a lung irritant sixteen times more lethal than the chlorine gas used in 1915... [but] the German Blue Cross shells were one of the biggest failures of the war as the detonation of the shell on landing proved inadequate to properly disperse the powder... Far more dangerous was the menace of the Yellow Cross mustard gas. Exposure to this unpleasant substance severely burnt the skin and had a terrible effect on the eyes... [It] took some time to disperse and thereby rendered areas virtually impassable for long periods.*⁷

Lloyd points out that:

*...Mustard gas... was used in increasing amounts by the German artillery. As the retreat [by the German forces] gathered momentum, German gunners fired thousands of these shells at their pursuers, using it as an area denial weapon, through which the Allies could not advance, or at least not without difficulty.*⁸

He quotes the findings of Tim Cook:

*German gunners simply blocked out map grids and fired shells to saturate the whole sector, thereby eliminating that area from the front.*⁹

Despite the dangers from gas, the references within the War Diaries of Second Army units indicate that it was dealt with as part of the routine of the front line. Given the relative inexperience of many units making up Second Army, from their first time in the front line, men had to be able to cope with the gas shells delivered as part of enemy bombardments. On 17 August 1918 (on the first morning of only the second spell for the Battalion on front line duty), the war diary of 11/Cameron Highlanders records that 'In the early morning Lt. G.S. Young and four men were gassed and two men wounded'.¹⁰ On 24 September, 104 Brigade records that 'Gas, especially Blue Cross, being used very extensively by the enemy'.¹¹

Within the war diaries of Second Army units there are constant references to the use of gas shells by the German artillery. This could affect both front and support lines. There is no particular importance attached to these references – it was obviously viewed as part and parcel of front line duty and the ongoing harassment from the enemy:

[5/Cameron Highlanders]

18 August Meteren Heavy gas concentration put down over our whole front line.

*22 August Meteren Enemy threw over a few Gas shells during Night.*¹²

The use of gas shells in enemy artillery fire was a commonplace feature for the men on duty in the front line trenches. The following extracts are from the war diary of 120 Brigade while on a tour of duty at the front during August 1918:

22/23 August [Enemy artillery carried out] continuous shelling of sector with H.E. mixed with gas shells ('Mustard').

23/24 August Some heavy-calibre gas shells fell near VERT RUE, also 6 or 8 fell [nearby].

25/26 August Between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. [the enemy fired] over 100 rds. 10.5 c.m. phosgene gas ... [other areas nearby] also received a few rounds of gas...

26/27 August During the night a few gas shells were mixed with H.E...

*28/29 August Our patrols of the Right Company were successful in gaining an entrance into BOWERY COTTAGES... but due to a heavy enemy barrage mixed with gas... they were unable to advance.*¹³

There are later references which give more details of the types of gas used; for example:

18/19 September ... heavily shelled with sneezing gas and Yellow Cross shells...
6 October ... a heavy barrage of mustard gas mixed with H.E. was put down on our support lines...
10/11 October ... Lachrymatory Gas... Mustard Gas mixed with H.E...¹⁴

Precautions were necessary when men came into contact with materials present during a gas attack. In July 1918, 120 Brigade's war diary makes reference to gas being introduced into a dugout through the use of sandbags which has previously been in an area fired on by the German artillery, the barrage including gas shells.¹⁵ As well as concern for their immediate health, the men's clothing could also be contaminated by gas. The following is from 120 Brigade's instructions issued in August 1918:

Gassed Clothing Such men as have been affected with Yellow Cross gas will be sent to the Divisional Main Dressing Station with a certificate signed by an officer stating that their clothing has been affected, when fresh clothing will be issued.¹⁶

Hence there was a clear threat to troops when making contact with other soldiers who had themselves been subject to a gas attack. This and other concerns were addressed in guidance issued to the units of 40th Division in September 1918; the aim was to ensure all possible steps were taken to minimise the risk of injury through exposure to the after-effects of gas shelling, and to put in place arrangements for disinfection:

1. As a result of recent experiments it has been found that Chlorine gas destroys Yellow Cross and its use as an external disinfectant has given very satisfactory results in treating clothing and equipment contaminated with this gas, thus saving 'gas' casualties among men who have not actually been in contact with the gas itself, but who came into contact later with men who have.
In an Army on our right many 'gas' casualties have been saved in this way.
2. A small chlorine gas chamber will therefore be established and maintained at the Advanced Dressing Station... under arrangements to be made between the A.D.M.S. and 40th Division Gas Officer: all personnel who have been in contact with Yellow Cross gas and are therefore likely to be contaminated with it, will be despatched as soon as possible to the A.D.S. and there passed through the chamber: this treatment should be carried out, if possible, before the men are allowed to congregate in any contained space. A period of 10 minutes in a concentration of about 1:1000 is sufficient.
3. When their condition permits of it, wounded men who are contaminated, and Yellow Cross gas casualties should also be passed through the chamber.
4. It has also been found that shell holes and inhabited localities such as dugouts, huts, gun positions, etc. that are contaminated with Yellow Cross Gas can be disinfected by being sprayed with Chlorine Gas: 40th Division Gas Officer will therefore arrange as soon as possible for the Gas N.C.O.'s of all units to receive instruction in this and they are in possession of the necessary equipment to carry out this disinfection process as soon as possible in any locality which may have become contaminated...¹⁷

In an advance following our own gas shell bombardments Divisions will issue suitable instructions to the troops to prevent gas casualties while passing over the late target.

While the length of time during which such an area is dangerous, unless respirators are worn, depends to a great extent on the weather conditions, the following figures are issued for guidance:

| <i>Gas.</i> | <i>Ground dangerous for</i> | <i>Remarks</i> |
|------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>With C.G.</i> | <i>½-2 hours</i> | <i>No under surface persistency</i> |
| <i>With N.C.</i> | <i>½-15 hours</i> | <i>Digging may not be possible for 24 Hours</i> |
| <i>With H.E.</i> | <i>48-60 hours</i> | <i>Under surface may remain dangerous for weeks</i> |

NOTE

The persistence of the liquid of [in] the ground is diminished by heavy rain, by sunshine or strong wind. During frosty and dull weather the persistency is increased.²²

Freemantle also makes clear that the value of the gas weapon lay in its psychological impact; it was more likely to cause soldiers to leave the field of battle, or be far less effective on it, than to be killed by it.²³

It was therefore important for British troops to take appropriate steps in order to issue warnings as early as possible of a forthcoming gas attack and to take steps to protect themselves. At the beginning of August, 121 Brigade was issued with three closely typed pages of 'Anti-Gas Instructions', which also referred the reader to SS534 (March, 1918) where 'full details of Gas Defence' could be found.²⁴ The key elements of the 'Anti-Gas Instructions' included:

