

**UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM**

**Centre for First World War Studies**

**A Moonlight Massacre: The Night Operation on the  
Passchendaele Ridge, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917**

**by**

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Thesis submitted to  
The University of Birmingham  
for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of History and Cultures  
College of Arts & Law  
June 2011

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## **Abstract**

The Third Battle of Ypres was officially terminated by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig with the opening of the Battle of Cambrai on 20 November 1917. Nevertheless, a comparatively unknown set-piece attack – the only large-scale night operation carried out on the Flanders front during the campaign – was launched twelve days later on 2 December. This thesis, a necessary corrective to published campaign narratives of what has become popularly known as ‘Passchendaele’, examines the course of events from the mid-November decision to sanction further offensive activity in the vicinity of Passchendaele village to the barren operational outcome that forced British GHQ to halt the attack within ten hours of Zero. A litany of unfortunate decisions and circumstances contributed to the profitless result. At the tactical level, a novel hybrid set-piece attack scheme was undermined by a fatal combination of snow-covered terrain and bright moonlight. At the operational level, the highly unsatisfactory local situation in the immediate aftermath of Third Ypres’ post-strategic phase (26 October-10 November) appeared to offer no other alternative to attacking from the confines of an extremely vulnerable salient. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of the affair occurred at the political and strategic level, where Haig’s earnest advocacy for resumption of the Flanders offensive in spring 1918 was maintained despite obvious signs that the initiative had now passed to the enemy and the crisis of the war was fast approaching.

## ***Recordabor Semper***

For Sergeant H.J. Cuff 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian MG Company, Captain C. Cundall MC 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, Private F.J. Wakely 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment, Private A. Cooksey 2<sup>nd</sup> King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, Private H. Cairns, Private W. Gilmour 16<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant W.T. Ridgway, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant W.B. MacDuff 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant J.E. Baskott 193<sup>rd</sup> Siege Battery RGA.

## **Acknowledgements**

I should like to express my gratitude to the following institutions and people in the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Canada and the United States for their generous support and assistance with this study: the extremely helpful staffs at the National Archives, British Library, National Portrait Gallery, Imperial War Museum, Royal Air Force Museum, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Churchill College Archives, Prince Consort's Library (Aldershot), Isle of Wight Public Record Office, Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 and US Army Heritage and Education Center; individuals in the UK: Dr Joanne Coyle, Brenda Eastaff, Alan Ridgway, Sue Floyd, Andrew Arnold, Chris Baker, Paul Reed, Clive Harris, Matthew Lucas, Jon Cooksey, Chris, Marianne, Julian and Olivia Barker, Captain Christopher Page RN (Rtd.), Dr James Beach, Dr Spencer Jones, Dr Lucian and Aurelia Pascut; in France and Belgium: Colonel Jack Sheldon (Rtd), Bart, Heidi, Wouter and Amber Vandeputte, Josue Denoo, Andre Winne, Wilfred and Rose Anne Caroloen Vierkelst, Emiel and Alice Depuydt; in Canada and the United States: Dr George Gilmour, Dr Richard Wertime, Dr Geoffrey Haywood, George Nafziger, Richard Baumgartner, Barbara Kulp, Marianne Brochhagen, Lieutenant-Colonel Lou Brown US Army (Rtd.), Dr Kevin Brown, Jon Kulaga, Tim Kuntz, Jeff Holder, Ron Turfitt, Dr David and Helen Cuff, Dr Janice Florey; my University of Birmingham colleagues: Professor Peter Simkins MBE, Dr Bob Bushaway, Dr Steffen Prauser, Dr Armin Grünbacher, Dr Michael Snape, Air Commodore Dr Peter Gray RAF (Rtd), Major-General Dr David Zabecki US Army (Rtd.), Dr Alun Thomas, Rob Thompson, Ross Mahoney, Peter Hodgkinson, Dave Molineux, Derek Clayton, Stuart Mitchell, Victoria Henshaw, Aimée Fox, Liz Morris, John Freeman, Nigel Dorrington, Andy Lonergan and James Gordon-Cumming; my thesis advisors Dr John Bourne and Professor Gary Sheffield. And finally, a very special thanks to Father Philip DeRea MSC, Stephen and Sylvia DeRea, my parents Salvatore and Eileen, brother Scott and YZ.

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## Notes

Some of the stylistic conventions found in this thesis have been adopted from the relevant British Official History.<sup>1</sup> Officers are described by the rank they held during the winter of 1917-18. Troop and place locations are normally written from right to left of the respective British and German forces. Thoroughfares running through the frontline are described with the names of towns or villages in British hands taking precedence, thus: ‘Passchendaele – Westroosebeke Road’. OH emulation of standard BEF conventions in regard to distinguishing numbers of Army, Corps, Division and Brigade has also been adhered to, thus: Second Army, II Corps, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, 2 Brigade. German formations and units are reproduced in italics, thus: *Fourth Army, Gruppe Ypern, 4<sup>th</sup> Division, 4<sup>th</sup> Infanterie-Brigade, Infanterie-Regiment* (abbreviated *IR*) 4. Exceptions and adjustments to these conventions have been made with the following: Reference to artillery brigades, which, in contravention of the Army-wide practice of using Arabic figures for units numbered higher than 100, will be described ‘161 Field Artillery Brigade’, etc. Formal unit titles, exclusive of direct quotations, have been adopted, thus: 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment, 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, etc. Commonly recognised regimental abbreviations are also employed: 1<sup>st</sup> RIR for 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI for 16<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry, etc. These titles will, on first appearance, be reproduced in full with the intended abbreviation in squared brackets. See list of abbreviations and terms for all other acronyms, etc. Recurring terms ‘operational’, ‘tactical’ and related forms are loosely defined, with the exception of direct quotes, throughout as follows: Operational concerns the activities of armies and corps in the conduct of large-scale military operations; tactical concerns the conduct of military operations at divisional level and below.

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<sup>1</sup> See Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France Belgium 1917 Vol. 2* (London: HMSO, 1948), pp.

## List of Abbreviations & Terms

### *Archives*

BA-MA	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Freiburg)
BL	British Library
CAC	Churchill College Archives (Cambridge)
IWM	Imperial War Museum
JSCSC	Joint Services and Command Staff College (Shrivenham)
LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (King's College, London)
NPG	National Portrait Gallery
MMP	Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 (Zonnebeke, Belgium)
NRO	Newport Record Office (Isle of Wight)
TNA	The National Archives of the United Kingdom (Kew)
UGA	University of Glasgow Archives

### *Military*

ADC	Aide de Camp
ADMT	Assistant Director of Military Training
ADS	Advanced Dressing Station
ANZAC	Australian New Zealand Army Corps
APM	Assistant Provost Marshal
Bde	Brigade
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BGGS	Brigadier General General Staff
BGRA	Brigadier General Royal Artillery
BGRE	Brigadier General Royal Engineers
CCS	Casualty Clearing Station
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CHA	Commander Heavy Artillery
C-in-C	Commander and Chief
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CMDS	Corps Main Dressing Station
CMGO	Corps Machine-gun Officer
CO	Commanding Officer
CQMS	Company Quartermaster Sergeant
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery (divisional artillery commander)
CRE	Commander Royal Engineers
CSM	Company Sergeant Major
CW	Continuous Wave
DAAG	Deputy Assistant Adjutant General
DAA & QMG	Deputy Assistant Adjutant & Quartermaster General
DADOS	Deputy Assistant Director Ordnance Services

### *Abbreviations and Terms*

DCGS	Deputy Chief of the General Staff
DDMS	Deputy Director Medical Services
DGT	Director General of Training (GHQ)
Div.	Division
DMGO	Division Machine-gun Officer
DMO	Director of Military Operations
DMT	Director of Military Training
DoW	Died of Wounds
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
FA	Field Ambulance
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
FSC	Field Service Company (mapping and survey)
FSR	Field Service Regulations (1909)
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GOCRA	General Officer Commanding Royal Artillery (corps artillery commander)
GSO 1 (I) /(O)	General Staff Officer, Grade 1 belonging to the (I) Intelligence or (O) Operations branch of the staff
GSO2 (I) /(O)	General Staff Officer, Grade 2 belonging to the (I) Intelligence or (O) Operations branch of the staff
GSO 3 (I) /(O)	General Staff Officer, Grade 3 belonging to the (I) Intelligence or (O) Operations branch of the staff
HAG	Heavy Artillery Group
HBMGC	Heavy Branch Machine Gun Corps
HE	High Explosive
how.	howitzer
HQ	Headquarters
HV	High Velocity
Inf.	Infantry
IO	Intelligence Officer
<i>IR</i>	<i>Infanterie-Regiment</i>
MC	Military Cross
MEF	Mediterranean Expeditionary Force
MG	Machine-gun
MGGS	Major General General Staff
MGO	Machine-gun Officer
MGRA	Major General Royal Artillery (advisor for that arm at Army HQ)
MM	Military Medal
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
NZ	New Zealand
OCB	Officer Cadet Battalion
OC	Officer Commanding
<i>OHL</i>	<i>Oberste Heeresleitung</i> (German Commander-in-Chief, General HQ Higher Command)
OR	Other Rank
pdr.	pounder

## *Abbreviations and Terms*

POW	Prisoner of War (plural: PsOW)
QMS	Quarter Master Sergeant
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
RE	Royal Engineers
RFA	Royal Field Artillery
<i>RIR</i>	<i>Reserve Infanterie Regiment</i>
RND	Royal Naval Division
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SAA	Small Arms Ammunition
SD	Service Dress
SOS	Call or coloured flare signal for immediate assistance by prearranged defensive artillery on previously surveyed approaches to the frontline
TM	Trench Mortar
TMB	Trench Mortar Battery
VC	Victoria Cross

### German Ranks and British Equivalents

*General-Leutnant* -- -- Lieutenant-General

*Oberstleutnant* -- -- Lieutenant-Colonel

*Major* -- -- Major

*Hauptmann* -- -- Captain

*Leutnant* -- -- Lieutenant

*Feldwebel* -- -- Sergeant Major

*Vizefeldwebel* -- -- Staff Sergeant

*Sergeant* -- -- Sergeant

*Unteroffizier* -- -- Corporal

*Gefreiter* -- -- Lance Corporal

*Musketier, Fusilier, Schütze, Ersatz-Reservist* -- -- Private (infantry)

## Introduction

This thesis examines a First World War attack involving two British divisions (8<sup>th</sup> Regular and 32<sup>nd</sup> New Army) launched near Passchendaele village in the icy pre-dawn hours of 2 December 1917. The operation remains almost entirely unknown and unmentioned in most standard works on the Third Battle of Ypres or what is commonly known as ‘Passchendaele’, a highly controversial campaign in which it was a notable last act.

Over ten years have passed since I first came across a clearly rendered operational battle map entitled ‘PASSCHENDAELE RIDGE 1/2 December 1917’ whilst leafing through a dog-eared 1926 edition of *The Eighth Division 1914-1918* by Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston and Captain C.E.O. Bax. This surprising discovery occurred during a leisurely shelf-browse of the popular ‘Shell Hole’ bed and breakfast/antiquarian bookshop not far from the *Grote Markt* in Ypres. Baffled, I contemplated the date: “December 1917? Surely ‘Passchendaele’ had finished up by then?”<sup>2</sup> Initial investigation provoked two main research questions: First, why was another attack on the Passchendaele Ridge deemed necessary and important after the official conclusion of the seemingly inconclusive Third Battle of Ypres? Second, was there more to this perceived lunatic and “futile” operation than “attacks on meaningless fragments of trench, barbed

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The British History Atlas* (1968) contains a general map (reproduced with minor annotations for this thesis) entitled ‘Third Ypres: The Advances June-December 1917’ that is probably based on the folding campaign map issued with Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig’s Despatches: December 1915- April 1919*. A related sidebar insert states that the campaign ‘began on 31 July and lasted until early December’ (my emphasis). This recognition that British offensive operations continued well after Third Ypres’ oft-cited (10 November) close date is, when compared with similar examples found in popular specialized works like Arthur Banks, *A Military Atlas of the First World War* (1975), highly unusual.

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wire, and pillboxes...?”<sup>3</sup> Subsequent examination of key archives and available printed sources led to the formulation of six detail-specific queries into the affair: First, was Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig wise to sanction the operation given prevailing political and strategic circumstances? Second, was there a viable alternative, given the unfortunate local military situation, to securing the extremely vulnerable Passchendaele Salient without having to resort to further offensive measures? Third, did an unpropitious full moon or enemy foreknowledge directly contribute to the barren operational outcome? Fourth, how was it that the right and left battalions of the assaulting 8<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Divisions only discovered the loss of a tactically vital strongpoint shortly before the attack? Fifth, were the attackers detected on the forming-up tape prior to the advance? And sixth, what sort of tactical/operational conclusions were reached in the subsequent unit and formation after-action reports? The importance of the topic lies in these general and specific enquiries and their direct correlation to an event that has never been appraised within its proper historical context. From a broader perspective, evaluation of the attack’s planning and preparations also clearly demonstrates, despite the obvious failure, a ‘fit for purpose’ operational/tactical template (circa late 1917) adopted by the BEF following a period of intense fighting.

The chosen analytical framework for this thesis is that of in-depth battle account with a considered attempt to mesh the detailed narrative with rigorous academic enquiry. Such proceedings, it must be admitted, are an unapologetically atypical format for a study

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<sup>3</sup> See John Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns: An Infantry Officer on the Western Front* (London: William Kimber, 1979), p. 115, Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-18* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992), p. 273 and William Moore, *See How They Ran: The British Retreat of 1918* (London: Sphere Books, 1975), p. 31.

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offering a necessary corrective to the accepted chronology of the Third Ypres campaign. “A crucial and unavoidable feature of narrative history is the fact of selectivity. The narrative historian is forced to make choices and selections at every stage: between ‘significant’ and ‘insignificant’, between ‘sideshow’ and ‘main event’, and between levels of description”.<sup>4</sup> For example, is a First World War battle best described at the level of policy-makers and generals or infantrymen and artillerymen? Is it possible to place these varied participant perspectives into a readable interpretive account? The decision to engage and blend these contextual conundrums (thus conceivably illuminating complex and varied aspects of a somewhat arcane event) has been my ultimate goal from the start. While primary focus is on operations and the interaction of mid-level commanders, tactical, strategic and political determinants are also investigated, in order to facilitate understanding of what amounts to a three-week period culminating in a large-scale night attack on a front still active in the immediate aftermath of a great campaign. Operational narrative with accompanying analysis is seldom taken to this level. Recent scholarship focusing on complexities of a particular style of set-piece attack circa September-November 1917,<sup>5</sup> is further substantiated by detailed enquiry into the genesis, planning (especially in regard to employment of standard operating procedure guidelines as related in contemporary *S.S. 135, Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* and *S.S.143, Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action, 1917* General Staff training manuals) and execution of what was widely viewed,

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<sup>4</sup> Understanding Society: Innovative Thinking About Social Agency and Structure in a Global World <[understandingsociety.blogspot.com/2008/11/narrative-history.html](http://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/2008/11/narrative-history.html)>

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), p. 106 and John Lee, ‘Command and Control in Battle: British Divisions on the Menin Road Ridge, 20 September 1917’, in Gary Sheffield & Dan Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army’s Experience 1914-1918* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), pp. 119-39.

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despite the application of a novel, albeit highly controversial and flawed hybrid assault scheme, contemporarily as a ‘dud show’ or ‘half-success’. What follows, therefore, is an original combination of official history-like operational detail, recent related and complementary academic viewpoints/perspectives on BEF and *Westheer* leadership, organization, operations and tactics coupled with applicable first-hand accounts. The human cost is also poignantly explored by focusing on the personal experience and varying tangible legacies of three British participant fatalities. Thus this study, in addition to reconstructing for the first time in a wide-ranging accessible narrative format, the background, course of events and outcome of a forgotten attack that cost approximately 1,689 British officers and men killed, wounded and missing, also highlights the accompanying sacrifice whilst contributing to further understanding of the Third Battle of Ypres and its aftermath in particular and First World War scholarship in general.

The dearth of published accounts covering the night operation on the Passchendaele Ridge has no doubt contributed to its relative obscurity. Indeed, Sir Douglas Haig, in his wartime despatch concerning the 1917 campaign, made only vague reference to the event in a brief statement of post-strategic phase policy: “These operations [Second Battle of Passchendaele] concluded our Flanders offensive for the time being, *although considerable activity was still continued for another fortnight...*” (my emphasis).<sup>6</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald Bond DSO subsequently recognised in his postwar history of the KOYLI that the only large-scale night attack associated with the lengthy Third Ypres campaign had been understandably overshadowed by the concurrent

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<sup>6</sup> See Fourth Despatch dated 25 December 1917, in Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches: December 1915- April 1919* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1919), p. 133.

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Cambrai offensive: “There was yet an incident on the Passchendaele front, dismissed in half-a-dozen lines in contemporary history, which involved a handful of battalions in dire distress ... It is the affairs of the battalions and with the lives of the gallant soldiers that this regimental record is concerned. In devoting a few pages to this incident, therefore, it can hardly be said that the treatment of the affair is bringing it out of its perspective”.<sup>7</sup> Bond’s appreciation that the general public remained unaware of the so-called affair was substantiated by the *Report of the Battles Nomenclature Committee* [BNC], which determined “what were officially the actions of the war and what were the geographical and chronological limits of those actions and their relative importance”.<sup>8</sup> The committee’s published findings (1922) bestowed the honour ‘Assault of Southern Redoubt, Passchendaele’ to 8<sup>th</sup> Division, whilst 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, tasked with carrying out the most difficult part of the two-division attack, was inexplicably awarded nothing for the 1917 campaign beyond ‘Defence of Nieuport’ in July 1917.<sup>9</sup> Why, during the course of its lengthy deliberations, did the BNC focus on Southern Redoubt when 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s assigned objectives also included neighbouring Venison Trench and Northern Redoubt? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that Southern Redoubt and its immediate environs represented the only tangible (albeit short-lived) territorial gain made during the ill-fated

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<sup>7</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald C. Bond DSO, *The King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War Vol. 3* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1929), pp. 909-10.

<sup>8</sup> House of Lords, *The Parliamentary Debates: Official Report, Fifth Series – Volume XLIX* (London: HMSO, 1922), column 127. Appointed by the War Office immediately after the armistice, the ‘Battles Nomenclature Committee’ (presided over by Major-General Sir John Headlam) consisted of representatives of all the forces. The guiding principle in selection and allotment of battle honours was based on the determination that HQs and at least 50% of a unit’s effective strength must have been present during an engagement.

<sup>9</sup> See Major A.F. Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions, Part 1 – The Regular British Divisions* (London: HMSO, 1934), p. 95 and, by the same author, *Order of Battle Divisions, Part 3B – New Army Divisions (30 - 41); and 63<sup>rd</sup> (RN) Division* (London: HMSO, 1945), p. 28.

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attack. Reason or rationale for the committee's failure to recognise 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's principal role in the costly operation remains enigmatic.<sup>10</sup>

Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, in his Official History of the Third Battle of Ypres, also overlooked the Passchendaele night operation by noting that the "intention to complete the capture of the main ridge northward to Westroosebeke as a winter position could not be put into effect", regardless of the fact that a large-scale attempt was made a fortnight after the official conclusion (20 November) of the Flanders campaign.<sup>11</sup> A surviving correspondence relating to the second volume for 1918 reveals that Major-General C.D. Shute (GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division) once expressed particular interest in what Edmonds and his team of historians had to say (in addition to other "rather big shows" under his direct command) about the attack, although work on the relevant 1917 volume did not commence until three years after Shute's death in 1936.<sup>12</sup> The latter's not unreasonable assumption that the night operation would be part of the official narrative

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<sup>10</sup> Regiments were subsequently bestowed with the generic 'Theatre of War' honour 'Ypres 1917', which ostensibly represented the campaign's nine distinct phases (Pilkem Ridge, Capture of Westhoek, Battle of Langemarck, Battle of Menin Road, Battle of Polygon Wood, Battle of Broodseinde, Battle of Poelcappelle, First Battle of Passchendaele, Second Battle of Passchendaele). Unofficial battalion 'Battle Honours' were more phase specific ('Pilkem 1917', etc. for 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Coldstream Guards, etc.). Thus general acknowledgement of a battalion's role in the night operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, while not officially recognised as part of Third Ypres, could technically fall within the parameters of allotted theatre of war honours.