- In the LA MOTTE Divisional Sector the Gas Zones are as follows:
ALERT ZONE – East of the Hazebrouck-Morebecgue Railway.
READY ZONE – East of a line joining BELLINGHEM & BLARINGHEK*
- A supply of Strombos Horns, Rattles, Gongs, and Fans may be obtained on application to Brigade...*
- All Formations and Units within the ALERT ZONE will prepare at their Headquarters and at such other places as Commanding Officers may find necessary 'WIND DANGEROUS' Boards, and will make arrangements for displaying them at appropriate times.
'WIND SAFE' Boards will not be used, and any such boards now in existence will be destroyed.*
- The following points should be brought frequently to the notice of all ranks:
a) Gas will often hang for a long time in woods, valleys, and villages, and may be dangerous after several days have elapsed.*

- b) *It is not safe to rely on the degree of detonation as a means of recognising gas shell, because H.E. shell often contains Gas.*
6. *The following is a précis of the various forms of gas attack, the warnings given in each case, and the duties of various Headquarters and Units on receiving the warning...*
- A. GAS CLOUD ATTACK
 - B. HEAVY GAS SHELLING OR GAS PROJECTOR SHOOTS
 - C. LIGHT GAS SHELLING
- [Under each heading the arrangements in place and the action to be taken are detailed].²⁵*

On 14 August, while out of the line, the troops of 5/Cameron Highlanders had experience in the 'Gas Chamber' – an arrangement designed to provide soldiers with first-hand experience of being gassed. The intention of the Army was for all units to spend a session in the chamber as part of their training and preparation for front line operations.²⁶

Despite such measures, there was ongoing concern at the number of casualties resulting from enemy gas attacks. Second Army wrote to its Corps Commanders at the start of September 1918 to place its concerns on record; this followed a period during which the Army had been advancing its line to take advantage of German withdrawals and a policy of probing attacks and harassment of the enemy:

The gas casualties during the past month have been unusually high. In order to combat these excessive casualties the Army Commander wishes Corps Commanders to go thoroughly into this question and to ensure that the responsibilities of the General Staff of formations and of all Commanders for successful anti-gas measures is fully realised. C.O.s should be constantly reminded that they are responsible for casualties occurring in their units which prove to be the result of lack of training in defensive gas measures in accordance with the orders which have been issued on the subject from time to time.²⁷

In its response, on 11 September XV Corps referred the instruction to its Divisions:

*Forwarded.
Attention has been drawn frequently to the importance of this subject. Arrangements will be made to have further 1 day courses for C.Os and Second-in-Command.
The question is, however, largely one of discipline; the strictest gas discipline is always to be enforced.²⁸*

40th Division then looked to emphasise the practical measures which units should have in place, to be supported and enforced through the Divisional Gas Officer:

The G.O.C. is confident that the most careful attention will be given to this matter by all concerned and the strictest supervision exercised in the anti-gas training of all units, both in the knowledge of all anti-gas precautions and in the care and upkeep of anti-gas equipment. In order to assist formations and units in this connection, the Divisional Gas Officer will make the following arrangements:

- a) *In the case of the Infantry Brigade in rest:*

- i) *To inspect all box respirators and anti-gas equipment at least once during the period the Brigade is out.*
- ii) *To hold a short refresher course for all Battn and Coy Gas N.C.Os during the period of rest, to ensure their being up to date and efficient in anti-gas measures.*
He will make similar arrangements regarding the resting company of the 39th M.G.Bn. taking each Coy. in turn as it comes into Reserve.
- b) *In the case of other units he will arrange direct with the units concerned, to carry out similar inspections and refresher courses for the Gas N.C.Os so that each unit will receive periodically his assistance and attention.*
- c) *On the completion of his inspection of each unit, he will render to Div. Hd. Qrs. a report on the state of the anti-gas training and equipment in that unit.*²⁹

The incentive for units is to avoid the prospect of a critical report being passed to Division HQ. What these instructions imply is the scale of the ongoing threat posed by the German use of gas on a regular basis, and the resulting concern of Second Army commanders to manage the consequences of this. There is a clear concern to minimise the resulting number of casualties by attaching a very high importance to the range of anti-gas measures available to units.

One week later, XV Corps issued some amendments to its Anti-Gas Instructions, reflecting particular concerns at that time. In part it is possible to detect a perceived casual approach by troops to gas shelling, perhaps a result of the frequency of this type of artillery fire, or the reaction of 'old hands' believing in their own ability to decide how to respond following a gas attack; troops also disliked wearing the respirators which were uncomfortable and restricted the visibility, and therefore the movement, of the wearer:

- 1) *... Gas casualties are frequently caused by neglect of proper precautions being taken after a gas shell bombardment. Mustard Gas will persist for long periods after a bombardment and respirators must be worn and protective clothing and gloves put on where available, by all troops in the affected area, as long as the smell of gas, no matter how faint, can be detected.*
- 2) *As the persistency of the mustard Gas may extend under suitable conditions over several days, units in the forward area will select alternative positions to which, in the event of a gas bombardment, they can move if the tactical situation permits.*
The exchange of positions, either to the alternative or back to the original position, should not be made until a Gas N.C.O. has reported the area which is to be occupied is free from gas.
- 3) *Enemy gas bombardments should invariably be reported, and it is important that any new gas or projectile should be investigated at once.*
- 4) *All ranks should be warned that the recognition of gas shell by degree of detonation is not to be relied upon.*³⁰

As the Flanders offensive gathered pace during the second half of 1918, the new danger was that of gas contained within booby traps left behind by the withdrawing German soldiers. XV Corps instructions stated:

TRAPS

Appendix G Gas Warfare in Flanders, 1918

- 1) *The enemy has on several occasions, before retreating, infected cellars, dugouts, etc., with Mustard Gas, and therefore such places lately vacated by him should be entered with caution. His usual method is either to scatter the liquid gas about or else to open a shell, thereby allowing the contents to leak into the ground.*
- 2) *Water from shell holes must on no consideration be used either for washing, cooking, or drinking purposes.
Wood must not be handled or burnt if there are any signs of gas shelling or gas in the vicinity.*³¹

Gas remained a prime concern for Second Army throughout the Hundred Days. In instructions issued after the Battle of Courtrai, the command of XV Corps stated that it was considered probable that the Germans would 'make considerable use of gas' during the retreat. Cloud gas attacks were considered unlikely and the main threat would be from gas shells delivered using HE. It was acknowledged that with the ongoing advance causing 'frequent changes of positions' then units would not be able to receive the same amount of supervision from senior Anti-Gas personnel and would have to rely principally upon their own trained soldiers. Frequent inspections of respirators were to be carried out together with the maintenance of anti-gas appliances such as respirators, containers and rattles.³²