<sup>11</sup> Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 2* (London: HMSO, 1948), pp. 359-60. Casualties (killed, wounded and missing) sustained during the night operation, William Moore observed, are not included in the official history's (pp. 364-65) 'final figures for Passchendaele'. See Moore, *See How They Ran*, p. 32. That British troops were called upon to continue the work of Canadian Corps following its withdrawal from the Passchendaele sector is, taking into consideration parochial former Dominion perspectives about Third Ypres, indicative that the campaign should, among others, be viewed in an 'Imperial' context.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 18 for typescript facsimile of Major-General Shute's 1930 letter. Brigadier-General Edmonds submitted first narrative drafts to 'as many survivors as possible (down to battalion commanders) and all replies acknowledged and responded to where necessary'. Andrew Green, *Writing the Great War: Sir James Edmonds and the Official Histories 1915-1948* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 57 and 168. No doubt Shute was subsequently informed (Edmonds' reply not found) that many of the engagements mentioned in his correspondence would be covered in future volumes.

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was primarily based on concern for his professional reputation relative to posterity. The absence of any sort of similar correspondence from surviving officer participants is indicative of an apparent dearth of advocates for inclusion.<sup>13</sup> Subsequent exclusion, notwithstanding the fact that similar sized or much smaller affairs were often recounted, however briefly, in other series monographs, may have been influenced by the operation's occurrence outside the nine BNC adopted phases (31 July to 10 November) that comprised what is officially known as the Third Battle of Ypres.<sup>14</sup> Edmonds' ready adherence to this officially adopted chronologic construct is still accepted by historians, normally critical of his Passchendaele volume's perceived pro-Haig bias, to this day. Published accounts of what was most recently referred to as a "futile sideshow",<sup>15</sup> therefore, remain limited to a miscellaneous assortment of personal memoirs, one divisional and a dozen or so battalion histories primarily but not exclusively produced during the interwar period, which, by their very nature, focus on individual experience or a particular unit without, more often than not, any sort of broad perspective or contextual evaluation. General historical focus on Cambrai and the succession of German offensives that followed in 1918 has, as with the BNC and Official History, thoroughly consigned the intervening local Passchendaele affair to almost complete obscurity, as perusal of

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<sup>13</sup> Conversely, official historians sometimes deliberately overlooked comparatively successful local operations despite earnest advocacy for inclusion. In 1938, Brevet-Major I.S.O. Playfair pleaded ('a splendid example of bold tactics' the novelty of which 'should be a refreshing contrast to the prevailing stereotyped methods and I feel that readers would be glad to know that ingenuity and imagination were not entirely lacking in those days') with official historian Captain Cyril Falls to include an account of the capture of 'Infantry Hill' by 76 Brigade (3<sup>rd</sup> Division) on 14 June 1917. 'His plea went unanswered. The Official History makes no mention of activities on the Monchy front after 30 May'. See Colin Fox, *Monchy le Preux* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2000), p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Captain Cyril Falls, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 1* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1940), pp. 525-32 for 'Events Outside the Arras Battlefield' during the spring of 1917. Indeed, the Passchendaele night operation, given its somewhat vague strategic connection (see Chapter 1, p. 28) with Third Army's offensive, would not have been out of place in the relevant volume (HMSO 1948) dealing with the Battle of Cambrai.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Stedman, *Salford Pals: A History of the Salford Brigade – The 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalions the Lancashire Fusiliers 1914-19* (London: Leo Cooper, 1993), p. 157.

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even the most comprehensive available chronologies of the First World War will attest.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, given the understandably parochial focus of postwar Dominion accounts, a much smaller operation (occurring on 3 December) in which two New Zealand battalions participated in a failed daytime operation against Polderhoek Chateau, has received far more attention in a wide variety of Antipodean military literature, while the much larger nocturnal attack involving nine British battalions remains largely forgotten. It is also curious to note that the German official monograph of the Third Ypres campaign (published 1928) makes, unlike its British equivalent twenty years later, particular mention – albeit in a few short lines – of the night operation. This in itself clearly demonstrates that the author perceived it to be the last major “English” attack in Flanders for the year 1917.<sup>17</sup>

A large variety of primary source documents were found in the National Archives’ extensive ‘WO’ series. This vast collection, a fundamental starting point for scholars wishing to understand the British Army during the First World War, contained the essential formation/unit war diaries, operation orders, intelligence and after-action reports on which the foundation of this study is based. Analysis of their contents revealed, besides comprehensive operational and tactical details, a reasonably efficient bureaucratic process for dissemination of information at all levels and general encouragement, by written report, questionnaire or personal interview, of subordinate

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<sup>16</sup> See Major-General Lord Edward Gleichen, *Chronology of the Great War* (London: Greenhill, 1988 omnibus reprint of 1918-20 editions) and Randall Gray & Christopher Argyle, *Chronicle of the First World War Vol. 2 1917-1921* (Oxford: Facts on File, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Werner Beumelburg, *Flanders 1917* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1928), p. 167. Jack Sheldon’s more recent work also acknowledges this late resumption of British offensive operations. See Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007), pp. 310-12.

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commanders to communicate their thoughts and actions frankly to immediate superiors. In addition, surviving VIII Corps and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division telephone and telegraph transcripts provided valuable ‘fly on the wall’ retrospective insight into the prevailing chaos and consequent impact of contradictory and erroneous messages at corps and division level throughout the attack. Subsequent examination of the available diaries and or papers of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig (C-in-C BEF), General Sir Henry Rawlinson (GOC Second/Fourth Army), Major-General A.A. Montgomery (MGGS Second/Fourth Army), Lieutenant-General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston (GOC VIII Corps) and Major-General W.C.G Heneker (GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division), among others, disclosed the thoughts and actions of over a dozen participants from Field Marshal to Private. New material relating to the character and command style of Major-General C.D. Shute GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division (who left no surviving papers) and additional Passchendaele night operation documents not found in the equivalent Kew files, was also discovered in the seemingly unrelated personal paper collections of Major-General A.H. Marindin and Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert respectively. German primary sources are almost completely absent from this study because of complete destruction of the central military archives at Potsdam during the Second World War. Nevertheless, six relevant Hessian and Thuringian regimental histories provided the principal source for understanding perspectives and course of events relating to the ‘other side of the hill’. The factual gulf between these accounts and the wealth of British primary documents was, in comparison, very limited, the former sources, more often than not, complimenting the latter.

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Chapter 1 considers the military situation in the period leading up to the capture (6 November 1917) of Passchendaele village. Sir Henry Rawlinson's succession as commander of Second Army and the subsequent Anglo-Canadian attack (10 November) to gain additional ground north and NW of Passchendaele follows. The decision to attack again in early December, enemy defensive measures, consequent tactical planning and controversy between participating division commanders, infantry training and artillery preparations are examined next in order to set the stage for the contemplated night assault. Part one of Chapter 2 compares and contrasts the plethora of related divisional instructions and orders. Part two explores the partially successful German riposte (30 November) that ultimately disrupted the attackers' painstakingly laid plans and the final hours leading up to Zero. Chapter 3 chronicles the assembly and initial assault in the early hours of 2 December. Chapter 4 continues the narrative from sunrise to the commencement of the afternoon German counter-attack. Chapter 5 relates events and immediate consequences of the hostile retaliatory thrust, resultant British consolidation of ground gained and GHQ's decision to terminate further offensive measures within ten hours of Zero. This is followed by a detailed tactical analysis. The concluding chapter analyzes the operational, strategic, political and human consequences as they directly or indirectly relate to this opaque episode of the First World War. Use of extensive acronyms made it necessary to include a glossary of terms and abbreviations. Eighteen related appendices and sixteen maps have also been collected in a separately bound volume for ease of access.

# 1

## Antecedents

*Any further offensive on the Flanders front must be at once discontinued though it is important to keep this fact secret as long as possible.*<sup>18</sup>

### 1.1 Setting the Stage

Great Britain and her Empire went to war in August 1914 to prevent a German hegemony of Europe and, in particular, to prevent the Low Countries and channel ports from falling into the hands of a hostile power. The cost of achieving these ends rose exponentially. Britain was the world's premier maritime power, but by the middle of 1916, the exigencies of the Franco-British alliance and the strength of the Imperial German Army had compelled Britain to create an enormous army to match that of its primary continental foe. The exigencies of the French alliance also compelled the employment of this largely extemporized army before it was fully trained and equipped. The subsequent long, drawn-out Battle of the Somme (July-November 1916) was the bloody template from which the British Army developed and applied emerging operational methods and technologies that would be effectively adapted and adjusted throughout 1917-18.

On 1 December 1917 the First World War passed into its fortieth month. Three years' deadlock on the Western Front had taken its toll. Imperial Germany was hard-pressed but defiant in the west. Victorious on the Eastern Front in the immediate

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<sup>18</sup> Sir Douglas Haig correspondence with CIGS Sir William Robertson, 15 November 1917, reproduced in Robert Blake (ed), *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914-1919* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952), p. 267.

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aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, Germany prepared for an all-out offensive designed to bring France and Great Britain to terms before the influx of millions of reinforcements from the United States tipped the military balance. France, reeling from internal unrest and the tremendous human and material costs sustained during the fighting of 1914-17, anticipated a previously agreed upon takeover by its British ally of a forty-mile swath of battlefield south of the Somme as the campaign season drew to a close. The ability of the British Expeditionary Force [BEF] to continue offensive operations in the west would be further reduced by the Lloyd George government's insistence that five divisions be dispatched to support the beleaguered Italian Army in the aftermath of the Caporetto defeat. Meanwhile, Britain's civil and military leadership, having sanctioned three costly and seemingly inconclusive western offensives commencing with the Battle of Arras the previous April, further exacerbated prevailing strategic/political contentions by engaging in heated debate over a growing manpower shortage that appeared to seriously threaten the Empire's capacity to continue the conflict.

It was against this alarming strategic and political backdrop that Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig (C-in-C BEF) officially terminated his great Flanders offensive, the 'Third Battle of Ypres' or what is still popularly known as 'Passchendaele', on 20 November 1917. The very real danger of *Kaiserliche Marine* destroyer and U-boat flotillas contesting Royal Navy dominance of the English Channel from occupied Belgian ports made Germany's expulsion from Flanders a cornerstone of British war policy. Dealing with this threat was deferred until the spring of 1917 in order to support the offensive schemes of Britain's main continental ally, France. The subsequent 'Nivelle Offensive'

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(16 April-9 May 1917) and the series of widespread mutinies that affected the French Army afterwards left the BEF to shoulder the main burden of offensive operations on the Western Front. This provided Haig with the opportunity to confront the menace in Flanders. Thus the West Flanders market town of Ypres, the last major Belgian municipality remaining in Allied hands, and its notorious salient became the starting point for what would be the principal British military effort of 1917 (**Map 1**) Haig aimed at nothing less than driving the enemy from Belgian soil. Clearance of dominating high ground of the Messines and Passchendaele ridges was to be followed by an eastward advance to capture the key railway centres at Roulers and Thourout. The German defenders, unable to disengage without having their vital lateral rail communications severed, would be worn down in an attritional campaign that would force the abandonment of occupied Belgium. British occupation of hostile naval bases on the Belgian coast, a serious threat to cross-channel communications since late 1914, would follow in due course.

By this time the BEF, bolstered by the full mobilization of British industry which was producing not only colossal quantities of established weaponry, but also new weapons such as the tank and trench mortar, had honed its fighting skills to conduct offensive operations that caused growing anxiety at all levels of the German high command. At the strategic level, Sir Douglas Haig failed to curb his overriding ambition, some say over-ambition, to expel Germany from Flanders in 1917. This still debatable strategic design was, nevertheless, accompanied by an increasingly effective operational approach that challenged the stark realities of position warfare with a lethal combination

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of massed artillery providing overwhelming fire support for limited infantry attacks. Tactical level developments were characterized by an increase in the amount of firepower through automatic rifles such as the Lewis Gun and rifle grenades, and a return to fire and manoeuvre that devolved initiative to platoon level under the auspices of an innovative GHQ inspired infantry training manual.

Seizure of the Messines Ridge, a necessary preliminary to a northern offensive aimed at Passchendaele Ridge, Roulers and Thourout, was successfully carried out by Second Army on 7 June. Grudging sanction for the next stage of Sir Douglas Haig's campaign was authorised by the Lloyd George government on 20 July. The main offensive by Fifth Army supported by Second and French First Armies on the right and left respectively, opened on 31 July. Three and one half months severe fighting resulted in the capture of over three-fourths of Passchendaele Ridge by the offensive's official close date. Another major offensive, launched that very day by General Sir Julian Byng's Third Army, broke through the vaunted 'Hindenburg Line' defences on a six-mile front near Cambrai. A devastating German counter-offensive, opening on 30 November, succeeded in re-capturing most of the British territorial gains. These events, occurring 49 miles south of Ypres, did not completely distract Sir Douglas Haig from sanctioning a relatively large-scale attack by General Sir Henry Rawlinson's Second Army. Its subordinate VIII Corps (GOC Lieutenant-General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston) and II Corps (GOC Lieutenant-General Sir Claud W. Jacob) were tasked with overseeing a night operation near the almost obliterated village of Passchendaele on 2 December. The objective was to make a short advance from a dangerously exposed salient on a 2,870-

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yard front north and NW of Passchendaele. On the right, 8<sup>th</sup> Division (GOC Major-General W.C.G. Heneker)<sup>19</sup> would assault with one brigade; on the left, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division (GOC Major-General C.D. Shute),<sup>20</sup> utilizing a reinforced brigade, would prolong the left flank. The operation, if successful, would secure important observation points whilst fleshing out the protruding bulge to provide additional defensive security during the winter of 1917-18.<sup>21</sup>

General Sir Henry Seymour Rawlinson Bt. (GOC Fourth Army) had, by the time the December operation was being contemplated, taken over the embattled Second Army from the Italy-bound Sir Herbert Plumer on 8 November.<sup>22</sup> The new commander – sidelined to command subsidiary operations on the Flanders coast<sup>23</sup> since the previous June – arrived just in time to oversee the next operational phase to secure the northern

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<sup>19</sup> Major-General Sir William Charles Giffard ‘Billy’ Heneker DSO, ADC (1867-1939). Commissioned Connaught Rangers 1888; Traveling commissioner Niger Coast Protectorate, West Africa 1897-1899; Benin Territories Expedition 1899; CO Ubium and Ishan expeditions 1900; Aro Expedition 1901-02; OC Ibeku - Olokro, Afikpo and Igara expeditions 1902-03; Awarded DSO 1902; DAA & QMG Orange River Colony District 1906-10; Author *Bush Warfare* 1906; ADC to King Edward VII 1907; 2/ic South Nigerian Regiment, West Africa Force 1911-12; CO 2<sup>nd</sup> North Staffordshire Regiment 1912; Temporary GOC Rawalpindi Infantry Brigade 1913-14; GOC 1 Infantry Brigade, Quetta 1914. Returned to UK in 1915 as temporary Brigadier-General and GOC 54 Brigade, 18<sup>th</sup> (New Army) Division. Wounded in France and invalided home December 1915; Promoted Colonel April 1916; GOC 190 Brigade, 63<sup>rd</sup> (Royal Naval) Division 29 October to 8 December 1916; GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division 9 December 1916, promoted Major-General (substantive) 3 June 1917.

<sup>20</sup> Major-General Cameron Dean ‘Tiger’ Shute (1866-1936). Commissioned Welsh Regiment 1885; Staff College 1893-94; transferred to Rifle Brigade 1895; Sudan 1898; DAAG Malta 1899-1904; GSO2 Scottish Coast Defences 1905-09; CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade 1910-14; GSO 1 Aldershot 1914; BGGs 1914-15; GOC 59 Brigade, 20<sup>th</sup> Division 1915-16. Promoted temporary Major-General on assuming command of 63<sup>rd</sup> (Royal Naval) Division October 1916; GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division February 1917; temporary GOC 19<sup>th</sup> (Western) Division April - May; GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division and promoted Major-General June 1917.

<sup>21</sup> The projected attack was one of four contemplated during the winter months. Only two of the four actually took place.

<sup>22</sup> Plumer had been chosen, at the insistence of the Lloyd George government, to command a British contingent of 5 divisions dispatched to assist the Italians following the Caporetto rout regardless of the fact that Second Army was conducting major offensive operations in Flanders.

<sup>23</sup> The contemplated amphibious landing and concurrent coastal advance under Rawlinson’s command were dependent on measured offensive progress made by Second and Fifth Armies. The scheme was abandoned in mid-October following the Second Battle of Passchendaele. See Andrew A. Wiest, *Passchendaele and the Royal Navy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), pp. 163-64.

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extremity of the Passchendaele Ridge. Plumer and his staff, having taken on the main part of the Anglo-French offensive from Sir Hubert Gough's stalled Fifth Army on 25 August, carefully oversaw and administrated a series of limited step-by-step advances dependent on the range and mobility of the supporting artillery; the overall aim was a combined maximum penetration of German *Fourth Army's* defences to a depth of 24,000 yards. Second Army's celebrated set-piece attacks (battles of Menin Road Ridge, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde) between 20 September and 4 October, with their thorough preparations and strictly limited objectives, frustrated previously successful German attempts to retake lost ground by counter-attack.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the seemingly relentless British gains made under favourable weather conditions during 20 and 26 September, interrupted by pauses of four or five days to bring batteries forward, were almost immediately followed by a consequent ill-considered attempt by *OHL* to bolster the once lightly held German forward area with additional troops. Their subsequent slaughter by massed British and Dominion batteries during the Battle of Broodseinde (4 October) contributed to *Fourth Army's* loss, in addition to what remained of the tactically vital Gheluvelt Plateau in its entirety, of the southern extremity of the main Passchendaele Ridge from east of Polygon Wood to just beyond Broodseinde crossroads. Meanwhile, Fifth Army, keeping pace with its southerly neighbour's three drives, steadily pushed eastward toward Poelcappelle and, surmounted by the sprawling village of Westroosebeke, the remaining northern stretch of the extended Passchendaele plateau. Second and Fifth armies thus appeared poised for further success against a weakened and demoralized enemy. The Australian official historian C.E.W. Bean, famously

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<sup>24</sup> See Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol.2* (London: HMSO, 1948), pp. x-xii for the strategic impact of these offensives and Sketch 12 for the 'German Flanders Positions'.

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commenting on the notable territorial gains made during 20 September-4 October, asked rhetorically: “Let the student, looking at the prospect as it appeared at noon on 4 October, ask himself: ‘In view of the three step-by-step blows all successful, what will be the result of three more in the next fortnight?’”<sup>25</sup> These lauded victories were not cheap; combined total losses sustained by Second and Fifth armies amounted to approximately 56,375 men killed, wounded and missing.<sup>26</sup>



**Plate 1.1 General Sir Henry Rawlinson**  
(Source: Author’s collection)

Against this novel “British approach to the battle, the Germans could find no remedy; the recapturing of ground once lost was impossible”. *Gruppe Wytschaete* chief of staff Albrecht von Thaer remarked on 28 September: “We are going through a really awful experience. I do not know anymore what to do in the face of the British”.<sup>27</sup> By

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<sup>25</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France 1917 Vol. IV* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936), p. 881. See Sketch 25 ‘Forecast of the Stages of the Campaign GHQ 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1917’, in Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 2* for projected operations to clear the Passchendaele Ridge.

<sup>26</sup> Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: the Untold Story* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996) pp. 119, 131 and 137.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Hagenlücke, ‘The German High Command’, in Peter Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1997) p. 53.

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mid-October, *Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht*, of which *Fourth Army* was part, seriously considered a “comprehensive withdrawal” to husband “men and material, which would have included the abandonment of the navy bases at Zeebrugge and Ostend”.<sup>28</sup> Second Army was now prepared to launch its primary thrust opposite a swampy, low-lying area just below the northern portion of the Passchendaele Ridge. This tapering extremity, with its constituent heavily-fortified, mutually supporting Passchendaele and Bellevue spurs protruding SW like extended fingers, presented a formidable obstacle. A fatal combination of sustained German resistance, narrowing assault frontages (the attackers, driving NE instead of due east into a constricted salient, were unable to establish enough available sites for the deployment of batteries tasked with overwhelming the enemy’s artillery and providing support for the assaulting infantry) and recurring bad weather, which reduced the battlefield to the infamous folk-memory nightmare of autumnal mud and floodwater in the days following Broodseinde, foiled further attempts to achieve a breakthrough. Rushed preparations to increase operational tempo and neglect of crucial “logistico-engineering” factors ultimately led to recognition that the strategic phase of the campaign had, in the immediate aftermath of the operationally barren follow-up battles of Poelcappelle (9 October) and First Passchendaele (12 October), run its course. This dolorous operational phase cost 9,741 British, Australian and New Zealanders killed, wounded and missing for no appreciable gain. Meanwhile, Fifth Army, at the cost of a further 5,598 casualties, made some barely

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

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measurable territorial gains toward Westroosebeke whilst closing with the southern fringes of Houthulst Forest.<sup>29</sup>

British GHQ, having abandoned all thoughts of strategic breakthrough aimed at capturing the indispensable enemy railway centres at Roulers and Thourout followed by clearance of hostile naval bases on the Belgian coast, now brought in Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie's Canadian Corps to seize Passchendaele village and its elevated environs before the onset of winter. The painstaking Currie insisted that sufficient guns should be brought forward and "adequate" preparations, by which he meant time to get battlefield communication routes in a proper state, were crucial before further attacks occurred. Granted a required two-week preparation period by Sir Douglas Haig, Currie and his staff made certain that vital communication arteries were "pushed forward into the salient at a considerable cost of 1,500 casualties" before offensive operations were resumed.<sup>30</sup> The series of three methodically planned and "carefully scripted" 500 yard advances that subsequently followed during the period 26 October-6 November (**Map 2**) allowed assaulting Canadian divisions to "gobble up the ridge, piece by methodical piece", until pulverized, corruption-strewn Passchendaele village and Bellevue Spur were overrun.<sup>31</sup> Fifth Army's neighbouring corps (XVIII and XIV), foundering in horrific, swamp-like conditions below Westroosebeke and opposite Houthulst Forest, made little

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<sup>29</sup> See Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 2*, pp. 323-41 and 364-65, Prior & Wilson, *Passchendaele: the Untold Story*, pp. 138, 159-69 and Rob Thompson, 'Mud, Blood and Wood: Logistical-Engineering during the Battle of Third Ypres', in Peter Doyle & Matthew Bennett (eds), *Fields of Battle: Terrain in Military History* (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), pp. 237-55.

<sup>30</sup> Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-1919* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), p. 168.

<sup>31</sup> Dean Oliver, 'The Canadians at Passchendaele', in Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres*, p. 257.

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headway during 26-30 October. GHQ subsequently instructed Second Army to take over XVIII Corps' front on the 31<sup>st</sup>, "so that the forthcoming further operations should be under one command".<sup>32</sup> Fifth Army, once the primed spearhead of the great northern offensive, was left with a single corps under its command. II Corps replaced the tired XVIII Corps two days later on 2 November. In the meantime, almost bloodless minor operations perpetrated by the exchanging corps' right-hand 63<sup>rd</sup> (Royal Naval) Division during the nights of 1/2 and 3/4 November successfully secured a number of seemingly impregnable German strongpoints.<sup>33</sup> These small, company-level enterprises, carried out by stealth, would influence the operational planning of the only large-scale night attack to occur in Flanders during 1917. Prior to this, Haig, his great campaign having lapsed into an uncertain post-strategic phase in which clearance of the northern part of Passchendaele Ridge was paramount, had determined to launch one more offensive (what would become known as the Battle of Cambrai), employing massed tanks accompanied by a revolutionary predicted artillery barrage, before the long and bloody campaigning season came to an end.<sup>34</sup> The semi-distracted British Field Marshal, nonetheless, would continue to contemplate theatre strategic designs centring on Flanders well into the first quarter of 1918.

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<sup>32</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 2*, pp. 351-52 and 354. Second Army was ordered to take over the remainder of Fifth Army's front on 10 November.

<sup>33</sup> Launched following crippling losses sustained whilst carrying out daylight attacks beyond the Canadian left on 26 and 30 October respectively. 63<sup>rd</sup> RND suffered the bulk of its 2,514 casualties killed, wounded and missing during the late October operations. See Leonard Sellers (ed), 'Western Front: Report on Operations During the Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele, 24<sup>th</sup> October to 5<sup>th</sup> November 1917', *R.N.D.: Royal Naval Division. Antwerp, Gallipoli & Western Front 1914-1918*, Issue Number 22 (September 2002), p. 2179.

<sup>34</sup> See Captain Wilfred Miles, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 3* (London: HMSO, 1948), pp. 1-16 for the operational and technological genesis of the Battle of Cambrai.

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Sir Henry Rawlinson was left to conduct waning offensive operations on the Ypres front. The northern extremity of the Passchendaele Ridge as far as Westroosebeke still remained in enemy hands. On 10 November another attack was launched on both sides of the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke Road. On the right, 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division gained 500 yards along the main ridge, although the summit and NE slope of Hill 52 (the highest tactical feature on the northern part of the ridge) was not secured. On the left, 1<sup>st</sup> British Division (II Corps), attacking with two battalions (1<sup>st</sup> South Wales Borderers [SWB] and 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Munster Fusiliers [RMF]) provided left flank protection.<sup>35</sup> Their objectives were a tongue-shaped outcrop of the main ridge known as ‘Vat Cottage Ridge’<sup>36</sup> and two corresponding strongpoints situated on the Passchendaele plateau. A right-hand divergence by 1<sup>st</sup> SWB allowed counter-attacking German infantry to exploit a considerable gap between the assaulting battalions; 1<sup>st</sup> RMF was cut off and routed with heavy loss after capturing a number of strongpoints. 1<sup>st</sup> SWB, its left flank dangerously exposed, was thus compelled to fall back to the original jumping-off line situated in the marshy Paddebeek valley.<sup>37</sup> The attack frontage “narrow enough to begin with, and reduced by three-fifths by failure on the left, allowed the enemy to concentrate an unusual weight of artillery against the new line. In all, the counter-batteries of German

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<sup>35</sup> ‘In consequence of the very bad condition of the low-lying country in the vicinity of the Paddebeek stream and Goudberg Copse [,] it was found impossible to attack across this, there being no room for forming up before attack, and arrangements were made by II Corps to take over from the Canadian Corps a portion of their left brigade front [opposite Vat Cottage Ridge], where the ground was better’. See TNA: WO/95/1232: 1<sup>st</sup> Division War Diary and Map 2.

<sup>36</sup> Referred to as such by Major-General E.P. Strickland (GOC 1<sup>st</sup> British Division) in his 4-page after-action report. See TNA: WO/95/1232: ‘Appendix A, 1<sup>st</sup> (Imp) Division No. G’, 15 November 1917, 1<sup>st</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>37</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> RMF losses amounted to 13 officers and 400 ORs; 1<sup>st</sup> SWB 10 officers and 374 ORs; 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division 1,094 killed, wounded and missing. Canadian Corps combined casualties from 26 October to 11 November amounted to 12,924 killed, wounded and missing. See Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 2*, pp. 358-59 and G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force: 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1962), p. 326.

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corps were turned on the Canadian front”.<sup>38</sup> That evening Sir Henry Rawlinson recorded his summation of the day’s events in his diary:

It has been a very disappointing day [.] After a wet blustery night the II and Canadian corps assembled for the attack at 6:5[0] am [.] and went over the top [.] By 7:30 they had gained all their objectives [.] and were [.] I hoped [.] well established [.] but soon after 9am the Bosch began concentrated hurricane artillery fire [.] which we could not hope to cope with [.] as no airmen were available to get into the air [.] and the counter-battery work was ineffective [.] The Bosch has greatly strengthened his batteries opposite Passchendaele [.] and until we can bring their fire under [.] I doubt [we] are making much progress [.] We shall be driven out every time. The Canadians have held on [.] but the Munsters and SWB have been driven back to their original line [.] It is very disappointing [.]<sup>39</sup>

Sir Douglas Haig, in contrast to his new Second Army Commander, was satisfied with the results of the day:

Attack launched at 6:5[0] am today on II and Canadian corps fronts extending from north of Passchendaele village to Tornaut farm [sic] on the west of the ridge. At 9:30 am Second Army reported all objectives taken. Very heavy rain had fallen in the night and the ground was very deep. At 3:30 pm Second Army reports our troops have been driven out of ‘Veal Cottages’ on the [Vat Cottage] spur northwest of Passchendaele and also from Vox and Vocation Farms, which are on the main ridge. ‘Steps are being taken to retake these localities.’ Notwithstanding these points being still in enemy hands, our troops have improved their position on the Passchendaele ridge very greatly.<sup>40</sup>

The ultimate result, despite this reserved optimism, was the creation of the narrow and extremely vulnerable Passchendaele Salient, a deadly, jutting proboscis “extended to a

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<sup>38</sup> Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 326.

<sup>39</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 10 November 1917.

<sup>40</sup> Haig diary entry 10 November 1917 in ‘The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig’s Autograph Great War Diary’, Parts 9-10 1917 (NLS Acc., 3155, Reel No. 5. 96, 97 and 141-53 (Brighton: Harvester Press Microfilm Publications LTD, 1987) and Gary Sheffield & John Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 340.

depth of about three thousand yards to a width of only 1,000 yards. This confined area, the combined responsibility of VIII and II Corps from 18 November, was “overlooked by the enemy from Westroosebeke, and suffered from shellfire and gas of all descriptions continuously both night and day”.<sup>41</sup> The overall position was so dire that Brigadier-General Cecil Faber Aspinall (BGGs VIII Corps)<sup>42</sup> prepared, ostensibly for Second Army HQ, a controversial appreciation that painted a grim picture of prevailing conditions in the salient.<sup>43</sup>

## 1.2 Aspinall’s Appreciation

Brigadier-General Aspinall’s report began with a topographic and logistic overview of the newly created salient (**Map 3**). The British front, an exact semi-circle with a radius of 1,300 yards, extended from the vicinity of Goudberg Copse (NNW of Passchendaele Village) to Tiber (a captured German strongpoint south of the village).<sup>44</sup> The distance from the Menin Gate to the apex was 13,000 yards, and every yard of this approach was

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<sup>41</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Seton Hutchison, *The Thirty-Third Division in France and Flanders 1915-1919* (London: Warlow & Sons, 1921) p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> Brigadier-General Cecil Faber Aspinall-Oglander (‘Oglander’ was added later to comply with terms of a family bequest) CMG DSO (1878-1959). 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant 4<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Battalion East Surrey Regiment 1898; Lieutenant 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers (Militia) 1899; Commissioned Royal Munster Fusiliers 1900; Ashanti Operations 1900; South Africa 1901; Staff College and Mohmand Expedition 1908; General Staff India and War Office 1909-14. GSO1 MEF 1915; GSO 1 63<sup>rd</sup> (Royal Naval) Division 1916-17; Awarded DSO June 1917, Promoted Brigadier-General and BGGs VIII Corps November 1917. Aspinall subsequently authored the official history of the Gallipoli campaign.

<sup>43</sup> TNA: WO/95/821: ‘Appreciation of the Situation on the VIII Corps Front: November 1917’, No Date, VIII Corps War Diary. An *ex post facto* notation on this document by an unknown hand states: ‘General Aspinall-Oglander in Nov[ember] 1934, told us that this appreciation was discussed verbally with Fourth Army [sic] HQ’s’. A puzzling aspect of Aspinall’s appreciation concerns divided command responsibility for the salient: ‘The VIII Corps front comprises the extreme NE extremity of the Passchendaele Salient, and from its left at V.29.a. 6. 5. to its right at Tiber, is an exact semi-circle of 1,300 yards’. These map references would put the left half of the salient under VIII Corps’ aegis. II Corps had been responsible for this area since 2 November. It would appear that Aspinall could not disregard the neighbouring Corps’ portion of the salient, as the two sectors were not mutually exclusive.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* The right of VIII Corps was subsequently extended from Tiber approximately 1,000 yards south to Rhine. See LHCMA: ‘Second Army No. 20/59 (G)’, 19 November 1917, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/15, King’s College, London.

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under the effective range of the German 5.9-inch howitzer<sup>45</sup> from some portion of the enemy line, “and the last 8,000 yards, i.e. from the old German forward system” could be “reached by 5.9’ fire from any point in an arc of more than 180 degrees”:

For the last 3,000 yards, until duckboard tracks can be made in the present impassable valleys, troops must move either along the BELLEVUE spur or along the main Passchendaele Ridge. The first named route is nowhere more than 1,500 yards from the frontline of the [II] Corps on our left; the last named route is throughout within 1,000 yards of our own frontline. The necessity for us to use one of these routes is well known to the enemy, who can cut off all communication by the simple expedient of placing a barrage across them.

The right (33<sup>rd</sup>) division was “served by one passable road as far as Devil’s Crossing, whence pack animals can be taken as far as Seine”.<sup>46</sup> This point was “4,000 yards from the left flank of the Division’s line”. The left (8<sup>th</sup>) division’s route was passable for wheeled transport only as far as the indispensable nodal point at Kansas Cross,<sup>47</sup> and for pack mules as far as Bellevue, “whence there is a 3,000 yard carry to the frontline”.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The 5.9-inch howitzer had a maximum range of 9,296 yards.

<sup>46</sup> Devil’s Crossing was situated on the Ypres – Roulers railway. Seine was a captured German strongpoint NE of Zonnebeke.

<sup>47</sup> The Passchendaele Salient was serviced by two roads: ‘Gravenstafel Road ran northeast along the Gravenstafel Ridge, bypassing Passchendaele to the north, whilst Zonnebeke Road ran from Ypres eastwards via Potijze and the Frezenberg Ridge to Zonnebeke and thence northeast into Passchendaele. Three other roads (Oxford and Cambridge roads, Godley Road and Kansas Cross-Zonnebeke Road) laterally connected the two main roads, allowing material to be transported from the Ypres-Roulers railway (which ran southwards from the main axis of the attack) to the north-eastern sector’. See Thompson, ‘Mud, Blood and Logistico-Engineering during the Battle of Third Ypres’, in Doyle & Bennett (eds), *Fields of Battle*, pp. 243-45.

<sup>48</sup> TNA: WO/95/821: ‘Appreciation of the Situation on the VIII Corps Front: November 1917’, VIII Corps War Diary.



**Plate 1.2 Brigadier-General C.F. Aspinall**  
(Source: NPG 163753)

Accumulated artillery assets remained vulnerable and exposed: “Owing to the paucity of roads and tramlines, the artillery is at present dangerously bunched and casualties are heavy. This must continue until the guns can be separated, which can only be done when more lateral roads are completed”. Light railway construction, to service gun platforms on Windmill Cabaret Ridge and Abraham Heights (west of the Passchendaele Ridge) was, with consequent difficulties, underway to ease a portion of the gunners’ logistical nightmare:

#### LIGHT RAILWAYS

(3) In order to give adequate counter-battery support to the infantry it is essential to bring heavy artillery up to the WINDMILL CABARET Ridge. Guns can only be adequately supplied on this line when the loops between Y4 and Y8 spurs has [sic] been completed.

The situation on the Abraham Heights – Boeteleer Line would remain unsatisfactory for the ubiquitous British 18-pounder [pdr.] field gun<sup>49</sup> until served by a light railway.

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<sup>49</sup> The 18 pdr. field gun had a maximum range of 7,000 yards.

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“Unfortunately, however, the construction of [railway] lines is hampered by hostile fire from our [VIII Corps] right flank, the shape of the salient being such that railways in our area, when still 5,000 yards from our own frontline, are within 2,000 yards of the front of the [II Anzac] Corps<sup>50</sup> on our right”.<sup>51</sup>

There was clearly a great deal of work to be done: “The backward state of communications necessitates a very large amount of labour, and the constant heavy shelling necessitates a further large number of men for maintenance alone”. Manpower, however, was in short supply: “It is estimated that the total number of battalions required for work in VIII Corps area is eight, of this number it is at present impossible to provide more than three battalions from within the Corps”.<sup>52</sup>

A carefully considered appraisal of ‘advantages’ and ‘disadvantages’ of retaining such a poor position followed in parts 6 and 7:

### ADVANTAGES OF OUR POSITION.

6. The main advantages to be derived from our position in the salient are:

(a) MORAL. Passchendaele was one of the main objectives of our summer offensive, and was captured despite the enemy’s most strenuous efforts.

(b) It denies to the enemy close observation of some portion of our back areas.

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<sup>50</sup> On 8 November, II ANZAC Corps relieved the I ANZAC Corps along the Passchendaele Ridge from Tiber southwards, as far as the Reutelbeek stream (SE of Polygon Wood). See Lieutenant-Colonel H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919: A Popular History Based on Official Records* (Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1921), p. 298.

<sup>51</sup> TNA: WO/95/821: ‘Appreciation of the Situation on the VIII Corps Front: November 1917’, VIII Corps War Diary.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

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(c) It would greatly assist a spring offensive either from Poelcappelle towards Westroosebeke, or eastwards towards Moorslede and Menin.

As regards (b), it will be noticed that only negative advantages are claimed on the score of observation. The present British position offers few facilities for observation N or NE, and up to the present no satisfactory OP has been established in the salient.

### DISADVANTAGES OF OUR POSITION.

7. The disadvantages of our position are:

(a) The frontline troops can be shelled from any point on an arc of 240 degrees.

(b) There is no cover for supports or close reserves, and distances are so great that material can only be carried up with great difficulty.

(c) The approaches are such that, with a very small effort, the enemy can make it impossible for us to reinforce the frontline by troops kept outside the salient. Conversely the area comprised within the salient is so small that the enemy could blot out the whole garrison by artillery fire at will, and the larger the garrison the greater would our losses be.

(d) The 'rent' in casualties which we pay for the occupation of the salient is extremely severe.

(e) Troops holding the frontline have so arduous a time that they will have little chance of 'picking up' for a spring offensive.

(f) The line has to be strongly supported by artillery. This necessitates a large proportion of available artillery being kept in the line without rest, and the guns are so far forward that they are subjected to close range fire from their flanks.

A contentious strategic poser followed this careful survey:

### IS THE SALIENT WORTH KEEPING?

8. A consideration of the foregoing paragraphs leads to the question of whether it is worthwhile to maintain a position

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which was fought for and gained as a means to an end, and which, since the end was not achieved, has in itself so few advantages

The answer to this question is largely dependant on whether or not there is to be a British offensive in the spring, and it can therefore be given only by the high command. It would appear, however, that if the British forces in Flanders are to be on the defensive in 1918, the moral and political advantages of remaining at Passchendaele are more than outweighed by the military disadvantage of clinging to so unfavourable a position.<sup>53</sup>

### RECOMMENDATION

9. It is strongly urged, therefore, that unless a British offensive is to take place in this area in the spring, a policy of withdrawal [westward] to the Westhoek – Pilckem Ridge Line should be decided on, and that preparation of a strong defensive system in that neighbourhood be commenced at once.

It is further urged that if the policy of withdrawal from the salient be accepted, the retirement should take place as soon as a defensive position in the rear was prepared. Such a retirement, carried out in our own time, and as a surprise, could almost certainly be completed without loss. If, on the other hand, it was decided to postpone the withdrawal until the enemy should attack, there would be a great risk of our only two roads being destroyed by his fire and a very large number of guns being sacrificed.

A deliberate retirement 8,000 yards westward to the Westhoek – Pilckem Ridge Line would relinquish most of the gains made north of Gheluvelt Plateau during three and one half months of costly fighting. The contemplated withdrawal, based on a logical outcome of pure attrition, made military sense. On the other hand, the “moral and political advantages of remaining at Passchendaele” could not be ignored.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Brigadier-General Aspinall was presentient in regard to the BEF’s adoption of a defensive policy during the first half of 1918. British GHQ would not reveal this change of strategy until the following month.

<sup>54</sup> TNA: WO/95/821: ‘Appreciation of the Situation on the VIII Corps Front: November 1917’, VIII Corps War Diary.

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To give up territory, gained at such immense expenditure of men and material during an offensive that was the British Empire's major effort for the year 1917 would, besides demonstrating a clear admission of the failure of Sir Douglas Haig's preferred strategy, have adverse effects on the army, the civilian population at home and Great Britain's allies. Germans propaganda could also be expected to announce such a withdrawal to the world as another victory over the Entente. Already strained relations between the Lloyd George Government and British GHQ would be further exacerbated if the meagre gains in Flanders were relinquished before year's end. Third Ypres, Gary Sheffield has observed, was "never just an attritional battle", so psychological and political factors took equal precedence for consideration as the campaign drew to a close.<sup>55</sup> Finally, British GHQ still planned to resume the offensive in early 1918. Second Army expected, come spring, to jump off from advantageous positions on the Passchendaele plateau in order to continue operations toward Roulers (a downhill advance of approximately five miles to this former strategic objective), Thourout and the Belgian coast. Operational, tactical and logistical infrastructure difficulties could be improved upon during the winter months, while retention of the possessed heights provided desirable dry ground on which to spend the winter.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gary Sheffield, Chapter 8 of forthcoming Sir Douglas Haig biography (2008 draft).