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- ¹ Stevenson, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 200; the section pp. 200-205 gives a useful summary of gas usage by both sides in 1918
- ² G. Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock: Britain and the First World War* (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 173
- ³ M. Freemantle, *Gas! Gas! Quick Boys! How Chemistry Changed the First World War* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, Spellmount, 2012), Chapter 6, pp. 115-120
- ⁴ A. Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front: The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War I* (Lincoln, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p.2; quoted in Freemantle, *Gas!*, p. 120
- ⁵ Lloyd, *Hundred Days*, p. 102
- ⁶ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, 17 September 1918
- ⁷ P. Hart, *1918: A Very British Victory* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), pp. 68-9
- ⁸ Lloyd, *Hundred Days*, p. 102
- ⁹ T. Cook, *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), p. 200; quoted in Lloyd, *Hundred Days*, p. 102
- ¹⁰ TNA WO95/2611/4, War Diary of 11th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders
- ¹¹ TNA WO95/2483, War Diary of 104 Infantry Brigade, 24 September 1918
- ¹² TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders
- ¹³ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Intelligence Summaries*
- ¹⁴ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade
- ¹⁵ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade
- ¹⁶ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Administrative Instructions No. 215, 23 August 1918*
- ¹⁷ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *40th Div. No. 10/61 (G), 18/9/18*
- ¹⁸ Palazzo, *Seeking Victory*, p.2
- ¹⁹ For examples see TNA WO158/294, (Second Army) Effects of our Gas and Gas Shells, 11 October 1915 – 17 October 1918
- ²⁰ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *5th August 1918*
- ²¹ TNA WO95/1899, War Diary of 42 Infantry Brigade
- ²² TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/145 G. 28th October 1918*
- ²³ Freemantle, *Gas!*, p. 120 – quoting from T. A. Ryan, C. Ryan, E. A. Seddon and K. R. Seddon, *Phosgene and Related Carbonyl Halides* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1996), p. 40
- ²⁴ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Centre Sector Defence Orders, Appendix III*
- ²⁵ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Centre Sector Defence Orders, Appendix III*
- ²⁶ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders
- ²⁷ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *Second Army G.T. 420, 9th Sept. 1918*
- ²⁸ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/137 G. 11th September 1918*
- ²⁹ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *40th Div. No. 10/56 G. 13-9-18*
- ³⁰ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/141 G. 21-9-18*
- ³¹ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/145 G. 28th October 1918*
- ³² TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *XV Corps No. 89/145 G. 28th October 1918*

British Second Army and Coalition Warfare in Flanders in the Hundred Days, 1918

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Appendix H

Air Warfare in Flanders, 1918

Dennis Williams

Air Warfare in Flanders, 1918

The growth in importance of air power and the ability to defend against it is illustrated by the post of Anti-Aircraft Defence Commander on the Army General Staff. The rank of the officer, Lieutenant-Colonel, reflects both the newness of the role and that the available technology meant the full potential of air power was yet to be realised. Nevertheless, ground troops could expect to be observed and, of greater immediate concern to them, to be attacked by enemy aircraft. Air bombing raids upon troops and key strategic points were also increasingly common, although by the final phase of the war the allied aircraft outnumbered their German counterparts. While it was in reconnaissance that the aeroplane continued to make its most important contribution, Plumer had come to realise the potential of air power in the new warfare.

Referring to the battles of April 1918, Sir John Lessor, a future Marshall of the Royal Air Force, wrote that Plumer ‘pressed urgently for concentrated bombing of vital points of the German supply system to help slow down the enemy advance... [he] was emphatic that an essential condition of success was the concentration of all available aircraft continuously on the minimum number of points where the greatest dislocation could be produced’.¹

The deployment of the RAF was an automatic component within the planning and operations of Second Army in 1918.

The table below shows a summary of RAF activity during the final weeks of the war in Flanders:

| Summary of RAF activity during the Final Advance in Flanders | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---------------|---------|-------|----------------|--------|--------|---------|-------|-------|
| Week commencing | 21 Sept | 28 Sept | 5 Oct | 12 Oct | 19 Oct | 26 Oct | 2/9 Nov | Total | |
| Enemy aircraft destroyed | 13 | 51 | 36 | Severe weather | 2 | 52 | 38 | 642 | |
| RAF machines lost to enemy | 10 | 30 | 12 | | 10 | 18 | 10 | 90 | |
| Enemy balloons burnt | 1 | 8 | 2 | | 0 | 8 | 5 | 24 | |
| RAF balloons burnt | 0 | 1 | 1 | | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | |
| Bombing Summary | | | | | | | | | |
| Bombs dropped | Other | 31 | 54 | 27 | 20 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 113 |
| | 112lbs | 272 | 534 | 240 | 152 | 113 | 84 | 117 | 1512 |
| | 25lbs | 2071 | 6365 | 2820 | 1825 | 581 | 2256 | 1403 | 17321 |
| | Total | 2374 | 6953 | 3087 | 1997 | 703 | 2340 | 1520 | |
| SAA rounds fired at ground targets | - | 42068 | 6500+ | 1670 | - | - | - | - | |
| Photos taken | 1848 | - | - | 300 | - | - | 578 | | |

Compiled from the weekly operations reports produced by Second Army HQ
 Source: TNA WO158/218

The operational planning and training by units of Second Army included co-operation with the RAF as a common feature. Attack orders issued by 89 Brigade in August 1918 included reference to the RAF dropping supplies to forward troops:

RAF: ammunition and stores as follows will be dropped by aeroplane at [map reference]...

20 Boxes SAA

2 SAA Boxes filled with VERY Lights

1 SAA Box filled with Special S.O.S. Signal

30 coils of barbed wire

2nd Battalion S Lancs Regt. will detail a party under a N.C.O. to collect these stores as they are dropped and issue them as required to troops of 89th and 90th Infantry Brigades. This party will mark the dropping ground by two white letters 'N'.²

An attack on 19 July to capture the village of Meteren, by 26 Brigade and the South African Brigade (9th Division) was given cover by the RAF:

Six of our planes hovered over our front from dawn to ZERO, and denied aeroplane observation to the enemy.³

Even during quieter periods, the war in the air was a common feature of the daily routine for the soldiers at the front, and for the aircrews:

One enemy aeroplane dropped a few light bombs on our front line doing little damage. Considerable aerial activity on part of the enemy. Two of our planes brought down by enemy squadron behind our lines.⁴

The control of the air space above the opposing forces was an important factor in the allied advance. The RAF, together with its French and Belgian counterparts, enjoyed a numerical superiority during the campaign; the success that this led to is shown by the high number of enemy aircraft destroyed in this period. This control of the skies – when the weather permitted – gave a significant advantage to coalition troops. It allowed effective reconnaissance of German troop activity and positions, including artillery, plus the crucial details of the new terrain over which the troops would be advancing. French and RAF planes also carried out regular bombing of enemy communications, headquarters and transport, thereby disrupting German command and movement. A further feature of air operations was the dangerous task of direct attacks at low level upon German troops.

The much smaller Belgian Air Corps, around 150 craft, also played its part; primarily in observation and reconnaissance, but also via its fighter squadrons, which had been reorganised at the start of the year.⁵ On 17 October pilots of the Groupe de Chasse Jacquet (Fighter Group Jacquet) landed in Oostende to become the first members of the Belgian armed forces to enter the town after German occupation.