<sup>56</sup> The projected 1918 offensive was outlined by Lieutenant-General Sir L.E. Kiggell (CGS GHQ) during a conversation with the influential *Times* Military Correspondent Colonel Repington the previous October: 'We [British] should take the rest of the [Passchendaele] ridge and then continue next April, threatening the Hun coast defences on our left and Lille on our right, and extending our hold gradually until we reach the Dutch frontier, which was only 18 miles from Roulers. We should then clear the two ports (Zeebrugge and Ostend), establish railway communication with them, destroy the Hun aerodromes, and menace the right of the whole German line'. See Lieutenant-Colonel C. À Court Repington, *The First World War 1914-1918 Vol. 2* (London: Constable & Co., 1920), p. 102.

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Sir Henry Rawlinson, taking into consideration plans for the continuance of further operations to clear the main ridge before 1917 ended, future plans for 1918, and the dismally obvious points made in Brigadier-General Aspinall's 'Appreciation of the Situation' concluded the Passchendaele Salient would have to be retained. It was, in any case, not BEF policy to make withdrawals of the kind contemplated by the BGGs VIII Corps, so the GOC Second Army lacked ultimate authority to abandon the position. Such a decision would have been the exclusive purview of GHQ. The salient, however, could be rendered less vulnerable if satisfactory observation was gained over valleys to the north and NE. GHQ, Rawlinson noted in his diary, provided further incentive: "Tavish [Brigadier-General J.H. Davidson DMO GHQ] was here today [,] but I missed him. He says that if D[ouglas] H[aig] considers the Third Army attack [at Cambrai] sufficiently successful he will want me to have a further go at the ridge [;] so I am to prepare for it about the end of this month".<sup>57</sup>

On 18 November Sir Henry Rawlinson convened a conference, attended by Lieutenant-Generals Jacob, Hunter-Weston and Currie, the GOC of the out-going Canadian Corps, at II Corps HQ:

I gave them their objectives for the next operation [,] which will go as far as the edge of Westroosebeke [,] The 32 will protect and prolong the flank [,] I left it to them to discuss the details [,] If we can get enough guns forward we shall do all right [,] but the II Corps command are the difficulty [,] Everyone is crying out for labour and there is none to be had [,] All help is required for II Corps [,] which I hope [will] be allowed to keep the 2 [British] Division [,] I will

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<sup>57</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 17 November 1917.

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discuss this with D[ouglas] H[aig] tomorrow when I meet him at 9:45.<sup>58</sup>

The GOC Second Army had dispensed with any designs to capture Westroosebeke and thereby clear the northern portion of the Passchendaele Ridge; an advance as far as the environs of that town was now all that would be contemplated. Formal orders were issued on 21 November.<sup>59</sup> Following this, planning and preparations for the second phase of a step-by-step northern drive along the main ridge toward the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke – Spriet position were set in motion. On 26 November 8<sup>th</sup> Division (VIII Corps) would make a short advance (100 to 300 yards) on a front of 1,020 yards from the apex of the salient. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division (II Corps) was chosen to safeguard and extend the flank by advancing 400 yards (on the right and left) to 700 yards (in the centre) on a front of 1,850 yards from the northern shoulder of the salient (**Map 4**). The limited nature of the proposed advance bears comparison with the four 500 yard bounds (two made on narrow frontages) accomplished by Canadian Corps from 26 October to 10 November. These previous efforts, despite horrendous conditions and heavy losses, demonstrated what could be achieved following reasonable time allotment and methodical preparation.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 18 November 1917. GHQ did not allow II Corps to retain 2<sup>nd</sup> (Regular) Division (GOC Major-General C.E. Pereira), the latter formation being sent south to join Third Army reserve for the imminent offensive at Cambrai. Major Earl Stanhope (GSO 2 II Corps) subsequently remarked: ‘It had been intended, should the weather permit, that a further big advance should be made and that we should endeavour before the winter to seize Westroosebeke and Stadenberg, our line then being designed to run westward through or north of the Forest of Houthulst. Such a line would have given us the whole of the high ground east and north of Ypres overlooking most of the Flanders plain. Owing, however, to the Caporetto disaster in Italy whither the British Army had to send seven [sic] divisions, and to our tank attack at Cambrai on November 20<sup>th</sup> our beloved 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, which had been returned to us to take part in this attack, was withdrawn again, and all further attacks in the Ypres Salient were abandoned [sic]’. See Brian Bond (ed) *The War Memoirs of Earl Stanhope: General Staff Officer in France 1914-1918* (Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions, 2006), p. 149 and TNA: WO/95/643: ‘II Corps G.S. 6/5’, 9 November 1917, II Corps War Diary.

<sup>59</sup> See Appendix 3a.

<sup>60</sup> A preliminary operation (scheduled for the night of 21/22 November) to establish strong posts on Hill 52 and at Vox Farm ‘before the bigger attack is made’ was subsequently cancelled. See CAC: RWLN 1/9:

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Major-General Shute (GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division) had previously received a warning order for pending operations from II Corps HQ on 16 November:

Early in November, the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, at that time resting around Lederzeele, were informed that they would move into the line at an early date in the neighbourhood of BELLEVUE and would attack northward with a view to improving our position at PASSCHENDAELE.<sup>61</sup>

The forwarded document clearly outlined Sir Henry Rawlinson's intention to flesh-out Second Army's position within the Passchendaele Salient:

So far as can be foreseen, it will be necessary for your division to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> [British] Division on the front between approximately Vocation Farm on the right and the Paddebeek on the left.

Further operations will then probably have to be undertaken to drive the enemy from the PASSCHENDAELE – HILL 50 – SPRIET position and so widen out the front and gain observation east of the WESTROOSEBEKE – STADEN Ridge.

Though no definite orders have been received on the subject it is possible either –

- a) That the VIII Corps may operate on the right of the II Corps and be responsible for forming a flank down the slopes of the hill towards WRANGLE FARM and RACKET WOOD.
- b) That the II Corps (32<sup>nd</sup> Division) may have to takeover the front as far as the PASSCHENDAELE – WESTROOSEBEKE Road and may itself be responsible for forming a right flank to the advance towards VALUATION HOUSES – HILL 50.

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Rawlinson Diary, 20 November 1917, LHCMA: 'Notes of Army Commander's Conference at Chateau Lovie', 20 November 1917, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/15, King's College, London and appendices 3 a b & c, 4 a & b, 5 a & b and Map 4.

<sup>61</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part II, Plan of Operations, Section 1, General', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 2.

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II Corps concluded by asking Shute to relate “briefly how in either of the above eventualities you would propose employing your division to gain the approximate line VALUATION HOUSES – HILL 50 – MULLET FARM – WESTWOOD HOUSE – and thence a line along the western edge of the WESTROOSEBEKE Ridge in the vicinity of TOURNANT FARM”.<sup>62</sup> On the afternoon of 18 November, Major-General Heneker (GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division) met Brigadier-General Aspinall (BGGs VIII Corps), who related that there was to be “another and rather more considerable local operation, in which troops of the VIII and II corps were to be engaged”.<sup>63</sup> This attack, according to Heneker’s diary, would occur on 26 November. The objective was to “drive [the] Boche off the edge of the plateau we are on”.<sup>64</sup> Subsequent conference minutes relate that offensive operations would be resumed by Second Army “about the end of the month” on the fronts of II Corps and VIII Corps: “The objective of the VIII Corps will be the capture of VENISON TRENCH, thus obtaining observation to the east, while at the same time the II Corps will capture the line VOLT FARM – V.23 central (vicinity of Mallet Wood)<sup>65</sup>, improving our position on the ridge, and making our hold on PASSCHENDAELE doubly secure”.<sup>66</sup> The proposed operation would, if successful, open out the west side of the salient and at the same time carry the British line “sufficiently far northward along the ridge to give us observation into the valleys running up to the Passchendaele plateau from the north and

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<sup>62</sup> TNA: WO/95/643: ‘II Corps G.S. 6, 16 November 1917’, II Corps War Diary. See Map 3 for general area of Passchendaele – Hill 50 (south of Westroosebeke) – Spriet (west of Westroosebeke) position.

<sup>63</sup> Lieutenant Colonel J.H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, *The Eighth Division: 1914-1918* (London: Naval & Military Press reprint of 1926 edition), p. 163.

<sup>64</sup> IWM: 66/541/1: Heneker Diary, 18 November 1917.

<sup>65</sup> ‘From VOLT FARM a very good view on the ground to the east and SE of WESTROOSEBEKE’ would ‘be obtained and the ‘capture of this locality’ was deemed to be of ‘considerable importance’. Hostile ‘sniping fire’ from the direction of Mallet Wood (situated in low-lying ground just north of Vat Cottage Ridge) inflicted heavy losses on 2<sup>nd</sup> RMF during the 10 November assault. It was, therefore, ‘desirable’ that the shattered woodland strongpoint ‘be cleared if possible’. TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence: Maps of the Area V.15 – V.30’ November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>66</sup> LHCMA: ‘Notes of Army Commander’s Conference at Chateau Lovie’, 20 November 1917, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/15, King’s College, London.

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east". Occupation of these new vistas would also make it difficult for the enemy to mass troops along reverse slopes of the ridge, thus reducing potential threats to the salient's vulnerable garrison throughout the winter months.<sup>67</sup>

Sir Douglas Haig, keeping one strategic eye on Flanders as the opening of the Cambrai offensive fast approached, made an important tactical suggestion during a meeting with Sir Henry Rawlinson on 19 November:

At 9:45 a.m. I saw Sir H. Rawlinson commanding Second Army. He told me of his views to extend the front northwards of Passchendaele. He does not wish to take Westroosebeke. I suggested attack by small units at night, because up to the present nothing of this nature has been attempted by us at the Ypres battlefield. I directed Rawlinson to work out his plan, but not to give effect to them until the result of tomorrow's attack is known, and I can decide on our future plans.<sup>68</sup>

Rawlinson noted: "D[ouglas] H[ai]g is not in any hurry [for a continuance of operations], but if we wait [,] I shall have no fresh troops".<sup>69</sup> His concern was no doubt engendered by the dispatch of British divisions to Italy and requirements for Third Army's forthcoming

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<sup>67</sup> Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 163. Conversely, Sir Douglas Haig, writing in his diary in the immediate aftermath of the proposed operation, observed: 'The object [of the attack] was to obtain certain points which gave the Enemy observation westwards on to our communications'. See Haig diary entry 2 December 1917 in 'The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig's Autograph Great War Diary', Reel No. 5, Parts 9-10 1917 and Sheffield & Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig*, p. 355.

<sup>68</sup> Haig diary entry 19 November 1917 in 'The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig's Autograph Great War Diary', Reel 5, Parts 9-10 1917 and Sheffield & Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*, p. 345. Haig's evident desire to resume operations at this time was in keeping with the post-strategic policy 'to progress as far as Passchendaele' related in his official despatch of 25 December 1917. Nevertheless, a scheme (see fn. 58) to capture the remainder of Passchendaele Ridge was contemplated prior to the 19 November meeting with Sir Henry Rawlinson. See Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches: December 1915- April 1919* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1919), pp. 130 and 132.

<sup>69</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 19 November 1917.

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offensive. These factors, combined with a politically contentious manpower shortage,<sup>70</sup> would limit the number of troops available for any subsequent operations intended to improve the situation on the Passchendaele Ridge before year's end.

### 1.3 German Defensive Measures

Two German Army Corps (*Gruppe Staden* and *Gruppe Ypern*) were situated opposite the Passchendaele Salient and its environs.<sup>71</sup> *Gruppe Staden* was organised and placed between *Gruppen Diksmuide* and *Ypern* following the First Battle of Passchendaele, when it was recognised that the British offensive was being directed northwards in an attempt to clear the remainder of the ridge as far as Westroosebeke.<sup>72</sup> The boundary between *gruppen Staden* and *Ypern* ran NE along the road from Vindictive Crossroads to Oostnieuwkerke.<sup>73</sup> By mid-November, the right division of *Gruppe Staden* and left division of *Gruppe Ypern* were responsible for the Passchendaele plateau from Passchendaele village to Vat Cottage Ridge. Defensive arrangements for both divisions

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<sup>70</sup> See Keith Grieves, 'The 'Recruiting Margin' in Britain: Debates on Manpower during the Third Battle of Ypres', in Peter Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997) pp. 390-405.

<sup>71</sup> A *Gruppe* [Group] was a fixed corps command assigned, as circumstances directed, a greater or lesser number of infantry divisions. 'The previous year, during the battle of the Somme, it had become clear to the German Army that the Corps level of command was critical to the conduct of the contact battle and that the pressures of modern major battles required a flexible approach. Each of the corps was renamed a 'Group' and was so organised as to be able to take under command varying numbers of divisions as they rotated through the battle area. From time to time they themselves would be relieved, but they were expected to carry out longer tours of duty, to build up expertise over a particular area and thus provide essential continuity'. The *Fourth Army* was divided into three *Gruppe* sectors (*Diksmuide*, *Ypern*, *Wijtschate*) during July 1917. See Hermann Cron, *Imperial German Army 1914-18: Organisation, Structure, Orders-of-Battle* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2002), pp. 87-88 and Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007), p. 40.

<sup>72</sup> Bean, *The Australian Force in France 1917 Vol. IV*, p. 928.

<sup>73</sup> See TNA: WO/95/643: 'Map A. Showing Enemy Dispositions, Line of Resistance and assembly Positions of Reserve Battalions to Accompany II Corps O.O. 167', 22 November 1917, II Corps War Diary.

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were, nevertheless, somewhat contradistinctive.<sup>74</sup> *Gruppe Ypern's* right division (responsible for *Abschnitt A* or sub-sector A) occupied two breastworks (known to the British as Southern Redoubt and Northern Redoubt) situated NE of Passchendaele. Venison Trench, a shallow, muddy furrow of 550 yards extending in an undeviating line between two roads merging approximately 600 yards NE,<sup>75</sup> conjoined the redoubts (originally laid out and excavated as part of a rear defence system during late 1916 and early 1917) in a conventional trench configuration.<sup>76</sup> It was highly unusual for the Germans to construct, improve or occupy any sort of linear system at this stage of the campaign. The deviation was based on local operational and tactical necessities.

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<sup>74</sup> The German defences are described as they were following the Anglo-Canadian assault of 10 November. Captured German maps indicated the Passchendaele Salient was divided into a left 'Passchendaele Sector' and right 'Westroosebeke Sector'. The line of *Gruppe Staden's* right division extended from the Lekkerboterbeek stream inclusive to Vindictive Crossroads, while the line of *Gruppe Ypern's* left division continued from the vicinity of Vindictive Crossroads to south of Passchendaele Village. Divisional rotation in the *Gruppe Staden's* right sub-sector during the period 11-30 November was as follows: *199<sup>th</sup> Reserve* (to night of 16/17 November), *4<sup>th</sup> Division* (night of 16/17 November to night of 21/22 November), *199<sup>th</sup> Reserve* (night of 21/22 to night of 30 November/1 December). Divisions rotating in and out of *Gruppe Ypern's* left sub-sector during the same period were: *44<sup>th</sup> Reserve* (to 14 November), *25<sup>th</sup>* (14 November to 20 November), *44<sup>th</sup>* (20 to 26 November), *25<sup>th</sup>* (26 November). See TNA: WO/157/120 and 121: Intelligence Summaries, November 1917, Second Army Intelligence File.

<sup>75</sup> Forked junction of the Gravenstafel – Oostnieuwkerke Road (*Grote Roeselarestraat*) with *Doornkoutersraat* NE of Passchendaele.

<sup>76</sup> Discrepancies occur when attempting to delineate sector responsibilities of German divisions assigned to defend the left of *Gruppe Staden* and right of *Gruppe Ypern*. Contemporary British intelligence maps show Northern Redoubt in occupation by the right Division of *Gruppe Ypern*, while a sketch map found in a relevant German regimental history places the redoubt under the aegis of *Gruppe Staden's* left Division. See various 'Situation' maps in TNA: WO/95/643: II Corps War Diary, WO/157/287 and 288, II Corps Intelligence Files and Alexander von Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) Nr. 94 im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Verlag von Klasing & Co., 1921), *Skizze 32* reproduced in Appendix 16 Part D.



**Plate 1.3 Venison Trench**

(Source: Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin (3. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117*)

Defensive arrangements known as *die Leer des Gefechtsfeldes* (invisible garrison) were introduced by *Fourth Army* as one of a number of *OHL* inspired amendments on 23 October.<sup>77</sup> This was part of the update to established defence doctrine adopted in the aftermath of British “bite and hold” attacks from 20 September to 4 October. *Eingreifdivisionen* no longer encountered an overextended enemy pressing forward beyond the range of supporting artillery. Deadly protective barrages and a solidly established defence of recently gained objectives foiled German attempts to develop large-scale counter-strokes.<sup>78</sup>

These new defensive measures called for a counter-attack or *Eingreifdivision* to be “brought up wholly or in part so close” behind each line-holding or *Stellungsdivision*

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<sup>77</sup> Captain G.C. Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 310.

<sup>78</sup> Robert T. Foley, ‘The Other Side of the Wire: The German Army in 1917’, in Peter Dennis & Jeffrey Grey (eds), *1917: Tactics, Training and Technology* (Commonwealth of Australia, Australian History Military Publications, 2007), pp. 174-75.

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that the former would be within the zone of the enemy's long range fire and could, if necessary, intervene at once in the battle. German military authorities estimated that under "normal conditions, and with divisions at full strength, two divisions assembled in depth in this manner should be able to hold a frontage of 5,000 yards". Severe weather conditions, intense bombardments and "the failing quality and quantity" of manpower had halved the originally proposed frontage to 2,500 yards by the close of the campaign.<sup>79</sup>

The application of the two-division defence organisation led to the creation "of a new battle unit, a German legion of two divisions under the front divisional [*Stellungsdivision*] commander". This allowed for command and control cohesion to continue once a *Stellungsdivision* became heavily engaged. Subsequent *Gegenstoss* (formal, deliberate counter-stroke supported by artillery) were to be carried out, if necessary, by an *Eingreifdivision* echeloned immediately behind each *Stellungsdivision*. An *Eingreifdivision* would be placed, on arrival in the forward area, under operational control of the *Stellungsdivision* commander whose proximity to events allowed for on-the-spot decision-making.<sup>80</sup> Available artillery batteries remained, as per doctrine adopted in late 1916, under his authority: "The commander of a *Stellungsdivision* was assisted by a newly created divisional artillery commander. Prior to the new doctrine, artillery was

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p.310-12. Wynne observed that the 'invisible garrison' was 'only rendered practicable in such conditions by inter-battalion reliefs within the front division every two days, and by inter-divisional reliefs every six days; so that each battalion of the two divisions was in the front line for only two days in twelve'.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p.313.

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primarily a corps-level asset. With the shift to the division as the primary tactical unit, came a redistribution of artillery assets”.<sup>81</sup>

On 9 October a memorandum inspired by *Generalquartiermeister* Erich Ludendorff, detailing the desired method of deploying *Eingreifdivisionen* on the Western Front, was distributed by *OHL*. *Stellungsdivisionen* were, in principal, to use organic reserves to drive the enemy from areas of responsibility.<sup>82</sup> The Germans were now faced with the problem of concealing two divisions, deployed 8,000 yards in depth, on the barren, shell-swept Passchendaele Ridge. Their immediate solution was to adopt the aforementioned *die Leer des Gefechtsfeldes* arrangements. Shell holes would provide the necessary cover:

There was no entrenched position or anything resembling a connected trench system, which the enemy's artillery could have destroyed in a few hours; our lines were such that they were unrecognizable to the enemy's ground or air observers. There was no lack of accommodation, wet and filthy though it was; for every crater made by the heavy shells was a potential shelter for a machine-gun nest or a few men, with a tent or a strip of corrugated iron as their only head-cover and a few planks as their only chairs or beds.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Foley, 'The Other Side of the Wire', in Dennis & Grey (eds), 1917, pp. 167-68.

<sup>82</sup> 'If this was not possible, counter-strokes by *Eingreif* troops are only possible if the operations are launched by powerful forces (both infantry and artillery), are concentrated and swift (within a few hours) and well supported by artillery. To facilitate this it is important that the troops are placed in good accommodation outside the range of the enemy artillery. They should be concentrated by regiments and have good communications with the artillery'. See 'Chefs de Generalstabs des Feldheers 1 a Nr. 67059 op. Gr. H. Qu., den 9. Oktober 1917' quoted in Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele*, p. 227.

<sup>83</sup> Wynne, *If Germany Attacks*, p. 312. This quote was originally taken from the regimental history of *Reserve Infanterie Regiment Nr. 10. (11<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division)*, which was deployed near Passchendaele from November 1917 to January 1918. See Intelligence Section of the General Staff, American Expeditionary Force, *Histories of two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions*, p. 203.

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*Eingreifdivisionen* were expected to shelter in the cellars of villages and farms in areas immediately behind designated *Stellungsdivisionen*.

The *Westheer* began to organise its defences into two (*Vorfeldzone* and *Grosskampfzone*) defensive zones at the close of 1916.<sup>84</sup> This general arrangement remained in place throughout the *Flandernschlacht*. The recent attempt to counter British tactics by packing the frontline with additional troops had, nevertheless, proved disastrous on 4 October. Forward companies of battalions holding the frontline were now arranged in groups of shell holes.<sup>85</sup> These formed a *Vorfeldzonelinie* (outpost zone or what Ludendorff described as a “narrow strip of territory”) of double sentry posts some 400 yards or less from the British line. At the immediate rear of this zone was the *Sicherungslinie* (safety line) where the *Vorfeldzonelinie* garrison would, if pressed by the enemy, retire first. This safety or security line was, as an additional defensive measure, only occupied during the night. Approximately 400 yards behind was the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* (main line of resistance), a series of mutually supporting fortified farms, pillboxes and shell hole positions.<sup>86</sup> Troops driven into the *Sicherungslinie* were, if unable to contain a hostile assault, required to withdraw and reinforce *Hauptwiderstandslinie* defenders against a rapidly developing large-scale attack. General

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<sup>84</sup> ‘The concepts of flexible defence and the centrality of the Division were incorporated into a new manual, ‘Grundsätze für die Führung in der Abwehrschlacht im Stellungskrieg’ (‘Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare’), issued on 1 December 1916, and into ‘Allgemeines über Stellungsbau’ (Principles of the Construction of Positions’) issued on 15 December 1916. These two manuals, together the new doctrine for defensive warfare, enshrined the ideas of elastic area defence’. See Foley, ‘The Other Side of the Wire’, in Dennis & Grey (eds), 1917, pp. 164-65.

<sup>85</sup> The average strength of a German battalion on the Western Front in November 1917 was approximately 640 men. This seemingly small complement was backed up by an increase in machine-gun firepower. *Ibid.*, p. 283

<sup>86</sup> Ludendorff *op. cit.*, quoted in Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele*, p. 226 The companies defending this line were ‘given areas or zones, instead of lines to hold, and they lay out in shell holes or shelters within it ready to occupy the *main line of resistance*, which was some defined bank or track across the regiment’s sector’. See Wynne, *If Germany Attacks*, p. 310.

von Kuhl (*Chef des Generalstabes Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht*) wrote of this elastic arrangement:

The foremost shell crater area to a depth of 500 to 1,000 yards was to be considered merely a *Vorfeld* and only to be occupied by a thin line of sentries with a few machine-guns. In face of a big offensive these few troops were to retire to the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* at the back of the advanced zone, while the artillery were at once to lay down and maintain a dense barrage of shell in front of it.<sup>87</sup>

*Vorfeldzonelinie* garrisons were expected to withdraw only if pressed by a major attack. Kuhl observed that an inherent tactical conundrum beset the defenders of Ludendorff's "narrow strip of territory" from the start: Was it possible to differentiate a hostile patrol or local attack from a large-scale attack? "Was it always possible to tell one from the other? And was it not possible that a thin line of men, who could count on no support, would feel that they had been abandoned and so tend to withdraw even earlier?" This part of the scheme had an "artificial air" that the men never fully comprehended.<sup>88</sup>

The *Grosskampfzone* extended 1,700 yards from the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* to *Artillerieschutzstellung* (artillery protective line).<sup>89</sup> Support and reserve battalions of a

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 309.

<sup>88</sup> General Hermann von Kuhl, *Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918 Vol.2* (Berlin: Verlag Wilhelm Kolk, 1929), pp. 128-29.

<sup>89</sup> There has, according to Robert Foley, 'been a tendency in the historiography to introduce linearity to the new defensive system that was not the doctrine's intention. Although the doctrine discusses two separate combat zones, these were not necessarily designed to be completely separate areas. The new doctrine emphasised that the size and location of the *Vorfeldzone* and *Grosskampfzone* were dependent on the particular terrain of a sector and could actually overlap. In other words, the two zones did not have to be two completely separate areas. In many respects, the difference between the two zones was in function. The *Vorfeldzone*, which would be more exposed to enemy observation and hence knowledge, was designed to be strong enough for 'ordinary trench warfare'. It also prevented the enemy from seeing and knowing the features behind this forward zone. The new doctrine recognised that to hold this zone in the face of a determined large-scale offensive would be prohibitively costly in manpower terms. In the face of such an attack, the *Grosskampfzone* was to be the area in which the battle was fought. This area would be unfamiliar terrain to an enemy, who prior to a large-scale attack would not have been able to penetrate the *Vorfeldzone*'. Indefinite aspects of this new defence scheme were subsequently recognised in a British

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*Stellungsdivision* were positioned here for *Gegenangriff* (automatic counter-attacks) toward the embattled main line of resistance the moment the enemy broke through. There was a clear distinction between local *Gegenangriff* and formal, deliberate *Gegenstoss*; the variance was in timing. *Gegenangriff* by support and reserve battalions would only be launched if the defensive barrage failed to stop advancing British infantry in the *Vorfeldzone*. A *Stellungsdivision* commander set the designated *Eingreifdivision* in motion to *Gegenstoss* if the earlier *Gegenangriff* failed to achieve its objective.<sup>90</sup>



**Plate 1.4 Northern Redoubt in the summer of 1917**  
(Source: MMP)

Venison Trench and its redoubts, although provided with the prescribed *Vorfeldzonelinie*, evolved into a doctrinally anomalous linear *Hauptwiderstandslinie* position following Canadian gains on 10 November. Situated where a firm hold could be maintained on the sloping eastern contours of the Passchendaele Ridge, its reverse slope

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intelligence report, which concluded that boundaries of the main line of resistance (*Hauptwiderstandslinie*) were 'constantly changing'. See Foley, 'The Other Side of the Wire', Dennis & Grey (eds), 1917, pp. 166-67 and TNA: WO/95/2370: 'Map C' and 'Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15 – V.30' November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>90</sup> Wynne, *If Germany Attacks*, pp. 308-16 and Foley, 'The Other Side of the Wire', Dennis & Grey (eds), 1917, p 163.

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defences prevented direct observation of valleys to the north and east. Thus the British were denied a corresponding panoramic view, seized after so much blood and effort from 4 October to 6 November, available southward along the ridge from Passchendaele village to Broodseinde.

The sub-sector (*Abschnitt B*) of *Gruppe Staden*'s left division continued along dry ground west of Northern Redoubt. On the east side of the straight Passchendaele – Westroosebeke road lay a concrete pillbox identified on British maps as 'Teall Cottage'.<sup>91</sup> This tiny shell-scarred edifice was ideally placed to cover the northern approaches of the Venison Trench defences. Beyond the road lay outworks blocking the ridge route to Westroosebeke. Defences in this sector differed from those of Venison Trench: in keeping with the idea of *die Leere des Gefechtsfeldes*, there was no definite line, but "a series of fortified localities and improved shell holes".<sup>92</sup>

Hill 52, a local promontory 200 yards west of Teall Cottage, was the key position in *Abschnitt B*. The Germans knew this elevation, and the flat-topped high ground around it, as *Höhenrücken* (high ridge) *Passendale*.<sup>93</sup> It provided good observation of the British forward area "from almost any part of the [Passchendaele] ridge north of Vindictive Cross Roads..."<sup>94</sup> British maps designated this rise (an objective of 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division on 10 November) as the highest point on the northern extremity of the Passchendaele

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<sup>91</sup> Teall Cottage was likely named after Captain G.H. Teall, who subsequently became acting AA & QMG of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division on 27 November 1917. The site is now occupied by a brick utility tower and nearby pig farm.

<sup>92</sup> See After-action report, TNA: WO/95/2370: 'Part II, Plan of Operations, Section I, General', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 8.

<sup>93</sup> See Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) Nr. 94 im Weltkrieg*, p. 238.

<sup>94</sup> TNA: WO/157/287: 'II Corps Summary of Information, 13 November 1917', II Corps Intelligence File.

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Ridge. Some, according to David Schurman, viewed the use of the word ‘ridge’ to describe the Passchendaele high ground as a misnomer – an illusion gradually dispelled during the Canadian advance:

Strictly speaking, the expression is geographically accurate, but to Canadian eyes the slope was so imperceptible that the advancing troops almost doubted its existence, until they were on top and looked back over the slowly undulating sea of mud toward Ypres.<sup>95</sup>

This deceptive upland contributed to post-operational uncertainties about the actual situation at Hill 52. Daniel Dancocks asserts, based on statements found in the battalion after-action report that 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion secured the tactically important elevation on the evening of 10 November.<sup>96</sup> Postwar published official accounts also generally avouch, regardless of contrary contemporary evidence, that 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division captured Hill 52 along with its other assigned objectives. Nevertheless, a Second Army intelligence summary, written immediately following the conclusion of the Second Battle of Passchendaele, stated: “The left flank of the Canadians is thrown back in the *vicinity of Hill 52* (my emphasis) and rests on Venture Farm”.<sup>97</sup> A II Corps intelligence summary outlined what was known by 13 November:

It is almost certain that the enemy’s main defensive line prior to the 10<sup>th</sup> inst. was on the reverse, or northeastern slope of Hill 52, and so far beyond immediate local counter-attacks, he has made no great effort to prevent us from reaching the southwestern slopes, or possibly the top of this hill.

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<sup>95</sup> David Schurman, ‘Passchendaele: The Final Phase’, *History of the First World War Vol.6, no. 5* (London: BPC Publishing, 1971), p. 2361.

<sup>96</sup> Daniel G. Dancocks, *Gallant Canadians: The Story of the Tenth Canadian Infantry Battalion 1914-1919* (Calgary: Calgary Highlanders Regimental Funds Foundation, 1990), p. 151.

<sup>97</sup> TNA: WO/157/120: ‘Second Army Daily Intelligence Summary, 10 November 1917’, Second Army Intelligence Files.

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To obtain command over the area which lies in the triangle Westroosebeke – Vindictive Crossroads – Oostnieuwkerke, and to discover the enemy's battery positions [,] it would be necessary for us to advance to the false crest on the northeastern slope of Hill 52. It is apparently on, or near this false crest that the enemy's line runs [,] and he appears to be organising artillery so that he can deny it to us by artillery fire.<sup>98</sup>

Thus this vital hillock remained, notwithstanding earlier Canadian gains on its SW slope, an important topographical asset to the German defenders.<sup>99</sup> The remaining defences in this sector (the scene of 1<sup>st</sup> Division's debacle) extended in a loose collection of fortified farms across the protruding tongue of the Vat Cottage Ridge. Strongpoints at Volt, Void, Vocation, Virile and Vox farms and Veal and Vat cottages dotted the area.<sup>100</sup> There were

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<sup>98</sup> See TNA: WO/157/287: 'II Corps Summary of Information, 13 November 1917', II Corps Intelligence File. 'A large proportion of raw intelligence was collected at 'corps-level and below'. Intelligence officers 'tapped' various (interrogation of PsOW and deserters, examination of captured documents, ground observation, aerial photographs, telephone and wireless intercepts) sources to create a picture of German 'capabilities and intentions'. See Michael Ocellshaw, *Armour Against Fate: British Military Intelligence in the First World War* (London: Columbus Books, 1989), pp. 86-102, David French, 'Failures of Intelligence: The Retreat to the Hindenburg Line and the March 1918 Offensive' in Michael Dockrill & David French (eds), *Strategy and Intelligence: British Policy and the First World War* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996), pp. 71-72 and James Beach, 'British Intelligence and the German Army, 1914-1918' (Unpublished PhD Thesis. London: University College, 2004), pp. 15-87.

<sup>99</sup> The British Official History provides a general summary of objectives assigned to Canadian Corps and II Corps on 10 November; Hill 52 is not specifically mentioned. The Canadian Official History states that 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division advanced the line to the final objective. Dancocks wrote by 'dawn next morning [11 November], Hill 52 was in Canadian hands'. To substantiate this he quotes a report claiming 'that we [Canadians] commanded the whole slope to our right front'. The slope referred to was most likely the southwestern one, thus placing the Canadian line below the summit of the hill. Exhaustive efforts at Kew to ascertain if Hill 52 was seized in its entirety on 10 November, or lost in the days leading up to the night operation in early December, led to the discovery of contemporary intelligence reports which contradict the former and make no mention of the latter. It would appear that Hill 52 was never fully secured by 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Furthermore, its subsequent loss after 10 November is not recorded in war diaries or intelligence summaries of Second Army, Canadian Corps, VIII Corps, II Corps or various attached divisions. It is unlikely, given the perceived tactical importance of the promontory that these formations would have failed to note such an event. See Edmonds, *Military Operations: France Belgium 1917 Vol.2*, pp. 358-59, Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 326 and Daniel G. Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: The Canadians at Passchendaele* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1986), pp. 173-74. The summit of Hill 52 can be found in a field just south of a factory parking lot. Its immediate environs are also the site of a number of large greenhouses and a lovely white *huis* with beautifully manicured lawn.

<sup>100</sup> An aerial photograph of Volt Farm, taken by the RFC 'at a very low altitude' on 15 November, 'shows the actual structure of the building to have completely disappeared...' Farms in the vicinity would have been reduced to rubble by previous bombardments; only German ferro-concrete structures, constructed in and around the farm buildings, remained. Void Farm was known to the Germans as *Nordhof*. Ernst Junger described the site in late October 1917 as 'essentially a former farmhouse, in whose ruins the commander

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also a number of pillboxes and fortified positions exclusive of these strongpoint locales.<sup>101</sup>

Approximately 400 yards NE of the German forward posts on Vat Cottage Ridge lay a scarcely discernable spinney known as Mallet Copse. This shattered clump of fallen trees and overlapping shell holes, situated at the junction of the former outcrop with the western slope of the main Passchendaele Ridge, contained a cluster of battered trenches, dugouts and shelters to house support troops. Situated just 300 yards to the north was a soggy, confused wilderness of bare and broken timberland known as Mallet Wood.<sup>102</sup>

The established *Vorfeldzone* was approximately 150 yards deep opposite Southern Redoubt and 400 yards opposite Venison Trench and Northern Redoubt. Its maximum depth from the vicinity of Hill 52 to Vat Cottages was 200 yards. Behind, incorporated into the *Hauptwiderstandslinie*, were Venison Trench and its redoubts and, accurately delineated as part of the enemy outpost zone or main line of resistance with increased difficulty by intelligence officers at II Corps HQ,<sup>103</sup> were Hill 52, Void and Volt farms (situated on the 50-metre Y-shaped height overlooking the SW gradient of Vat Cottage Ridge), Mallet Copse, Vat Cottages and Veal Cottages.

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of the battalion in reserve was staying ... The terrain around the *Nordhof* was covered with a lot of bodies in frightful condition'. See TNA: WO/157/287: 'II Corps Summary of Information', 17 November, 1917, II Corps Intelligence File and Ernst Junger, *Storm of Steel* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 195 and 198.

<sup>101</sup> A prisoner captured on 10 November informed British interrogators that Vat Cottages 'had several direct [artillery] hits and is uninhabitable'. See TNA: WO/157/287: 'II Corps Intelligence Summary', 12 November 1917, II Corps Intelligence File.

<sup>102</sup> Both copse and wood no longer exist.

<sup>103</sup> See fn. 89.

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Three regiments of nine battalions of *Gruppe Staden's* right *Stellungsdivision*, along with one regiment of three battalions of *Gruppe Ypern's* left *Stellungsdivision*, were responsible for a line (extending from Southern Redoubt exclusive to north of Tournant Farm) 2,850 yards in length by 1 December. The remaining two regiments of the latter clung to Southern Redoubt and low-lying positions east of Passchendaele village. Designated front, support and reserve battalions were echeloned to a depth of approximately 2,500 yards from the *Vorfeldzone* to the *Artillerieschutzstellung*.<sup>104</sup> Forward battalions defended *Vorfeldzonelinie* and *Hauptwiderstandslinie* positions<sup>105</sup> while support battalions were deployed behind the *Grosskampfzone*. Reserve battalions garrisoned the vicinity of the *Artillerieschutzstellung*.<sup>106</sup> Beyond this lay *Eingreifdivisionen* in immediate reserve.

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<sup>104</sup> The German defences were sited north, NE, east and SE of where the *Flanders I* and *Flanders II* lines intersected (Map 2). Second Army penetrated the junction of both positions during October-November, thus forcing the defenders to echelon into a re-entrant from Goudberg Copse to Tiber. See Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 2*, pp. 141-146 for development of the multi-zoned (Frontline, *Albrecht, Wilhelm, Flanders I, Flanders II, Flanders III*) defence-in-depth positions during the first-half of 1917.

<sup>105</sup> The depth of the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* was approximately 600 yards. See TNA: WO/95/643: 'Map A. Showing Enemy Dispositions, Line of Resistance, and Assembly Positions of Reserve Battalions to Accompany II Corps O.O. 167', 22 November 1917, II Corps War Diary. II Corps intelligence observed that 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's proposed assault involved the 'capture of practically all the area occupied by the front battalions of the centre and left [German] regiments. It also effects [sic] the right regiment inasmuch as it threatens the isolation of its forward battalion'. Prisoners related that 'support battalions are 500 yards to 600 metres in the rear, but they are probably distributed over considerable areas as the localities they occupy have been continuously and heavily shelled'. Detailed dispositions of companies were 'almost impossible to determine', but it appeared 'tolerably certain that all four companies of each battalion are forward and maintain groups pushed forward between main line of resistance and our frontline'. See TNA: WO/95/2370: Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15 to V.30' November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* The British were well aware of changes to *Fourth Army's* defence scheme after 7 October, as their intelligence files and maps attest. Reserve battalions of the front left Division of *Gruppe Staden* were billeted along the road running NE, between Oostnieuwkerke and Roodkruis, from Vindictive Crossroads. Reserve battalions of *Gruppe Ypern's* right division were quartered in the open near the Veldebrook (just south of the junction of the Moorslede-Roulers highway with the Ypres-Roulers railway) and in the villages of Vierkavenhoek, Zilverberg, La Cavalier and Magermeirie.



**Plate 1.5 KTK Headquarters: Winter 1917-18**  
(Source: Author's Collection)

A *Stellungsdivision's* three attached regiments, Jack Sheldon has observed, readily diversified and delegated command responsibilities amongst component battalion commanders throughout 1917. The *Kampftruppenkommandeur* or *KTK* (Commander of Forward Troops) deployed his battalion in the frontline. Approximately 600 to 800 metres behind was the support battalion under the command of the *Bereitschaftstruppenkommandeur* or *BTK* (Commander of Supporting Troops). The third battalion occupied reserve positions under command of the *Reservetruppenkommandeur* (*RTK*). In the event of an attack, the *BTK* was sent forward “a further 300 yards or so, ready to participate in the defence in whatever way events dictated they were needed”, while the *RTK* would reinforce if deemed necessary. “Without any doubt, the key man in each sector was the *KTK*. His command responsibilities went well beyond that of a normal battalion commander. Whenever possible he and his small staff (including an

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artillery liaison officer) were located in a concrete blockhouse, preferably of reasonable size, between the main defensive line and the gun lines”. Communications difficulties experienced during Third Ypres dictated, “regimental, brigade and divisional commanders were not in a position to react swiftly enough in the face of enemy attacks. The supporting troops were always near at hand, at the disposal of the *KTK*, and the companies of the reserve battalion were usually within easy reach as well”. Thus the *KTK* (usually a *Hauptmann*) was, analogous with the aforementioned authorised responsibilities of a *Stellungsdivision* commander, delegated with the immediate command decision of when and where a *BTK*'s support troops would be deployed. “From the moment they were committed, they came under his direct command. The same applied to the reserve battalion if it was called for, but the deployment of this unit was a decision for the regimental commander in the first instance”.<sup>107</sup>

Dispersed bulwarks based on the *die Leer des Gefechtsfeldes* concept, the two-division defensive organisation, along with application of a flexible, mobile defence of the *Vorfeldzonelinie* and *Hauptwiderstandslinie* zones undoubtedly assisted those tasked with maintaining a firm grip on Westroosebeke and the northern portion of the Passchendaele Ridge. By mid-November *Fourth Army* was “reduced to hanging on grimly, assisted by the weather, until winter came to their rescue”.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele*, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

## 1.4 Tactical Controversy

Preparations for a narrow front attack to open out the western face of the Passchendaele Salient and carry the frontline northward in order to provide desired observation into low-lying valleys situated north and east of the main ridge had been set in motion.<sup>109</sup> On the right, 8<sup>th</sup> Division<sup>110</sup> (VIII Corps) would advance on an approximate frontage of 1,020 yards east northeast to a varied depth of 100 to 300 yards. On the left, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division<sup>111</sup> (II Corps) was to protect and prolong the northern flank by advancing west and north on a frontage of 1,850 yards, to a depth of 400 yards on the left and right and 700 yards in the centre.