Communications with aircraft by advancing troops relied almost entirely upon visual aids. The normal practice was an agreed system of coloured flares. For example, during an action by advance platoons of 31st Division on 18 September 1918 (described in an earlier chapter)⁶, a 'Contact Aeroplane' was identified to 'co-operate with the attack'. Troops

carried SOS flares: red smoke by day, green over green over red by night; plus white Very lights: three to be fired when a platoon reached its objective.

The RAF was also a regular feature in the advance planning by Second Army. Orders issued by 89 Brigade in August 1918 included reference to the RAF dropping supplies to forward troops.⁷ An attack on 19 July to capture the village of Meteren, by 26 Brigade and the South African Brigade (9th Division) was given air cover by six RAF planes circling the front before the attack and preventing enemy observation.⁸

The preparations for the forthcoming Battle of Ypres give a good example of requirements for the various units of the RAF to undertake specific missions in support of the attacking infantry. The priority, through the use of 'contact aeroplanes', was to track the progress of the attack in order to inform HQ.⁹ Another important role was that of the 'counter attack aeroplane', used to identify possible counter-attacks by the enemy and to signal for a defensive barrage by artillery.¹⁰

The reference to 'wireless' in such orders would most likely be through a code signal; for example, the arrangements for 88 Brigade refer to an 'LL' or 'GF' call.¹¹ These arrangements also illustrate the increasing importance of wireless communications; while the existing equipment was too heavy and bulky for advancing units to utilise, it could be fitted to an aircraft with suitable adaptations.¹² The main HQ of Corps, Division, and increasingly Brigade, would have access to wireless receivers. It was crucial for the forward infantry to be able to indicate that an objective has been taken and, as required, to signal for the necessary matériel or other forms of support in order to protect the gains made; reconnaissance aircraft made an important contribution to the various means of communication employed by advance formations. However there was concern at the ability of the enemy to access wireless communications.

The initial planning for the Battle of Ypres, arranged at Divisional and Brigade levels, also included what at the time was the novel proposal to use aircraft to deliver supplies, principally ammunition, to forward troops. The system depended upon the ability of the advance troops to display the required layout of strips of white cloth, along with the firing of a white flare. Parachutes (to be collected and returned to Division) were employed to prevent the weighty packages from just falling directly to the ground (with unfortunate consequences for any nearby troops).¹³

By the following Battle of Courtrai, the scope of such operations had been extended to include the dropping of food and rations (plus messenger pigeons) as well as small arms and machine gun ammunition. Each of these had a different arrangement of ground sheets by which advance units could indicate the type of supplies required; with the attention of the contact aeroplane attracted by the firing of a white very light or the lighting of a white flare.¹⁴

All units were now required to take the necessary steps to protect themselves from attack from the air, normally co-ordinated at Brigade level. In the front line the main emphasis was upon the deployment of Lewis Guns.¹⁵ By 1918 defence against attack from the air had become an important component of operations, offensive and defensive. In November 1918, British Second Army had five anti-aircraft batteries and two sections of 13-pounder guns for anti-aircraft defence.¹⁶

The preparations for the forthcoming Battle of Ypres give a good example of requirements for the various units of the RAF to undertake specific missions in support of the attacking infantry. The priority, through the use of 'contact aeroplanes', was to track the progress of the attack in order to provide intelligence to senior command:

CONTACT AEROPLANES

- a) *The most forward troops will carry RED FLARES, American Cloth on Box Respirators, and Vigilant periscopes for the purpose of signalling to Contact Aeroplanes.*
- b) *These, and every other means of signalling their position, will be used by the attacking troops at:
ZERO plus 2 hours 15 minutes
and at
ZERO plus 4 hours
and at such other times as called for by the Contact Aeroplane.*
- c) *Contact Aeroplanes will call for Signals from the attacking troops by sounding the Klaxon Horn and dropping WHITE Lights.*
- d) *Contact Aeroplanes will be marked with two BLACK RECTANGULAR FLAGS (2 feet by 1 foot 6 inches) attached to and projecting from the lower plane on each side of the fuselage. Each contact plane will also have a TRAILING STREAMER.
All troops will be warned how to recognise contact aeroplanes.¹⁷*

Another important role was that of the 'counter attack aeroplane', used to identify possible counter-attacks by the enemy and to signal for a defensive barrage by artillery:

COUNTER ATTACK AEROPLANE

A counter attack aeroplane will be in the air on II Corps Front [west of Ypres] from Zero plus one hour onwards for the purpose of giving warning of an impending hostile attack.

On perceiving hostile infantry moving to attack the counter attack aeroplane will call for annihilating artillery fire by Wireless and will also signal the fact that a hostile attack is impending by dropping a RED SMOKE PARACHUTE VERY LIGHT.¹⁸

The reference to 'wireless' would most likely be through a code signal; for example, the arrangements for 88 Brigade refer to an 'LL' or 'GF' call.¹⁹ These arrangements also illustrate the increasing importance of wireless communications; while the existing equipment was too heavy and bulky for advancing units to utilise, it could be fitted to an aircraft with suitable adaptations.

Hence this further example from 88 Brigade:

Aeroplane fitted with Wireless Telephone

From time to time an aeroplane fitted with a wireless telephone will patrol the II Corps Front. Receiving Stations to take down messages from this aeroplane are being arranged for at YPRES, and GOLDFISH Chateau.

It is to be remembered, however, that all messages sent by this machine can be intercepted by receiving stations and on no account whatever will any messages referring to the positions of our troops be sent 'in clear' by this means.²⁰

The main HQ of Corps, Division, and increasingly Brigade, would have access to wireless receivers. It was crucial for the forward infantry to be able to indicate that an objective has been taken and, as required, to signal for the necessary matériel or other forms of support in order to protect the gains made; reconnaissance aircraft made an important contribution to the various means of communication employed by advance formations. However there was concern at the ability of the enemy to access wireless communications.

The initial planning for the Battle of Ypres, arranged at Divisional and Brigade levels, also included what at the time was the novel proposal to use aircraft to deliver supplies, principally ammunition, to forward troops. The system depended upon the ability of the advance troops to display the required layout of strips of white cloth, along with the firing of a white flare. Parachutes (to be collected and returned to Division) were employed to prevent the weighty packages from just falling directly to the ground (creating the likelihood of unfortunate consequences for any nearby troops). The following is a typical example of the arrangements made:

DROPPING OF AMMUNITION FROM AEROPLANES

- a) *Arrangements have been made with the R.A.F. to drop ammunition from aeroplanes, if required.*
- b) *Two kinds of ammunition will be dropped:*
 - a) *bundle packed S.A.A.*
 - b) *M.G. Ammunition packed in belts (4 belts per box)*

The ammunition prepared for dropping will be in the proportion of two of bundle packed ammunition to one of M.G. Ammunition in belts.