Information gleaned from recently captured documents (outlining the new defence scheme ordered by *Generalquartiermeister* Ludendorff following *Fourth Army's* disastrous experience of 4 October) caused the commanders of both divisions a great deal of concern. The papers related that the commencement of a British bombardment was perceived as a sign of imminent assault. The massed hostile infantry would now be dealt with by bringing an immediate defensive artillery barrage to bear on jumping-off positions inside the enemy frontline. After a few minutes, the barrage would be withdrawn across positions already evacuated by the *Vorfeldzonelinie* (outpost zone)

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<sup>109</sup> See appendices 4 a & b, 5 a & b, 6 and 7 for VIII Corps, II Corps, 8<sup>th</sup> Division and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division operation orders respectively.

<sup>110</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> (Regular) Division sustained a combined total of 5,320 killed, wounded and missing during the opening stages of the Third Ypres campaign. Sent south to the comparatively quiet Ploegsteert sector for rest and refit, it was ordered to return north in November. See Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, pp. 156-61 and Appendix 1 for infantry orders of battle.

<sup>111</sup> The 32<sup>nd</sup> (New Army) Division had been deployed on the Flanders coast, where it suffered heavy losses (10-11 July) during the German riposte at Nieuport, throughout the Third Ypres campaign. It was ordered south to join II Corps the following October. See Major A.F. Becke, *Order of Battle Divisions Part 3B: New Army Divisions (30-41); & 63<sup>rd</sup> (RN) Division* (London: HMSO, 1945), pp. 21-29, and Appendix 1 for infantry orders of battle.

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garrison at the start of the enemy bombardment. Surviving British troops, traversing the hurriedly abandoned outpost zone in order to come to grips with the heavily defended *Hauptwiderstandslinie* (main line of resistance) would then encounter an intense curtain of annihilating shellfire. *Fourth Army* began to put this method into effect on 13 October. The artillery was now the main line of defence. “It was hoped that the ‘dense barrage of shell’ in front of the main line of resistance would stop, or at least break up, an offensive before it covered the varying depths of the *Vorfeld*”.<sup>112</sup> This tactic made it necessary for the attackers to get beyond the *Vorfeldzonelinie* as quickly as possible. To this end, it was decided to attempt to surprise the advanced hostile outpost zone before the supporting artillery could be brought to bear on the British forward line. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division faced the most difficult task in the projected night attack, so the planning and preparations of 8<sup>th</sup> Division were influenced and constrained by the tactical schemes of the former.<sup>113</sup>

Major-General Shute recognised it was impossible for a brigade to form up below Vat Cottage Ridge during daylight owing to the unpleasant fact that any such movement would be in full view of the enemy. A dawn or night attack offered the only prospect of achieving surprise: “As so many recent attacks have been made at dawn [,] it was decided to risk the inherent dangers of a night attack on a big scale and to attack at night.”<sup>114</sup> No

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<sup>112</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and Captain G.C. Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West* (West Port, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1976), p.309.

<sup>113</sup> 32<sup>nd</sup> Division was due to relieve 1<sup>st</sup> Division on the night of 23/24 November.

<sup>114</sup> See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section I, General’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 2. Major-General Shute composed his narrative of the night operation of 2 December 1917 in the form of an *ex post facto* general report of eighteen pages and eight appendices. His concern about a kind of ‘wooden’ approach to operations was previously expressed by Brigadier-General Shoubridge (GOC 54<sup>th</sup> Brigade) during the Somme offensive, when the dangers of ‘trying to do every attack by barrage and relying on stereotyped tactics which meant that the Bosch always knows by our barrage where we are going to attack and when we are’. See Brigadier-General T.H.

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doubt Sir Douglas Haig's earlier recommendation to Sir Henry Rawlinson that Second Army should "attack by small units by night, because up to the present nothing of this nature has been attempted by us at the Ypres battle front" had made its way down the chain of command to the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division.<sup>115</sup> Shute, however, would substitute the idea of nocturnal assaults by small units suggested by Haig, with a large-scale set-piece night attack involving a reinforced brigade from his division. With this tactical approach he hoped to secure the formidable defences of Hill 52 and Vat Cottage Ridge.



**Plate 1.6 Major-General C.D. Shute (Source IWM H82157)**

Two primary factors caused Major-General Shute concern during planning for the proposed operation. First, the artillery brigades could only fire from west to east in support of an infantry brigade assaulting along the ridge from south to north. The failure

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Shoubridge *op. cit.*, quoted in Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 108.

<sup>115</sup> Haig diary entry 19 November 1917 in 'The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig's Autograph Great War Diary', Reel 5, Parts 9-10 1917 and Sheffield & Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig*, p. 345.

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of 1<sup>st</sup> SWB on 10 November had been attributed to this same difficulty.<sup>116</sup> Perennial difficulties (bad weather, poor roads, mud, hostile shelling) encountered while shifting batteries forward continued to be exacerbated by the diminishing number of dry sites available for heavy and field guns. Such locations that did exist were limited to the area of waterlogged ground to the west, and within the restricted confines of the Passchendaele Salient.

Second, how to avoid the defensive barrage that would surely be brought down on 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's jumping-off positions the moment British artillery commenced its bombardment? Major-General Shute succinctly outlined his considered solution:

The idea of an advance under a creeping barrage was therefore abandoned, and it was decided to advance for the first 200 yards without artillery fire, except of course, preliminary artillery bombardment within safety limits, and to attempt to surprise the enemy's most advanced posts and to overwhelm them with the bayonet.<sup>117</sup>

The usual procedure was to be dispensed with; batteries would not open fire at Zero. As the unfortunate tactical situation facing the gunners dictated that fire – to assist an advance with a creeping barrage that would “perforce be in enfilade, and experience had shown that such a barrage was difficult to manipulate, was often inaccurate and tended to mislead the infantry as to their direction”<sup>118</sup> – was to commence at “Zero plus 8 with all available artillery and machine-guns in a series of area concentrations,<sup>119</sup> those inside the

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<sup>116</sup> Only one part of the 3 Brigade's barrage was fired in enfilade during 10 November. Shute could only contemplate a similar barrage along the *entire* front of his assaulting brigade.

<sup>117</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part II, Plan of Operations, Section I, General', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>118</sup> Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 164.

<sup>119</sup> Area concentrations, fired in *lieu* of a creeping barrage by the supporting artillery, would have been the most effective method in targeting the dispersed German defences along Vat Cottage Ridge.

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objective to lift as the infantry advanced”.<sup>120</sup> This hybrid tactical approach to the set-piece attack, with its delayed artillery scheme and employment of area concentration fire instead of a creeping barrage, would allow, it was hoped, for the *Vorfeldzone* garrison to be surprised and overwhelmed. A more effective bombardment (although the necessary pre-attack dominance of enemy batteries was hardly realised) of the dispersed targets on Vat Cottage Ridge would also be obtained. Conversely, Shute’s assaulting brigade would be exposed to the direct fire of the German defenders for 8 minutes.

Major-General Shute realised the danger of allowing his men to be exposed to machine-gun and rifle fire for six to eight minutes, “but it was considered preferable running this risk to drawing the enemy’s intense artillery barrage on us by opening our own barrage”.<sup>121</sup> In this way, the dangerous area could be traversed and the forward German posts rushed to a depth of 200 yards before hostile batteries could bring down the feared defensive barrage. “Playing for safety” was not an option if desired objectives were to be achieved.<sup>122</sup> The current plan, given the problematic tactical circumstances,

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<sup>120</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section I, General’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Major-General Shute also noted that his ‘decision was further strengthened by the fact that in previous attacks on this front the enemy had disclosed such a superiority in artillery fire that the assaulting troops suffered very heavy casualties in reaching their objectives’.

<sup>122</sup> Major-General Shute later expressed strong views on the necessity for such operational risk taking: RISKS: ‘Try to be versatile and strive to invent some new plan. Remember that your effort should always be to ‘mystify and mislead the enemy’– Stonewall Jackson. Don’t be contented time after time to follow the same old plan. No two military problems are exactly the same. A line of action which succeeded once under one set of circumstances may be the worst possible one to follow in the next battle. Don’t hesitate to take risks. Don’t dread defeat. Feel sure of victory. Your optimism will communicate itself to those under you. Remember that the man who takes no risks will never get great results and does not deserve them. Fortune favours the bold. The enemy does not know your risk. Then when you have made your plan see red and go all out’. See JSCSC: Major-General A.H. Marindin Papers: ‘Senior Officers’ School: Lecture Delivered by Major-General Sir C.D. Shute, KCG, KCMG November 1920’. The contents of this unique document are a valuable representation of Shute’s cumulative Great War military thought and experience. It is not unreasonable to assume, given the postwar lecture date that many of the ideas expressed were, as we shall see, *idée fixe* in the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s mind by late 1917. Shute has no traceable personal

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was the best that could be devised and the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division was a confident soldier: “The strong man in war is an OPTIMIST. He won’t allow himself that he is going to fail”. Night attacks, Shute also observed “almost invariably succeeded”.<sup>123</sup>

A night operation was a difficult undertaking. Major-General Shute found it necessary to attack during the *relative* darkness of a moonlit night in order to ensure direction and rapidity of advance across the almost featureless battlefield.<sup>124</sup> Thus co-ordination was deemed more important than concealment. Indeed, the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division stated in the aforementioned postwar lecture: “Night Attacks: Moonlight best – not worst”.<sup>125</sup> A moon at full sphere would therefore, in Shute’s view, expedite the first operational stage by providing the attackers with just enough light to quickly traverse wet and broken ground to overrun the *Vorfeldzonelinie* before Zero + 8.

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papers, so a very special thanks to Professor Gary Sheffield for bringing these long forgotten lecture notes to my attention.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Major-General Shute’s, as acting GOC II Corps, operation against Puisieux and River Trenches (3-5 February 1917) is a case in point: ‘With the object of surprise, so far as that was possible, on ground covered with snow and in bright moonlight, the attack was launched at 11 p.m.’ See Falls, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 1*, p. 71.

<sup>125</sup> JSCSC: Major-General A.H. Marindin Papers: ‘Senior Officers’ School: Lecture Delivered by Major-General Sir C.D. Shute, KCG, KCMG November 1920’. Failure to take into account the crucial relationship between nocturnal operations and astronomic projections was amply demonstrated during the disastrous large-scale night attack by Fifth, Third and First armies (Third Battle of the Scarpe) on 3 May 1917. GHQ adjusted zero hour, at Fifth Army’s request, just before the assault. ‘A night attack was therefore carried out, based on dispositions suited to an attack at dawn. The sun did not rise till 5:22 [a.m.] and it was impossible to distinguish a line of men at a distance of fifty yards until 4.5 a.m. – the original Third Army Zero. Nor was this all. The moon, approaching the full, set 16 minutes before the new zero hour. On large stretches of the front the troops assembling for the assault were silhouetted against its light as it sank behind them, their appearance giving warning of the attack and drawing heavy fire, which caused serious loss and confusion’. Official historian Cyril Falls gloomily concluded: ‘That British troops, with their traditional skill in estimating the effect of the lights of the heavens and turning it to their own advantage, should have suffered to fall into this trap is one of the most melancholy features of a melancholy episode...’ See Falls, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 1*, 430-33.

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Major-General Heneker related, during the nascent planning stage, that he preferred to attack at dawn because “the difficulties of assembly leave no choice for the hour of attack”.<sup>126</sup> Brigadier-General Aspinall stated, in his reply on 21 November, that II Corps was “anxious for the attack to take place at night [,] and since you [Heneker] are in agreement with this [aspect of the] plan, the [VIII] Corps commander is concurring with the II Corps proposal”.<sup>127</sup> Heneker also expressed grave concerns about other aspects of Major-General Shute’s plan. He was not in complete agreement in regard to the immediate danger of the German defensive barrage or the necessity of dispensing with a creeping barrage on 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s front. This is not to say he dismissed the necessity of a surprise advance without a creeping barrage or the inherent threat of the defensive barrage employed by enemy gunners. On the nights of 18/19, 20/21 and 24/25 November, the 8<sup>th</sup> Division advanced its line by stealth, thus narrowing the distance to the *Hauptwiderstandslinie*, and seized portions of the *Vorfeldzonelinie* opposite the Venison Trench defences. During the latter operation, a new line, offering an uninterrupted view for approximately 400 yards, was dug on the ridge crest.<sup>128</sup> Obviously there was something to be said for this tactic. Shute, however, envisaged the opening phase of the forthcoming night attack as only the precursor to a larger operation that would be carried

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<sup>126</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G. 97/1/1, 18<sup>th</sup> November 1917,’ 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary..

<sup>127</sup> Brigadier-General Aspinall added that the ‘actual time of Zero will be decided on after trials of the time required for forming-up have been carried out by the divisions concerned’. See TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘VIII Corps G.1990, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1917’, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>128</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Devonshire and 2<sup>nd</sup> West Yorkshire (23 Brigade) participated in this minor operation. On the left, 1<sup>st</sup> British Division carried out, prior to its relief by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division on the night of 23/24 November, similar small-scale operations on the nights of 16/17 and 17/18 November. These modest enterprises succeeded in advancing the frontline along the western slope of Vat Cottage Ridge. Two important strongpoints (Vocation and Virile farms) were thus secured, although the hostile garrison occupying Vox Farm continued to hold out. 1<sup>st</sup> Division’s measurable gains reduced overall distances to the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* opposite and strengthened the boundary between II Corps and VIII Corps. See TNA: WO/95/1712: ‘Report of Minor Operation carried out by this Battalion on night of 24/25 November’, 26 November 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Devonshire War Diary, WO/95/1714: 2<sup>nd</sup> West Yorkshire War Diary, C.T. Atkinson, *The Devonshire Regiment 1914-1918* (London: Eland Brothers, 1926), pp. 318-19 and WO/95/1232: 1<sup>st</sup> Division War Diary

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out on established lines with artillery assistance once the *Vorfeldzonelinie* was overrun. Ominously, one of Heneker's battalions experienced a number of casualties during the small advance on the night of 24/25 November. These losses were sustained when a German machine-gun crew easily observed movement under the bright moonlight.<sup>129</sup>



**Plate 1.7 Major-General W.C.G Heneker**  
(Source: IWM Q114384).

Assaulting enemy positions on a small scale, under cover of darkness without a barrage, became fairly routine in the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke sector following the successful operations carried out west of the Paddebeek by 63<sup>rd</sup> Division on the evenings of 1/2 and 3/4 November. Lessons learned during these attacks were elaborated in a lengthy after-action report – lessons clearly recognised by Major-General Shute:

### MINOR OPERATIONS

- Minor night operations and surprise tactics as employed on the nights 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> November are most effective

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<sup>129</sup> Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, pp. 162-63.

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against enemy outpost lines in marshy country, and are infinitely less costly than set-piece attacks under a barrage.

- A policy of minor night enterprises when holding battle lines is strongly advocated. Those enterprises increase the morale of our troops, and the constant movement of our posts prevents their being accurately located by the enemy's artillery.
- Further, if a set-piece attack is contemplated soon after a series of such enterprises, the enemy will be in ignorance of the exact position of his own outpost line. This will cause him to place his initial barrage at a greater distance from his line than would otherwise be the case and minimize the risk of this barrage opening on our troops.
- To make minor enterprises successful special attention must be paid to the training of subordinate commanders in night work, minor tactics, and reconnaissance, as the success of such enterprises entirely depends on the initiative of subordinate commanders.
- The new German tactics as described in a captured order of the 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division received since these notes were written appears to make night enterprises of a kind advocated above more than ever valuable.
- The few men that the enemy employs to hold his forward zone and the uncertainty that must exist in their minds as to how much resistance they are to offer should render posts in this zone particularly liable to capture by such enterprises. Further if a set-piece attack is contemplated it is more than ever necessary to get as close as possible to the "line of resistance of the forward zone" prior to the attack. Unless this is done our troops may be caught by the enemy counter-barrage when it is brought back at Zero plus 15 minutes.

### NIGHT OPERATIONS VERSUS DAY OPERATIONS

- In the case of a strong position such as TOURNANT FARM [captured by 1<sup>st</sup> Division on 10 November] there is little chance of a minor enterprise succeeding unless the enemy is taken by surprise. In such situations the attack must be supported by artillery fire. It is, however, suggested that in swampy ground a night attack on a large

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scale following a preliminary bombardment will have more chance than a set-piece daylight attack, the success of which largely depends on the ability of the assaulting infantry to keep up to the barrage.<sup>130</sup>

The terrible battlefield conditions that limited movement and decreased creeping barrage effectiveness combined with excellent observation capabilities afforded the Germans during daylight hours, made it necessary to isolate and overwhelm with small assault parties by night, certain pillboxes and strongpoints that could not be approached without severe loss by day. Thus “individual pill-boxes would be on their own [at night], and not mutually supporting as by day; they would have fewer targets, and would be vulnerable to surprise attacks”.<sup>131</sup>



**Plate 1.8 German pillboxes Flanders 1917**  
(Source: Author's Collection)

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<sup>130</sup> Leonard Sellers (ed), 'Western Front: Report on Operations During the Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele, 24<sup>th</sup> October to 5<sup>th</sup> November 1917', *RND: Royal Naval Division. Antwerp, Gallipoli & Western Front 1914-1918*, Issue Number 22 (September 2002), pp. 2181-82.

<sup>131</sup> Christopher Page, *Command in the Royal Naval Division: A Military Biography of Brigadier General A.. M. Asquith DSO* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999) p. 162.

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It was the thought of what a luminous moon would allow the Germans to observe that vexed Major-General Heneker most when considering application of this tactic on a large scale: “How was I to protect the infantry from the enemy’s MG and rifle fire between Zero and Zero plus 8 in case the enemy becomes alarmed before the latter hour, and opened on the attacking infantry?”<sup>132</sup> He had originally requested a conventional creeping barrage:

The [creeping] barrage should move fairly quickly as the advance is short: I hope to be able to ask for lifts of 100 yards in four minutes, but naturally this depends on reconnaissance [and] the state of the weather and ground. If this can be managed, the attacking troops should be past the main German defences [Venison Trench] before the enemy barrage comes down on them.<sup>133</sup>

Gunners responsible for the 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s barrage were not limited by the difficulties confronting 32<sup>nd</sup> Division batteries. As the former division’s assaulting brigade advanced NE, its supporting artillery *would* be capable of firing an orthodox creeping barrage. Brigadier-General Aspinall’s response was, at first, somewhat equivocal: “II Corps is suggesting that there should be no creeping barrage. The Corps Commander is deferring an answer to this point until you have formed your opinions on it”.<sup>134</sup> It was, however, subsequently deemed necessary, regardless of the fact that both divisions were assaulting

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<sup>132</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried out by 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1/2 December, 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, p. 2. Major-General Heneker brought forward the selected date for an operation between Bouchavesnes and Moislains the previous winter after considering moon phase data: ‘Heneker submitted a further report two days later following a XV Corps conference earlier that day. He stated he could only qualify his earlier reports in a few respects. The top of the ground was drying and the laying of duckboards was going well. Even so, the communication trenches were still very bad and made worse by the thaw. He still emphasised that it would be the advance across ‘No Man’s Land’ that would be very difficult, as would the maintenance of the troops in the areas captured from the Germans. He added: *There is one further point to mention: owing to the moon, the longer the operation is postponed, the greater will be the chances of the assaulting troops being detected forming up* (my emphasis). The assault date was changed to 4 March. As the day for the assault approached the weather improved. The assault could not be delayed too long with a waxing moon in the offing’. Special thanks to Dr Alun Thomas for providing the above excerpt from Chapter 5 of his PhD thesis.

<sup>133</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G. 97/1/1, 18 November 1917’, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid: ‘VIII Corps G.1990, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1917’.

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in different directions, to have a homogeneous artillery timetable, so 8<sup>th</sup> Division had to conform to the 8-minute interregnum prescribed by its neighbour. Consequently, Major-General Heneker was required by VIII Corps HQ to adhere to Major-General Shute's scheme so as not to alert by the opening of a preliminary barrage, an already vigilant enemy obstinately clinging to the northern portion of the much-contested ridge.

Major-General Heneker proposed two ways to minimize the risk: First, he suggested that a protective artillery barrage should immediately be brought down on to the enemy line if the German defenders opened fire before Zero + 8. The assaulting battalions could then form up under cover of this fire. As the barrage lifted forward, the infantry would rush the enemy line in the ordinary manner. "Had this been agreed to I [Heneker] would have had my outpost line all along the front withdrawn at Z - 1 hour to a line 150 yards from the enemy trenches." The GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division added that he had applied this method on previous occasions with success.<sup>135</sup> Arrangements could be made with Lieutenant-Colonel N.M.S. Irwin MC (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment),<sup>136</sup> whose HQ would be at Mosselmarkt, to discharge an SOS rocket "as soon as he considered it advisable, between Z[ero] and Z[ero] plus 8". This officer would be in a position "to see and hear how soon the enemy's fire opened"; his signal would alert British gunners to commence the necessary protective barrage. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ, unwilling to adjust its

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> A/Lieutenant-Colonel Noel Mackintosh Stuart Irwin (1892-1972). RMC Sandhurst; Commissioned Essex Regiment 1912; Lieutenant 1914; Captain and MC 1915; A/Major and A/Lieutenant-Colonel 1917. Irwin's short autobiography makes no mention of this operation. See Hubert C. Fox (ed), *Infantry Officer 1914-1918: The Record of Service as a Young Officer in the First World War of Lt. General N.M.S. Irwin, CB, DSO, MC, Member of the British Legion* (Southampton: Pearson & Lloyd, 1995), pp. 14-15.

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preferred artillery scheme, summarily rejected Heneker's latest contingency plan by claiming it would lead to confusion.<sup>137</sup>

The denial of Major-General Heneker's first recommendation was immediately followed by a further suggestion that the barrage start time be reduced from Zero + 8 to Zero + 6 or Zero + 4, "for in my [Heneker] experience [,] I felt much more fearful of the enemy's MG fire from prepared positions on a bright moonlight [sic] night than I did of any artillery barrage". The brigadier and battalion commanders of 25 Brigade (the formation chosen to carry out 8<sup>th</sup> Division's part of the night operation) expressed complete agreement with this latest proposal. "This idea was overruled, for the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division which had to carry out the major operation [sic] were against curtailing the time".<sup>138</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston and Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, authors of the postwar history of 8<sup>th</sup> Division, noted that Heneker's suggestions "were overruled, as the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division considered that it was impossible to organise an effective creeping barrage to cover an infantry advance on their front..."<sup>139</sup>

Major-General Heneker subsequently wrote: "I did not feel justified in refusing to attack although I felt very doubtful of success and I said so".<sup>140</sup> He was even more candid in his diary: [Shute] "wishes to do a surprise attack by moonlight and have no covering fire to protect the advance from hostile machine-gun fire before Z + 8. I don't agree and

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<sup>137</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 'Narrative of Operations Carried out by 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1/2 December 1917', 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 164.

<sup>140</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 'Narrative of Operations Carried out by 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1/2 December 1917', 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, p. 2.

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protested [,] but my protest was overruled.<sup>141</sup> I told the Corps Commander that neither we nor the 32<sup>nd</sup> would succeed in consequence. However, I was ordered to attack”.<sup>142</sup> The apprehensive Heneker privately expressed little confidence in his infuriatingly irrepressible Corps Commander: “Hunter-Weston is mad and very trying. Such Corps Commanders should not be allowed out here”.<sup>143</sup> As Lieutenant-Colonel Edward ‘Moses’ Beddington (GSO1 8<sup>th</sup> Division) recalled decades later: “Both the General and I hated this operation, and suggested amendments, all of which were turned down. It was a night attack over horribly churned up ground three nights after a full moon and we considered that even if we were not seen advancing to the attack, which was highly improbable, we were certain to be heard squelching through the mud”.<sup>144</sup>

Sir Henry Rawlinson had previously considered lunar impact on night operations. The foundations of his approach, based on military history, recent experience in South Africa and study of the Russo-Japanese War, was related by the then Brigadier-General Rawlinson during a lecture at Aldershot in December 1907:

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<sup>141</sup> A then Brigadier-General Heneker previously expressed some intellectual disdain toward Major-General Shute – who had the reputation of being a very demanding superior and somewhat of a martinet – during a short spell (29 October-8 December 1916) as GOC 190 Brigade, remarking on 18 October 1916: ‘All four divisional commanders [Shute, Harper, Walker, Deverell] had dinner at [V] Corps HQ this evening and attended a conference on the attack [planning for the Battle of the Ancre] after dinner ... I was not impressed with the knowledge or power of mind of either the Corps Commander [Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Fanshawe] or any of the div[ision] com[man]d[e]rs at this conference’ and, writing somewhat cryptically on 29 October, ‘The [190] B[rigade] is in 63<sup>rd</sup> Royal Naval Division and Shute commands. Funny being under him’. See IWM: 66/541/1: Heneker Diary, 18 and 29 October 1916. For observations on Shute’s character and command style see TNA: CAB/145/134: General A.C. Girdwood 1930 typescript letter to Brigadier-General J.E Edmonds, Official History Correspondence (Somme 1916), IWM: 88/39/1: MacDonell Papers, Letter dated 24 June 1917, Douglas Jerrold, *Georgian Adventure* (London: The ‘Right’ Book Club, 1938), p. 178 and Bond (ed), *The War Memoirs of Earl Stanhope*, pp. 114-15. For Heneker’s character and command style see John Bourne, ‘Major-General W.C.G. Heneker: A Divisional Commander in the Great War’, in Matthew Hughes & Matthew Seligmann (eds), *Leadership in Conflict 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2000), pp. 54-67.

<sup>142</sup> IWM: 66/541/1: Heneker Diary, 19 to 29 November 1917

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 16 to 31 October 1917.

<sup>144</sup> Edward Beddington, ‘My Life’ (UK: Privately printed, 1960), p. 119.

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In all military operations the weather often influences the situation. In night work it is probably the most important and perhaps the most unstable factor which calls for our consideration. I fancy there is a good deal of conflict of opinion even amongst soldiers as to the ideal night for a night march, but again I find it impossible to generalise, and must leave each particular occasion to be judged on its merits. There is, however, no doubt that a bright, clear, moonlight night very much facilitates the movement of troops...<sup>145</sup>

Rawlinson still retained this outlook nine years later when planning the second phase of the Somme campaign. Two of five Fourth Army assault divisions were successfully assembled in no man's land under the light of a full moon to reduce a 1,500-yard gap opposite the heavily defended German second line. The subsequent Battle of Bazentin Ridge led to the seizure, "on the heels of a truly devastating bombardment", of formidable German positions during a surprise dawn attack on 14 July 1916.<sup>146</sup> It is probable, based on theoretical disposition and previous battle experience that the GOC Second Army heartily approved of Major-General Shute's large-scale moonlight scheme regardless of perceived risks, although final sanction was certainly the administrative purview of II Corps.<sup>147</sup> Enemy battery groups caused Rawlinson greater concern: "Shute

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<sup>145</sup> Brigadier-General Sir H.S. Rawlinson, Bart., CVO, CB, psc, commanding 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade, Aldershot Command, 'Night Operations', *RUSI: Royal United Services Institute Journal*, 52:1 (June 1908), p. 810.

<sup>146</sup> See Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992), p. 202.

<sup>147</sup> Passages found in FSR (1909) shed further light on the tactical mindset of those involved with the complex decision making process: 'Night operations may be undertaken to ... pass over an area of ground which it has been found difficult or impossible to traverse in daylight'; 'Surprise in some form is usually an object of night operations'; 'Night assaults, that is to say assaults delivered in the dark, should rarely be attempted by a force larger than an infantry brigade against a single objective unless the conditions are exceptionally favourable'; 'In all night operations the maintenance of connection is of the first importance'. Lunar effect was not directly addressed in the contents, although its relative value, when considering maintenance of co-ordination, could not have been lost to contemporary readers. See War Office, *Field Service Regulations Part 1: Operations 1909 (Reprinted with Amendments, 1912)* (London: HMSO, 1914), pp. 176-77.

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is very confident of bringing off a good success [...] The only thing I am anxious about is the guns of which the Bosch has concentrated in large numbers in that area”.<sup>148</sup>

The date finally chosen for the forthcoming night operation was based on meteorological data indicating the next period when the moon would be full.<sup>149</sup> It was, as we have seen, recognised, by Sir Henry Rawlinson, Major-General Shute and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division staff among others, that assaulting troops would, in order to facilitate co-ordination, direction and rapidity of advance on the barren desolate ridge, be better able to discern objectives in the relative darkness of a moonlit night. Examination of carefully prepared, widely distributed documents like Second Army’s ‘Moonlight Chart for October, November & December’ related the moon was certain to be full, or just past full sphere, during the nights of 26 November to 1 December.<sup>150</sup> The original date (26 November) was shelved because of the need for additional preparation time by both assault divisions. A new attack date (night of 1/2 December) was subsequently agreed upon by all concerned.<sup>151</sup> Zero had to be fixed for an hour that would ensure “time to assemble and yet assault as early as possible in order to give the maximum number of hours of darkness in which to consolidate ground gained”. 1:55 a.m. was subsequently chosen as the hour “best meeting” desired operational requirements.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 19 November 1917.

<sup>149</sup> See National Schools Observatory, Universe Now: A Month of the Moon, National Grid for Learning. <<http://www.schoolsobservatory.org.uk/ngfl.htm>> for phases of the moon during November/December 1917.

<sup>150</sup> Second Army: ‘Moonlight Chart for October, November and December’ 1917, Author’s collection.

<sup>151</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 20 and 29 November 1917. See Appendix 3 c.

<sup>152</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section I, General’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. p.3. ‘Another factor governing the hour of Zero was that experience proved that the enemy shelled the tracks in front of the line KANSAS – HUBNER FARM [east of the Steenbeek valley] most heavily between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. Zero hour had therefore to be so timed that that troops would not enter the shelled area until after 8 p.m.’ Ibid.

### 1.5 A New Zealand Gambit: Polderhoek Chateau

On 22 November, Sir Henry Rawlinson convened a conference at II ANZAC Corps HQ, in order to discuss another contemplated operation approximately 7,500 yards to the SW of the Passchendaele Salient (**Map 1**). South of the boundary between II ANZAC Corps and IX Corps lay a well-marked spur: an eastern outcrop of the Gheluvelt Plateau. “On it were perched the piled ruins of Polderhoek Chateau and groups of pillboxes which occupied sites of the attached buildings amid the shattered trees of the once luxuriant pleasancess”.<sup>153</sup> This bleak outcrop stronghold successfully withstood four previous assaults since the capture of strategically important high ground from Tower Hamlets spur to Broodseinde on 4 October.<sup>154</sup> Owing to a sharp re-entrant in the II ANZAC Corps’ line, the frontline of and approaches to the New Zealand Division were “exposed to continuous and pressing discomfort caused by enfilade fire” from the spur just beyond the left flank of the neighbouring IX Corps.<sup>155</sup> “For the satisfactory occupation of the

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<sup>153</sup> Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919*, p. 305. Polderhoek Chateau was reduced to a mound of rubble by shellfire, ‘but below ground level the large cellar had been turned into a reinforced concrete bunker with many concealed entrances and tunnels to various strongpoints. Viewed from our [British] lines it stood out like an island amid a sea of mud; a veritable fortress. Dotted here and there in what was once the chateau grounds were concrete pillboxes, perhaps from ground level they may have appeared to be positioned higgledy-piggledy, but each one was sited with deadly precision. They each provided covering fire to others and the whole of no man’s land could be raked with lethal machine-gun fire’. See Terry Carter, *Birmingham Pals: 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment: A History of the Three City Battalions Raised in Birmingham in World War One* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1997), p. 231.

<sup>154</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> (Regular) Division’s (X Corps) efforts to secure Polderhoek Spur were repulsed on 4, 9, 26 October and 6 November respectively. X Corps HQ was subsequently withdrawn and replaced by IX Corps. See Chris McCarthy, *Passchendaele: The Day-by-Day Account* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1996) and Major A.F. Becke, *Order of Battle Divisions, Part 4 – The Army Council, GHQs, Armies and Corps 1914-1918* (London: HMSO, 1945), p. 196. For first-hand accounts of the repeated attempts against Polderhoek Chateau see H.V. Drinkwater, ‘Heartbreak Attack on Polderhoek Chateau: A Ghastly Memory of a Duckboard Track in the Salient’ and Major C.A. Bill, ‘At the Chateau of Evil Omen: My Stretcher-Bearers Were Killed’, in Sir John Hammerton (ed), *The Great War... I Was There! Undying Memories of 1914-1918* (London: Amalgamated Press, 1939), pp. 1305-11 and 1371-74.

<sup>155</sup> Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919*, p. 305.

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Divisions' sector, it was highly desirable that a fresh effort should be made to capture the Polderhoek Spur".<sup>156</sup>

Local commanders thought it fitting, regardless of the fact that the chateau and its grounds lay opposite the IX Corps (GOC Lieutenant-General A. Hamilton Gordon) front, that the New Zealand Division "should strike the blow for its capture", as it suffered most from the galling flanking fire. To this end, Lieutenant-General Alexander J. Godley (GOC II ANZAC Corps) submitted a proposal to Second Army HQ "that the New Zealanders, immediately affected, should carry out the attack and, on the conclusion of the operation, hand over the territory won to the IX Corps". Army HQ subsequently agreed to this proposal. The assault frontage would be 400 yards. A projected advance of only 600 yards would carry the line as far down as the reverse slope of the Polderhoek Spur "as was necessary to deprive the enemy of his commanding and enfilading position. Further examination also showed that, owing to the height of the spur and general configuration of the ground, the new lines proposed about the chateau would not to a like degree be exposed to similar enfilade fire from the Gheluvelt Spur to the south".<sup>157</sup> Sir Henry Rawlinson observed that this operation required "hearty good will on the parts of IX and II ANZAC corps [,] and this I found to exist to a very satisfactory degree and I think all will be amicably arranged [,] I was well pleased with the conference".<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> A combined attack on both Gheluvelt village and Polderhoek Spur was initially contemplated 'as one of various local operations designed to continue our offensive during the winter, to add depth to our defence along the Army front, and to facilitate the initial phases of a resumed offensive on a large scale in the spring.' The scope of this operation was eventually reduced to an attack on Polderhoek Chateau and the formidable pillboxes situated on its grounds. Ibid. p. 305.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. p. 305.

<sup>158</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 22 November 1917 and LHCMA: 'Second Army No. 1 (G).', 22 November 1917, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/15, King's College, London.

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Second Army had now committed itself to two attacks designed to improve the local tactical situation in select areas astride the Passchendaele Ridge. Rawlinson and his corps commanders considered launching the much smaller Polderhoek enterprise simultaneously with the operation scheduled to jump off from the Passchendaele Salient on the night of 1/2 December. “The tactical objects in view, however, bore no correlation, and in addition the zero hours selected were different”.<sup>159</sup> II Corps and VIII Corps had previously agreed on a night attack, whilst the New Zealand operation was scheduled to occur at 12:00 p.m. The latter hour was selected because it was believed the obvious disadvantages of a daylight attack would be more than compensated for by the fact that the assault would be delivered at a time when the Germans least expected it. “In the end, therefore, it was decided that the 2 operations should be executed independently”. 3 December was eventually chosen for the next attempt to seize Polderhoek Spur.<sup>160</sup>

### 1.6 Preparations & Preliminaries: 18-30 November

A ghastly routine was maintained on both sides of the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke sector while the Battle of Cambrai was in progress. Life in the forward area consisted of improving and extending the foremost positions, and taking cover from frequent bombardments in shell holes and any other available shelter. Patrols probed no man’s land and approaches to the enemy line where ground was dry enough to allow a firm footing. Ammunition, ration, fatigue and relief parties made their way forward after dark, as best they could under frequent shelling, to battalion and battery positions and other

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<sup>159</sup> The original intention that the four minor operations proposed in ‘Organisation of Army Front During 1917-18’, should be carried out ‘so as to attack on a wide front, thus preventing the concentration of hostile artillery fire on an isolated minor operation’, appears to have been abandoned as impracticable.

<sup>160</sup> Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919*, p. 307-08.

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rendezvous on tramways, along corduroy roads or treacherous duckboard avenues extending across the seemingly endless sea of water-filled shell holes.<sup>161</sup> Owing to extreme conditions, the average tour of the frontline by a British infantry brigade was just 48 hours: “Reliefs were hazardous operations and they would not have taken place every other night if it had not been absolutely necessary. But two days at Passchendaele in winter was enough for the most earnest seeker of austerity and a great deal too much for most men”.<sup>162</sup> German observers remained vigilant to signs of another British attack, while artillery, communication and training preparations for the forthcoming attack proceeded in VIII Corps, II Corps and attached divisions.<sup>163</sup>

On 18 November Major-General Heneker requested that VIII Corps HQ find suitable assault training grounds.<sup>164</sup> He added that Brigadier-General Coffin VC,<sup>165</sup> whose 25 Brigade would carry out 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s part in the operation, “says this area is

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<sup>161</sup> For a harrowing account of frontline conditions experienced by the infantry during this period see J.C. Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew: 1914-1919. A Chronicle of Service in France and Belgium with the Second Battalion His Majesty’s Twenty-Third of Foot, The Royal Welch Fusiliers: founded on personal records, recollections and reflections, assembled, edited and partly written by One of their Medical Officers* (London: Jane’s, 1987 reprint of 1938 edition), pp. 416-19.

<sup>162</sup> John Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns: An Infantry Officer on the Western Front* (London: William Kimber, 1979), p. 110.

<sup>163</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> Division took over VIII Corps’ left sub-sector on a single brigade frontage from 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division on 18 November. Brigade rotation in and out of the frontline up to 30 November was as follows: 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade (night of 17-18 to night of 19/20 November), 24 Brigade (night of 19/20 to night of 23/24 November), 23 Brigade (night of 23/24 November). 32<sup>nd</sup> Division took over II Corps’ right sub-sector on a single brigade frontage from 1<sup>st</sup> British Division on the night of 23/24 November. Brigade rotation in and out of the frontline to 30 November was: 97 Brigade (night of 23/24 to night of 26/27 November), 96 Brigade (26/27 November) See TNA: WO/95/1677: 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and WO/95/2370: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>164</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G. 97/1/1.’, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>165</sup> Brigadier-General Clifford Coffin VC DSO (1870-1959). Commissioned Royal Engineers 1888; ‘Submarine Miners’ Jamaica; Ireland; Staff College 1899; South Africa 1899-1902; Intelligence Department, War Office 1904; Major 1907; GSO2 British forces in Sierra Leone four years later. CRE 21<sup>st</sup> Division 1914; Lieutenant Colonel 1915. Awarded DSO in the 1917 New Year’s Honour List ‘for distinguished service in the field’. Promoted temporary Brigadier-General and appointed GOC 25 Brigade (11 January). Awarded Victoria Cross (citation published on 14 September) by King George V on 2 January 1918 for resolute and inspirational leadership during the opening stages of Third Ypres.

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essential” for attack preparation. Notification of a designated site was received on 21 November.<sup>166</sup> By that time Coffin’s Brigade was in divisional reserve near Brandhoek.<sup>167</sup> His HQ diarist noted: “All battalions were bathed today. Battalions are situated in camp all round Brigade Headquarters. Headquarters are in the same camp as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment. A field is being taped out for the Brigade to practice the attack”. Coffin’s battalions duly carried out practice manoeuvres on the assigned acreage over the next five days.<sup>168</sup> This sort of thorough pre-battle preparation for a specific assault was *de rigueur* throughout the BEF by 1917. Maintenance of signal communications between corps and division, division and brigade and brigade and battalion proved problematic under the inexorable stress of battle. Intense shell fire, which often disrupted the established communications infrastructure, led to the development of various standard operating procedures that helped to maintain assault impetus and organisation while an attack was in progress: “If generals accepted that they had little chance to ‘control’ the battle once it had started”, John Lee notes, “their solution was to do everything in their power to create the conditions for success before it began. This included the careful training of the infantry so that all ranks understood the task ahead and the battle drill that would see them achieve success”.<sup>169</sup> Troops designated for an attack were withdrawn a

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid: ‘VIII Corps. G.1990, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1917,’ 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>167</sup> IWM IWM: 66/541/1: Heneker Diary, 19 to 29 November 1917.