- c) *Infantry will signal that ammunition is wanted as follows:*

['N' shaped layout] Machine Gun Post requiring M.G. Ammunition.

['triangle' layout] Bundle packed ammunition required.

Each signal will be made up of strips of white cloth 12 feet by 1 foot and in each case attention will be called to the signal by the firing of a white flare from the ground. Two strips per Battalion and one per Machine Gun Co. will be carried.

The Brigade Signalling Officer will make arrangements for supplying them.
- d) *The aeroplanes will be ready to drop ammunition from ZERO plus two hours onwards and will continue to do so as long as the ground signals are displayed.*

Once the signals are removed no more ammunition will be sent by aeroplane unless a report is received from a contact machine that more is required.
- e) *It is probable that each ammunition dropping aeroplane will be able to drop about two boxes of ammunition per hour and possibly at the outside three machines can be made available for the purpose on the Divisional Front.*

It will not be practicable that these aeroplanes will continue dropping ammunition for a longer period than about four hours and during the day it is calculated that the maximum number of boxes which can be dropped will be 9 boxes of mg Ammunition and 16 boxes of bundle packed ammunition.
- f) *It is of very great importance, therefore, that ammunition should not be called for except when really required. Platoon and Company Commanders will make every endeavour to collect enemy rifles, machine guns and ammunition and bring them into use against the enemy.*

- g) As many parachutes as practicable must be recovered and returned to Division.²¹*

As seen, the prime objective of these arrangements for the forthcoming Battle of Ypres was to deliver additional supplies of ammunition. However, a few weeks later, during the planning for the Battle of Courtrai, the scope of the operation had been extended. The dropping of supplies now included food and rations, plus pigeons, as well as small arms and machine gun ammunition. Each of these had a different arrangement of ground sheets by which advance units could indicate the type of supplies required; with the attention of the contact aeroplane attracted by the firing of a white very light or the lighting of a white flare.²²

All units were now required to take the necessary steps to protect themselves from attack from the air, normally co-ordinated at Brigade level. In the front line the main emphasis was upon the deployment of Lewis Guns. In August 1918 the following Divisional orders were issued to units in 121 Brigade (40th Division):

Anti-Aircraft Defence

All units are responsible for their own protection against attacks from the air, and should ensure that they are complete in A.A. small arms, sights and mountings, according to establishment.

[Chief considerations for the defence of the area include]:

- a) Fire will be opened on low flying aeroplanes by rifles and Lewis Guns, but in every case the sentry in front line posts will continue to watch the front.*
- b) Lewis Guns told off for anti-aircraft purposes in the line should not be placed at greater intervals than 500 yds. Positions may be changed, but changes should be reported to Brigade Headquarters so that anti-aircraft defence may be co-ordinated.*
- c) Most implicit orders are necessary to ensure that no Lewis Gun or rifle is to fire unless the 'CROSS' on the hostile plane can be clearly seen with the naked eye. It is useless to fire at a range greater than 1,300 yards. This is to be made clear to every Lewis Gunner, and steps will be taken to deal with those who fire wildly at aeroplanes obviously out of range.*
- d) Anti-aircraft Lewis Guns will, as far as possible, be placed in groups of 4, or in pairs. If in groups of 4, they will be under an officer, or if in pairs, under N.C.O.'s to be supervised by an officer.*

Fire at night will not be opened unless:

- i) The hostile aircraft can be seen against the sky.*
- ii) The struts of the planes can be distinguished in the beams of a searchlight.²³*

Subsequently the orders were added to:

An order board is to be provided at every post. Units will also arrange that the 'Letter and Colours of the Day' (particularly the latter) are communicated to each of their posts and understood by them.

The Letters and Colours change daily at 12 noon and are to be communicated daily to A.A. Lewis Guns as if they were passwords.

An additional reason for the restriction of A.A. Lewis Gun fire at night, particularly in back areas, is that the A.A. defences depend largely on listening for the location of hostile aeroplanes and that this is made more difficult if Lewis Guns fire unnecessarily...

... copies of a paper of orders for A.A. Lewis Gunners have been forwarded for distribution to each gun... This paper should be pasted to a board of [or] piece of tin and tied to the mounting or some part of the emplacement of the gun.²⁴

By 1918 defence against attack from the air had become an important component of operations, offensive and defensive. In November 1918, British Second Army had five anti-aircraft batteries and two sections of 13-pdr guns for anti-aircraft defence. In total this provided:

12 x 3-inch anti-aircraft guns
42 x 13-pdr guns.²⁵

¹ Sir J. Slessor, *The Great Deterrent* (London: Constable, 1957), pp.51-2.

² TNA WO95/2332, War Diary of 89 Infantry Brigade, *89th Infantry Brigade Order No. 180, 18 August 1918*

³ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders

⁴ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, *2nd July 1918, Stoic Farm, nr. Fletre (Meteren Sector)*.

⁵ This paragraph is based upon information from the website www.wwiaviation/ww1_belgium1918.

⁶ TNA WO95/2361, War Diary of 15/17th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment, *Narrative of Operations 13-18 September 1918*.

⁷ TNA WO95/2332, War Diary of 89 Infantry Brigade, *89th Infantry Brigade Order No. 180, 18 August 1918*.

⁸ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders.

⁹ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 2. CONTACT AEROPLANES*.

¹⁰ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 3. COUNTER ATTACK AEROPLANE*.

¹¹ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 3, Contact and Counter- Attack Patrols, 25th September 1918*.

¹² TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 3, Contact and Counter- Attack Patrols, 25th September 1918*.

¹³ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 4. DROPPING OF AMMUNITION FROM AEROPLANES*. The orders also directed that the parachutes were to be collected and returned to Division, which was probably not the first priority of the men on the ground.

¹⁴ For an example see TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 2, 12th October 1918*.

¹⁵ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Centre Sector Defence Orders, Appendix II*; TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *N. 120/415, 120th, Defence Orders*.

¹⁶ A. F. Becke, *Official Orders of Battle: Part 4: The Army Council, GHQs, Armies and Corps 1914-1918* (HMSO, 1945); in total this represented 12 x 3-inch anti-aircraft guns and 42 x 13-pdr guns.

¹⁷ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 2. CONTACT AEROPLANES*

¹⁸ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 3. COUNTER ATTACK AEROPLANE*

¹⁹ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 3, Contact and Counter- Attack Patrols, 25th September 1918*

²⁰ TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 3, Contact and Counter- Attack Patrols, 25th September 1918*

²¹ TNA WO95/2300, War Diary of 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, *Operation Instruction No: 2, 24/25.9.1918, 4. DROPPING OF AMMUNITION FROM AEROPLANES*

²² For an example see TNA WO95/2307/4, War Diary of 88 Infantry Brigade, *88th Infantry Brigade Operation Instructions No. 2, 12th October 1918*

²³ TNA WO95/2614, War Diary of 121 Infantry Brigade, *Centre Sector Defence Orders, Appendix II*

²⁴ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120 Infantry Brigade, *N. 120/415, 120th, Defence Orders*

²⁵ A. F. Becke, *Official Orders of Battle: Part 4: The Army Council, GHQs, Armies and Corps 1914-1918* (HMSO, 1945)

British Second Army and Coalition Warfare in Flanders in the Hundred Days, 1918

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Appendix I

British Army Medical Categories

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| British Army Medical Categories¹ | | |
|--|----|---|
| Category A - fit for general service | A1 | Men for despatch overseas in all respects, as regards training, physical and mental qualifications |
| | A2 | Recruits who should be A1 on completion of their training |
| | A3 | Returned Expeditionary Force men who should be A1 once 'hardened' |
| | A4 | Men under 19 years of age who should become A1 or A2 once they reach that age |
| Category B - fit for service abroad, but not general service | B1 | In Garrison or Provisional units |
| | B2 | In Labour units or on garrison or regimental outdoor employment |
| | B3 | On sedentary work as clerks or store men only |
| Category C - fit for home service only | C1 | In Garrison or Provisional units |
| | C2 | In Labour units or on command, garrison or regimental outdoor employment |
| | C3 | On sedentary work as clerks, storemen, batmen, cooks, orderlies, sanitary duties, etc. |
| Category D - temporarily unfit for service, but likely to become so within six months | D1 | In command depots |
| | D2 | In regimental depots |
| | D3 | In any unit or depot under or awaiting medical or dental treatment, on completion of which will re-join their original medical category |
| Category E - unfit for service, and not likely to become fit within six months | | |
| Notes: | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In October 1917, following recommendations made in the report of Lieutenant General H. M. Lawson at the start of the year, under ACI 1606/17, Category C was abolished; men listed within this category were recategorised in the corresponding Category B subdivision • In addition, the following categories were applied in France and Flanders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class A – fit for general service Class TB (Temporary Base) – temporarily unfit for general service Class PB (Permanent Base) – unfit for general service at the Front, but fit for service on the lines of communication and in army corps areas and capable of being regraded Class A Class PU (Permanently Unfit) – those in class PB who are never likely to become Class A, but employed in the same way as Class PB | | |

¹ The information in the table is taken from C. Messenger, *Call to Arms: The British Army 1914-18* (London: Cassell, 2006), Appendix Two, pp. 521-2; the sources are: *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War 1914-1920* (War Office, 1922; reprinted by Naval & Military Press, 1999); TNA WO32/5093, Lawson Report, *The Number and Physical Categories of Men Employed out of the Fighting Area in France*.

British Second Army and Coalition Warfare in Flanders in the Hundred Days, 1918

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Appendix J

The Operational Readiness of Second Army: Training and Deployment

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The Operational Readiness of Second Army: Training and Deployment

Training was of crucial importance given the number of reconstituted units within Second Army and the large number of new conscripts and re-designated men. The examples set out below represent Second Army's practical implementation of the processes outlined in the British Army's principal operational doctrine, *SS 135: The Training and Employment of Divisions* (issued in January 1918).

14th Division was one of the reconstituted divisions, put together during June 1918 before joining Second Army in July. There was therefore a very heavy emphasis upon training for the officers and men making up the battalions and supporting arms. For the units in 41 Brigade, the training programme throughout that summer included such topics as:

- Gas drill
- Time on the firing range
- Small tactical schemes for platoons
- Company and patrol work
- Tanks
- 'Duties of the RAF and the difficulties'
(a lecture attended by 200 soldiers)
- 'Fire discipline and fire control'
(for officers and NCOs)
- Troop deployment: extended order, artillery formation.¹

The range of the subject matter is very broad, from basic marksmanship through to co-operation with tanks and the RAF. What this list suggests is the ongoing need for the new formations, at all levels, to receive training in some of the more elementary aspects of their role. Having moved up into the front line on 28 August, the Brigade concluded a few days later that 'Units [were] lacking in knowledge of elementary trench duties'.²

43 Brigade, also part of 14th Division, had been reconstituted in England, comprising the three battalions, 12/Suffolks, 20/(Shoreditch) The Middlesex, and 10/Highland Light Infantry; the latter two battalions had themselves been rebuilt from cadre in June 1918. The Brigade returned to France on 4-5 July 1918.³ The War Diary of 43 Brigade contains the details of a Tactical Exercise for training purposes carried out on specified days in the middle of July 1918, shortly after the units re-grouped. The memo gives an insight into the tactical thinking at this point in the war, which had to be married to the priority of preparing relatively raw troops for the new offensive realities presented to Allied forces on the Western Front. Over four days, tactical exercises at battalion level gradually increased the number of troops involved, ending with a brigade level exercise. The main manoeuvre involved the theoretical capture and consolidation of a position by one battalion; followed by the passing through of this battalion and the capture of a secondary objective by another battalion. Key elements in the training included the pushing forward of Lewis Guns to support the attack with enfilade fire; the supporting fire offered by light trench mortars; the deployment of Vickers heavy machine guns for covering fire and for taking on 'floating' targets; means of ammunition supply; and application of the principle of 'no movement without fire'.⁴

Within these manoeuvres one can identify the features of a modern style of warfare: references to what can be summarised as 'fire and movement'; effective use of infantry support weapons; enfilade fire and flanking movement. These elements are subsequently

incorporated within the planning and execution of Second Army operations at brigade and battalion levels.

The importance of learning lessons was widely recognised, with senior officers present to provide commentary and feedback. On 7 September a tactical exercise by 26 Brigade (9th Division) was viewed by the Brigade and Division commanders. Some main points of the feedback included:

- The importance of the prompt conveyance of orders from HQ to junior commanders
- Soldiers should be trained to use the Lewis Gun and rifles at long range, not waiting until the enemy is within 200-300 yards
- *...The best way to kill retreating Boche was not to bayonet individuals (however enjoyable that process may be) but to bring rapid and effective controlled fire to bear on them*
- Unless the infantry are well supported by artillery, they will not advance as rapidly as they might do with the guns behind them – *There was no reason why the Field Artillery should not always support the infantry as they were quite as mobile as if not more so than them*
- A smoke screen is a valuable aid when attacking
- *[a discussion on the relative merits of the 'snake' and other formations when attacking]... it was decided to adopt a more open formation than the 'snake' in future operations.*⁵

There are interesting points to note here. The move away from the bayonet to the use of controlled fire indicates a major shift in doctrine. The comments on the field artillery, particularly with regard to expecting the guns to keep pace with the advancing infantry, would prove to be a challenge, particularly in the early stages of the campaign when the terrain was comprised of former battlefields, made worse by severe rain. The need for troops to deploy in open order when assaulting, adopting a looser formation than even that represented by the 'snake' profile, suggests a growing confidence in the initiative and ability of the individual soldiers. Such deployment could make it more difficult for NCOs and officers to maintain command and control during the attack. There is an implicit trust in the commitment of the troops to continue to manoeuvre forward, making maximum use of covering fire and available ground cover. In a later exercise the same unit practised 'advancing over rough ground' with regard to the pace of the advance, to provide a useful guide when considering the timing for a creeping barrage, or plans for subsequent defensive fire. 'The average pace of advance was found to be 100 [yards] in 3 minutes and it was found impossible to maintain 'blob' formation'.⁶ This latter view reinforces the need to allow troops to adopt a more open formation, although it would be crucial to maintain touch with a creeping barrage.

Having only been brought together in June 1918, with many men transferred from Labour Companies, 10/KOSB spent most of that month, July and the first half of August undergoing training; this included some time in support trenches (West Hazebrouck, 3-7 July 1918). The unit was finally put into front line positions in the third week in August; on 21 August it received orders to follow up a withdrawal by opposing enemy forces. Two days later the Battalion attacked German positions and was met by machine gun fire and a defensive barrage; the attack was only 'partially successful' in consequence.⁷

Research of the war diaries of the battalions, with original notes and diaries of the participants, illustrates that throughout the Final Advance, the units maintained regular army routines and procedures. For example, despite the speed of the advance and the problems created for communications, the troops of 31st Division underwent a number of moves from front line duty to time out of the line in reserve or support occupations, or to undertaking further training. The latter was largely the responsibility of the Battalion commander and could reflect his priorities or particular points arising from battle experience. During September 1918, 11/East Yorkshires spent time in reserve and received training sessions under the headings of 'NCOs', 'Lewis Gunners', 'Signalling', 'Observers', 'Scouts', and 'Stretcher Bearers'. On 21 September Captain C J Casey (Intelligence Corps) gave a lecture on 'The Work of the RAF and its use to infantry'.⁸ This record is a very good reflection of the changed nature of the British Army by this stage of the war, and the developments in its fighting, weaponry and tactics. The influence of Lieutenant-General Ivor Maxse, in his new role with responsibility for training across the British Army, would be in evidence by this time. On 9 August 1918, senior officers from Second Army attended one of his lectures on 'The Training of Infantry'.⁹

On 23 and 24 September, 1/18/Durham Light Infantry, perhaps reflecting optimism or prescience, ran a lecture on 'Education After the War'.¹⁰

The value of some of the training and lectures offered to troops was sometimes called into question. The following critical reviews were recorded in the War Diary of 41 Brigade:

- 10 August Lecture on 'Aeroplane Photography' by Second Army Photographic Officer [attended by over 100 soldiers]
 - *An interesting subject badly treated.*

- 14 August Lecture on 'Duties of Counter Batteries'
 - *A dull subject after a hard day's work.*¹¹

Units and troops also changed line responsibilities on a number of occasions, with time spent travelling (by rail, lorries, and on foot) between different points of the front. When out of the front line or support positions, units or contingents of soldiers could be involved in training, recreation or labouring. This situation appears to derive from the desire of the senior command in Second Army to ensure that no group of soldiers endured an overlong period in the front line of the advance. The arrangement was designed to keep the fighting forces as fresh as possible, though success in this was to become a relative term given the subsequent pace of the advance, the problems of transport and supply, and the determined resistance by the enemy at particular defensive points.

During July 1918, the record of 5/Cameron Highlanders (26 Brigade, 9th Division) demonstrates the variety of deployments and activities which troops could expect to be engaged in. This breadth of experience does not compare with the common perception now held of the common soldier's daily routine amidst the trench warfare of the Western Front and the First World War. The following is a brief summary of the Battalion's deployment over the course of the month:

- 1-4 July Battalion stationed in the Reserve Line.
Troops involved in work parties (One officer, 50 other ranks): for example, deployed as a 'carrying party' for the 3rd Canadian Tunnelling

- Company. Six other ranks spent time filling in shell holes under the supervision of the 64th Field Company RE.
Some units also underwent training: for example, Reserve Company Lewis Gunners.
- 4-7 July Battalion relieved 7/Seaforth Highlanders in the 'right front sub sector'. There is shelling by the enemy on a daily basis plus machine gun fire at night.
Patrols are sent out each night: for example, four other ranks (no officer) from B Company ordered to search for the location of enemy machine gun posts.
- 7-12 July Battalion based in Brigade Support. Training includes 'artillery formations and the attack', followed by a practice rehearsal which is watched by both Brigade and Division COs.
- 13-18 July Battalion deployed back to the front line.
During the relief there is an attack by a German raiding party on an advance post but this is repulsed.
Regular periods of enemy shelling
An enemy sniper is proving to be very active – the likely location is shelled by artillery and three hits observed.
The Battalion HQ suffers heavy shelling and the Battalion Adjutant, Captain M.C. Muir, is wounded; Stoic Farm is evacuated as a consequence, this taking place during a 'violent thunderstorm' and heavy rain.
On 18 July a raiding party of 20 other ranks led by Lieutenant A.L. Wilson attacked an enemy machine gun post; the action failed, due in part to the covering smoke shells falling short, and the troops were beaten back by machine gun fire. Six soldiers were reported as missing, including Lieutenant Wilson.
The Battalion was informed that on 19 July it would take part in an attack on the village of Meteren, in conjunction with 8/Black Watch and units from the South African Brigade. The aim is to capture the village and prevent its use for observation purposes by the enemy.
- 19-24 July Front line and support operations: attack on Meteren.¹²
- 25-30 July Battalion based in Corps Reserve.
- 31 July... Battalion moved up into the Support Line (Meteren) and on the following day took over the Brigade's section of the front line. Two German carrier pigeons were shot down – more importantly, the messages being carried were retrieved.¹³

At the end of the first week in August, 35th Division, deployed in the Locre Sector, was relieved by 30th Division. Accordingly, 90 Brigade of 30th Division replaced 105 Brigade in line, with the latter moving back to billets in the area of Sylvestre Cappel. A range of training and work duties were undertaken by the troops of 105 Brigade, much of the content in preparation for offensive action:

- August 9th ... One platoon from each Battalion, detailed for work in the forward area under No. 1. Foreways Company...
- 10th The Units of the Brigade spent the day re-organizing and refitting.
- 12th Orders were issued relating to a practice attack on the TERDEGHEM SWITCH by 15th. Sherwood Foresters and the 4th. North Staffordshire

- Regiment, to take place on Wednesday, 14th. August. Only Signallers on Brigade Headquarters and of each Unit to take part – assisted by a contact aeroplane of 53rd. Squadron R.A.F.*
[An exercise demonstrating the crucial need for effective communications during an assault – and the importance of this within Second Army preparations.]
Battalions carried out training according to programme.
[15th Cheshires ordered to undertake] 4 days Range Practice.
[Brigadier-General Turner went on a short leave to England.]
- 13th *The 105th. Brigade Headquarters Staff... attended a Lecture... on 'Counter-Battery Work'. A closer co-operation between Infantry and Artillery was advocated, and facilities for more immediate action were promised.*
[This could have been in part a response to the number of casualties being caused to the troops manning front line positions – and the concerns of their immediate commanders.]
- 14th *[Practice attack on the TERDEGHEM SWITCH by Signal troops carried out.] The object of the practice exercise was to improve the efficiency of Signal Personnel in the use of the 'T' POPHAM PANEL' and other means of communication (without cable). Communication between Headquarters of Assaulting Battalions and Headquarters of 105th. Infantry Brigade was satisfactorily established and maintained by means of (a) 'T' POPHAM PANEL', (b) Visual and (c) Runner.*

On 15, 17, 20, 21, 23, 25, and 27 August, the Diary refers to 'Training continued'. On 22 August the 'Second Army Commander visited 15/Cheshires and 15/Sherwood Foresters and inspected them while training,¹⁴ evidence of Plumer's interest in, and attention to, training for his men.

These extracts show the range of activities in which units would be engaged during the period when they were withdrawn from the line. It is suggestive of what might now be termed 'a learning organisation' and presents a positive picture of Second Army's commitment to training. There is very little reference to troops being used for work duties such as road repairs or similar; nor any record of recreational activities such as inter-unit sports competitions. The emphasis appears to be very much on improving the skills of the soldiers while there is time and opportunity to do so. Reflecting the time spent behind the lines, the monthly casualties' report showed no soldiers killed or missing; two officers and 20 men were recorded as wounded.

Extracts from the War Diary of 5/Cameron Highlanders, when out of the line during August and September 1918, provide a further snapshot of the range of activities which were arranged for the troops, recreational and educational. These included the Brigade and Battalion Horse Shows, Bathing parades and Gas Chamber exercises, a demonstration of message carrying rockets (no comments are recorded), and on 9 September, the Brigade Sports Day.¹⁵

Maintaining the men in healthy condition was another important factor with regard to the organisation of a unit's routine of duties. The war diary of 7/Seaforth Highlanders notes on 8 July 1918 that, after a long spell of trench duties (33 days), the men had a bath and were issued with clean underclothing; the Medical Officer, following inspection and

acknowledging the length of time spent in front and support positions, 'remarked on the clean condition [of the troops]'.¹⁶ In the circumstances of the trenches the risk of infection was ever-present; a later note from the same source records that 'the prevalence of diarrhoea was very marked during this tour and was attributed largely to the water supply'.¹⁷

Recreation was a regular feature of time out of the lines, officers making arrangements to promote sports competitions between units, with men taking part or as spectators. This was a means of ensuring healthy activity as well as providing entertainment for the troops. Appended to the war diary of 120 Brigade there is the programme, with cover page cartoon, for the Brigade's Sports Day, 7 September 1918. There are a mix of events including athletic races, horse jumping, tug-of-war, sack race, mule race ('no saddlery, spurs or stick') and bicycle tortoise race ('last man in wins'). An entrance fee of 10 francs is to go to the General Fund.¹⁸

On 9 July 1918, 7/Seaforth Highlanders held a Battalion football tournament with inter-company matches; the following day its Division (9th) held a football match with a team from 31st Division (the result is not recorded – perhaps the officer writing up the diary was not a soccer fan).¹⁹ Football also brought allies together; On the evening of 17 September, C Company of 7/Seaforth Highlanders played a football match against a Belgian team with the latter winning by two goals to one.²⁰

There is other evidence of sport bringing together Belgian and British troops. 'Belgian Fete Day' is recorded as taking place on 21 July 1918 – at this event there were two sporting competitions for teams from the Belgian Army and British Second Army, with prizes provided by Princess Philippa of Caraman-Chimay.²¹

On 3 July, 36th Division held its Horse Show at Proven, with Belgian guests of demonstrable ability:

*Upon this the officers of the neighbouring Belgian Cavalry Division, including an Olympic competitor, descended like wolves on the fold, giving a remarkable display of skill and horsemanship, and taking practically all the prizes for jumping events.*²²

As late as 10 September, just two weeks before the Battle of Ypres began, a football match took place between British and Belgian teams, from 18/York & Lancaster and 2nd Belgian Grenadier Regiment; the latter winning by two goals to one, 'the Belgians being slightly the better team'.²³

¹ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, entries for July and August 1918

² TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade, *31 August 1918*

³ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade

⁴ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 43 Infantry Brigade, memo: 43rd Bde G.S. 7S.

⁵ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, *7th September 1918*

⁶ TNA WO95/1905, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, *18th September 1918*

⁷ TNA WO95/2611/4, War Diary of 10th Battalion, Kings Own Scottish Borderers

⁸ War Diary of 11th Battalion, East Yorkshire Regiment

⁹ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade

¹⁰ TNA WO 95/2361, War Diary of 1/18th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry

¹¹ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade

¹² This raid is described in more detail later in this study.

¹³ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders

¹⁴ TNA WO95/2486, War Diary of 105 Infantry Brigade

¹⁵ TNA WO95/1767, War Diary of 5th Battalion, Cameron Highlanders

¹⁶ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, *8th July 1918*,

¹⁷ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, *10th August 1918*

¹⁸ TNA WO95/2610, War Diary of 120th Infantry Brigade, *120th Brigade Sports 7th September 1918*

¹⁹ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, *9th and 10th July 1918*,

²⁰ TNA WO95/1765, War Diary of 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders; the Battalion belonged to 9th (Scottish) Division, the northernmost of the Second Army divisions, and deployed next to the Belgian Army

²¹ TNA WO95/2299, War Diary of 86 Infantry Brigade, *Administrative Order, 29th Division, No. 160/136, 1st July, 1918*. The briefing note from 29th Division continues:

The CARAMAN-CHIMAY CUP, to be competed [for] annually, and 11 medals, for the winning Divisional Association Football Team, from the two Armies.

8 Medals for a Cross Country Run of 10 kilometres. Open to 8 runners from each of the [Belgian and British Second] Armies. Further information is being asked for, as to whether this is a team or individual event...

It is thought that the best way of selecting a Divisional Team, as time is so short, will be to find out the best Battalion or other Unit team by an eliminating tournament and then give that Unit the choice of playing in the Corps tournament with the team as then constituted, or of selecting one or more men from any other Unit for inclusion in their team... Brigades and Divisional Artillery will select 8 men and all other Divisional Units... 4 men to represent them in a race to be arranged by Divisional H.Q.s over a 10 Kilometre course. The first 8 men in will represent the Division...

²² C. Falls, *A History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (London: Constable, 1996; first published Belfast: McCraw, Stevenson, 1922)

²³ TNA WO95/1894/6, War Diary of 41 Infantry Brigade

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WO95/1771/4 27 Infantry Brigade

WO95/1771/5 27 Infantry Brigade

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