<sup>168</sup> 25 Brigade’s training schedule was as follows: ‘22 November: Battalions started training their companies on the taped out field. Weather rather wet; 23 November: Weather fine. Very strong wind. Battalions carried on training on the taped out field. Instructions were issued today for the coming offensive to be resumed by the VIII Corps; 24 November: Battalions carried on training according to training programme; 25 November: Training was carried on as usual according to the training programme; 26 November: The whole Brigade practiced the attack today on the taped field. The Divisional Commander and Corps Commander were there to watch it too. Very wet and cold night; 27 November: Weather fine. All the tapes were gathered in from the training area’. See TNA: WO/95/1727: 25 Brigade War Diary.

<sup>169</sup> John Lee, ‘Command and Control in Battle: British Divisions on the Menin Road Ridge, 20 September 1917’, in Gary Sheffield & Dan Todman (eds) *Command and Control on the Western Front* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004) p. 120 and Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack 1916-18* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 188-89.

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few miles to the rear “and given intensive study of maps, air photos and models of the terrain”. Participation in 1:1 reenactments of their duties in a field specially taped out to the correct proportions followed. “An attempt would be made to simulate such aspects as creeping barrages, the loss of key personnel at critical moments, or the enemy’s expected counter-attack during the consolidation period”.<sup>170</sup>



**Plate 1.9 Brigadier-General C. Coffin VC**  
(Source: Author’s Collection)

Major-General Shute selected 97 Brigade (GOC Brigadier-General C.A. Blacklock DSO)<sup>171</sup> to carry out 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s part in the night operation. The latter favoured calculated aggression, and was a proponent of “careful planning and proper

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Brigadier-General Cyril Aubrey Blacklock DSO (1880-1936). Commissioned KRRC from Royal Warwickshire Militia 1901; South Africa 1901-02. Emigrated to Canada after resigning commission 1904; Re-commissioned KRRC 1914. Blacklock (one of a small number of ‘exotics’ who managed to reach generals’ rank despite their civilian status at the start of the First World War) would subsequently experience rapid promotion: 2/ic and CO 10<sup>th</sup> KRRC by the close of 1915; Awarded DSO and Bar during 1916; Promoted Brigadier-General and GOC 182 Brigade, 61<sup>st</sup> Division January 1917; GOC 97 Brigade March 1917. See John Bourne, ‘The BEF’s Generals on 29 September 1918: An Empirical Portrait with Some British and Australian Comparisons’, Peter Dennis & Jeffery Grey (eds), 1918: *Defining Victory: Proceedings of the Chief of Army’s History Conference Held at the National Convention Centre, Canberra 29 September 1998* (Canberra: Army History Unit, 1999), p. 102, fn. 20.

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preparation against facsimile objectives before carrying out attacks”.<sup>172</sup> To this end, “special measures were taken to ensure that every officer and man not only understood the object of the scheme of operations [,] but also knew the definite part he himself had to play”. The GOC 97 Brigade also had a plasticine model constructed, “which represented with great accuracy and detail”, the entire area of operations. The model was kept at 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ, “and officers, NCOs and men were daily lectured, not only by their own officers, but by their Divisional Commander, Brigadier, and their respective staffs, on the forthcoming operations”. Each man was issued a map, “and it may be safely said”, Shute subsequently wrote “that as far as explanation went on the ground and on the model, little was left undone to ensure each man knowing his part”.<sup>173</sup> 97 Brigade did not start training until relieved by 96 Brigade on the night of 26/27 November. The former then withdrew to Dambre Camp near Vlamertinghe, where battalions of the Brigade “rested and completed preparations for the forthcoming offensive at Passchendaele”. Brigadier-Generals Coffin and Blacklock, like many of their counterparts throughout the BEF, placed great value on these pre-attack briefings and practice exercises, which ensured staffs and subordinate officers “were efficient and also well briefed on the content and nuances of orders and battle plans” so they could direct operations in a brigade commander’s place “should he become a casualty or lose contact through a failure in communications”.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Captain V.F. Inglefield, *The History of the Twentieth (Light) Division* (London: Nisbet, 1922), p.55.

<sup>173</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section III, Preliminary Measures’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. p.7.

<sup>174</sup> Arthur & Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry*, p. 67, TNA: WO/95/2370: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary and Peter Simkins, ‘Building Blocks’: Aspects of Command and Control at Brigade Level in the BEF’s Offensive Operations 1916-1918’, in Sheffield & Todman (eds). *Command and Control on the Western Front*, p. 146.



**Plate 1.10 Brigadier-General C.A. Blacklock**  
(Source: IWM H82159)

The platoon<sup>175</sup> had been transformed into the basic sub-unit of manoeuvre within the BEF by the distribution of *S.S. 143 Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* in February 1917.<sup>176</sup> Its authors provided the infantry with a general blueprint for platoon re-organisation, whereby the integration of firepower technology with tactical independence and flexibility permitted the co-ordination of “Lewis Gun, rifle grenade and trench mortar fire with the advances carried out by riflemen and bombers”. Sophisticated ‘fire and movement’ drills carried out by these four component

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<sup>175</sup> A British infantry battalion consisted of four companies of four platoons each. A full-strength platoon was organised as follows:

HQ	1 Officer	4 ORs	
Bombing Section	1 NCO	8 ORs	8 men including two expert throwers and two bayonet men.
Lewis Gun Section	1 NCO	8 ORs	8 men including two gunners
Rifle Section	1 NCO	8 ORs	8 men including two marksmen and two scouts
Rifle Bomb Section	1 NCO	8 ORs	<u>8 men, four of them bomb firers.</u>

Total: 1 officer and 40 ORs

<sup>176</sup> See also General Staff training manuals *S.S. 144 The Normal Formation for the Attack* (February 1917) and *S.S.185 Assault Training* (September 1917).

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sections of specialists (operating as firepower and manoeuvre elements within the platoon) were now applied to overcome any resistance. “Great emphasis was placed on seeking out and turning the enemy’s flank in any circumstance and the initiative of the platoon commander was favoured”.<sup>177</sup> This was, as Tim Cook points out, “never that easy, as there were often no gaps within the interlocking defensive fields of fire, but infantrymen had a more flexible organisation and system of weapons which better allowed them to fight their way forward when the artillery barrage broke down, as it often did”. All of this, nevertheless, “blended with an increasing confidence in the gunner’s ability to lay down effective creeping barrages”, thereby transforming British low-level tactics and battle performance in 1917-18.<sup>178</sup>

*S.S. 143* was based on battle experience gained during the Somme offensive in 1916.<sup>179</sup> Instruction in the prescribed platoon battle drills – debate over their complete acceptance and standardization throughout the BEF continued well into 1918 – became the basis of routine pre-assault training, so battalions of 25 and 97 brigades, simulating attacks across specially prepared practice fields in waves or lines of columns, rigorously

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<sup>177</sup> Lee, ‘British Divisions on the Menin Road Ridge, 20 September 1917’, in Sheffield & Todman (eds) *Command and Control on the Western Front*, p. 120.

<sup>178</sup> John Lee, ‘Some Lessons of the Somme: The British Infantry in 1917’ in Brian Bond *et al*, ‘*Look to Your Front: Studies in the First World War* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), p. 80 and Tim Cook, ‘Storm Troops: Combat Effectiveness and the Canadian Corps in 1917’, in Peter Dennis & Jeffrey Grey (eds), *1917: Tactics, Training and Technology* (Commonwealth of Australia, Australian History Military Publications, 2007), p. 48.

<sup>179</sup> Controversy over *S.S. 143* continued throughout 1917. Lieutenant-General Ivor Maxse (GOC XVIII Corps) observed in a letter (9 December 1917) to Brigadier-General Charles Bonham Carter (DGT GHQ) that its authors ‘had not grasped what kind of men were commanding platoons. They try to cram a Staff College education into a pamphlet ... it is a fine performance but bewilders our platoon commanders and people like me. If they would be simple and teach a few points in each pamphlet I think they would produce better results’. Nevertheless, Brigadier-General Arthur Solly-Flood’s (Bonham-Carter’s predecessor and chief author of *S.S. 143*) pamphlet contributed to stabilization of the BEF’s tactical structure and the shift of Lewis Gun assets from company to platoon level. See Shelford Bidwell & Dominic Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons & Theories of War 1904-1945* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004), p. 127.

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rehearsed manoeuvres against mock objectives in the days leading up to Zero. The increased proficiency gained during these exercises would, perhaps, also mitigate any infantry apprehension about the absence of an orthodox artillery barrage from the impending operation's first stage.<sup>180</sup>

That stage, it will be recalled, was not subordinate to an artillery plan; it was up to the infantry to surprise and overrun the German advanced posts before the inevitable defensive barrage was called for. Batteries of VIII Corps, II Corps and attached divisions were, however, still an important component to this hybrid set-piece assault. Field artillery was tasked with providing fire support after the *Vorfeldzonelinie* was overwhelmed, whilst heavy guns searched approach roads, bombarded assembly areas, and places where support and reserve battalions were disposed. Counter-battery groups were expected to continue with their main task: suppression of deadly artillery concentrations opposite the Passchendaele Salient.

Eight field artillery brigades and one Heavy Artillery Group<sup>181</sup> would support 8<sup>th</sup> Division's attack.<sup>182</sup> Major-General Heneker requested that the 'Northern Bombardment Group' (62<sup>nd</sup> HAG – a Corps artillery asset) be placed under his orders for the necessary

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<sup>180</sup> For a detailed survey of the new platoon tactics see General Staff Training Manual SS 143, *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* (14 February 1917) and Lee, 'Some Lessons of the Somme', Bond *et al*, *Look to Your Front*, pp. 79-87.

<sup>181</sup> Heavy Artillery Groups (typically of five batteries each) were organised and reorganised as best suited the situation in the sector they were deployed. These regiment-sized units consisted of siege batteries (6 in., 8 in., 9.2 in or 12 in. howitzers, or 12 in. or 14 in. railway guns) or a mixed or double grouping of siege and heavy batteries (60 pdr.). See Dale Clarke & Brian Delf, *British Artillery 1914-19: Heavy Artillery* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), pp 12-14.

<sup>182</sup> The field artillery (18 pdr. and 4.5 in. howitzer) consisted of four brigades from 8<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> divisions and four Army field artillery brigades. See TNA: WO/95/1677: '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instruction No. 1, 22 November 1917', '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 8, 25 November 1917', '8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 247, 26 November 1917', '8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G.97/1/2A, 29 November 1917' and 'Addendum No. 1 to 8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 247', 29 November 1917', 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

## Chapter 1

artillery preparation prior to the assault: “This arrangement had worked excellently on several occasions this year when I [Heneker] was operating in similar conditions under the orders of the G.O.C XV Corps”.<sup>183</sup> VIII Corps HQ acquiesced, but required the GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division to submit his orders to Brigadier General H.D.O. Ward (GOCRA VIII Corps) for co-ordination.<sup>184</sup>

Work continued with all available labour on repairing and extending VIII Corps roads and tramlines under deadly enfilade fire from the right flank. This effort greatly improved supply routes to field batteries on the Abraham Heights – Boeteleer Line and the newly placed heavy guns on the Windmill Cabaret Ridge. The guns (the maximum range of the 18-pounder field gun and 4.5-inch howitzer was 7,000 yards) on the former position were now approximately 3,000 yards from Venison Trench and its environs. Both field and heavy batteries, however, still remained dangerously bunched and vulnerable to shelling by German counter-batteries.

The eight field artillery brigades directly supporting the night attack were designated ‘Right (or 32<sup>nd</sup> Divisional) Group’, which consisted of sixteen batteries from

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<sup>183</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> Division had been attached to XV Corps (GOC Lieutenant-General Sir J.P. Du Cane) in early 1917. It participated in the night operation near Bouchavesnes (4 March) and followed up the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line (24 March to 5 April). It was during the latter operations that 8<sup>th</sup> Division successfully launched a number of night attacks to secure Sorel and Fins (30 March) and, marching by compass ‘during a wild and snowy night’, the big village of Gouzeaucourt near Cambrai (12 April). See Major A.F. Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions, Part 1 - The Regular British Divisions* (London: HMSO, 1934), p. 95, Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, *The Eighth Division 1914-1918*, (London: Naval & Military Press, 2002 reprint of 1926 edition), Chapter VIII and Falls, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 1*, pp. 120-22, 154-55 and 526.

<sup>184</sup> See TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division. No. G.97/1/1.’, 18 November 1917 and VIII Corps G.1990, 21 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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1<sup>st</sup>, 32<sup>nd</sup>, 63<sup>rd</sup> divisions and two attached army brigades.<sup>185</sup> Divisional batteries were under orders of II Corps GOCRA (Brigadier-General Kirby) for the purpose of co-ordination and distribution of instructions and barrage tables.<sup>186</sup>

A formidable array of siege and heavy batteries were also deployed to support 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's attack. These guns were laboriously shifted forward along corduroy roads and rail lines intersecting the devastated area west of the Langemarck – Winnipeg Road. Conveying them away from these avenues to carefully prepared off-road gun emplacements was the most trying ordeal.<sup>187</sup> As November drew to a close, II Corps' accumulated siege and heavy artillery consisted of (1) 15-inch howitzer served by a crew of Royal Marine Artillery, (4) 12-inch howitzers, (12) 9.2-inch howitzers, (24) 8-inch howitzers, (88) 6-inch howitzers, (42) 60 pdrs, (8) 6-inch Mark VII guns and (1) 9.2-inch gun.<sup>188</sup> Brigadier-General Kirby was able to surmount the difficulties of transporting east, across very bad ground, the required number of field artillery brigades. The newly sited batteries were now approximately 5,000 yards from targets on and about Vat Cottage Ridge. These accumulated field and heavy guns of II Corps, as in VIII Corps, still remained clustered and exposed to concentrated German artillery fire from the north, NW and east.

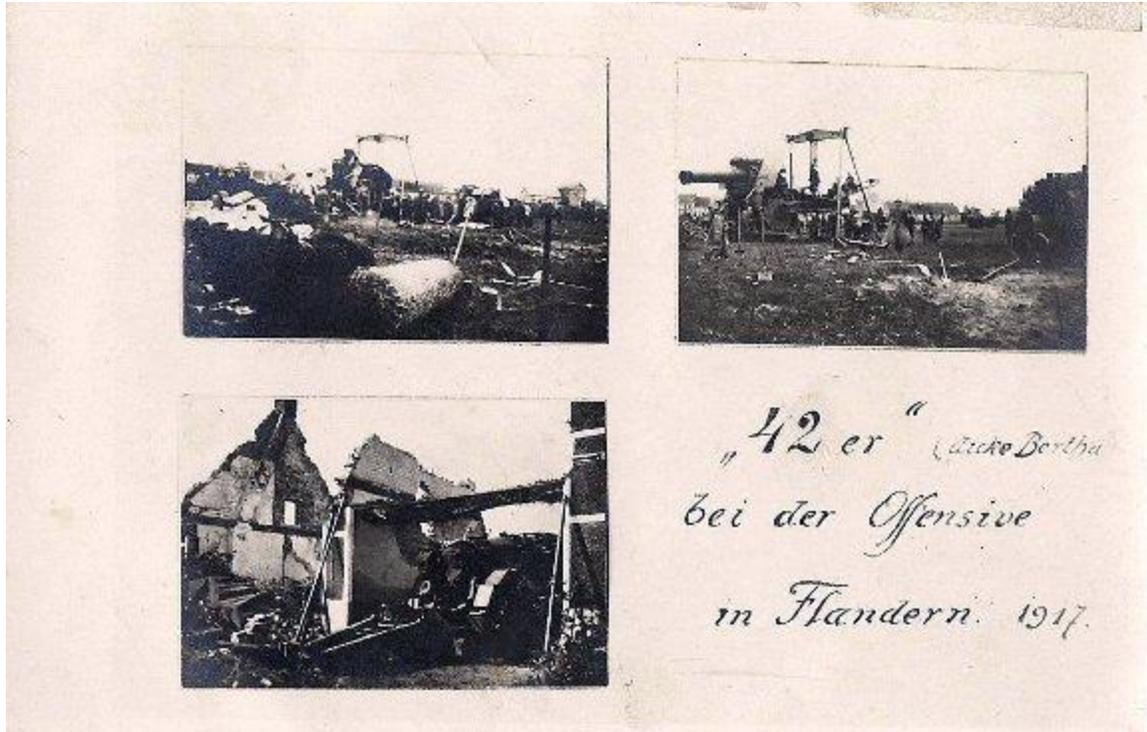
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<sup>185</sup> TNA: WO/95/643: 'Summary of Arrangements for Attack by II Corps, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1917', II Corps War Diary. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division artillery HQ distributed the necessary artillery instructions and amendments to field artillery brigades concerned during the period 28 November to 1 December 1917. See TNA: WO/95/2370: '32<sup>nd</sup> Division Artillery Instructions No. 7', 28 November, '32<sup>nd</sup> Divisional Artillery Group Instructions No. 15', 30 November and '32<sup>nd</sup> Divisional Artillery Group Instructions No. 18', 1 December, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid: 'II Corps Operation Order No. 167', 22 November 1917.

<sup>187</sup> See Major G. Goold Walker DSO (ed), *The Honourable Artillery Company in the Great War 1914-1919* (London: Seeley, Service & Co., 1930), pp. 378-79.

<sup>188</sup> TNA: WO/95/1643: 'Summary of Arrangements for Attack by II Corps, 29 November 1917', II Corps War Diary.



**Plate 1.11 German 4.2 cm howitzer**  
(Source: Author's Collection)

Much of the German shellfire encountered on the northern part of Second Army front came from artillery situated in the dead ground behind the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke portion of the main ridge. Flat terrain, westerly winds, foul weather, poor ground conditions, continuous bombardments and enemy employment of dummy batteries precluded effective use of sound ranging and flash spotting technology (responsible for detecting 75 percent of all German batteries by mid-1917)<sup>189</sup> to locate hostile guns for British counter-batteries.<sup>190</sup> The efficacy of flash spotting groups was also reduced because there were practically no observation posts between Houthulst Forest and Hill 60. Such posts that did exist were in captured pillboxes offering views to the NE. These structures, offering the only available cover for observers, were frequently

<sup>189</sup> David John Jordan, 'The Army Co-operation Missions of the Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force 1914-1918' (Unpublished PhD Thesis. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1997), p. 185.

<sup>190</sup> Air and ground lines for these units were also frequently cut by constant traffic across the battlefield.

## Chapter 1

defiladed by shellfire from the ridge. “That closest to the enemy was 5,000 yards from Passchendaele”.<sup>191</sup> Consequently, the counter-battery efforts of VIII Corps and II Corps relied primarily on the RFC to provide information on the locus of enemy battery positions. The airmen’s efforts were often hampered by bad visibility and mist.<sup>192</sup>

Sir Henry Rawlinson had been “anxious” about the massive concentrations of enemy guns opposite the Passchendaele Salient. He was also aware of the need (especially in II Corps) of obtaining necessary labour to “get enough guns forward”.<sup>193</sup> Much progress had been made by his subordinates in regard to improving the unsatisfactory artillery situation on VIII Corps and II Corps fronts in the weeks leading up to the next attack. Nevertheless, mastery of enemy battery concentrations had not been achieved during the second-half of November. The loss of guns to enemy counter-battery fire in the vicinity of the salient remained high – 58 heavy and 248 field guns being “knocked out” between 14 and 29 November.<sup>194</sup>

‘Second Army Artillery Instructions No. 28’ had been distributed to all corps HQs on 20 November. This considered change in previously applied artillery tactics was

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<sup>191</sup> See Peter Chasseaud, ‘Field Survey in the Salient: Cartography and Artillery Survey in the Flanders Operations in 1917’, Peter Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), pp. 117-39 for an excellent account of British sound ranging and flash spotting efforts during Third Ypres.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid and Jordan, ‘The Army Co-operation Missions of the Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force 1914-1918’, pp. 172-203 for RFC developments in air-artillery co-operation during 1916-17.

<sup>193</sup> CAC: RVLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 18 and 19 November 1917. The initial German defensive barrage, II Corps intelligence surmised, would ‘probably come down on the general line VENTURE FARM – GOUDBERG COPSE – TOURNANT FARM and a later period (between zero plus 15 min[ute]s and zero plus 1 hour) will be brought back to the line VAT COTTAGES – VOX FARM – TEALL COTTAGE, the shelling on the TOURNANT FARM – GOUDBERG COPSE sector coming from the west of WESTROOSEBEKE [;] on the GOUDBERG COPSE – TEALL COTTAGE sector from the east of WESTROOSEBEKE and later from the SE’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15 to V.30’ November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>194</sup> CAC: RVLN 1/10: Rawlinson Papers, ‘1917 & 1918 Documents Found Loose in War Journal’.

## Chapter 1

scheduled to commence during the lead up to what was still regarded as the tenth stage of operations<sup>195</sup> commencing with the Battle of the Menin Road on 20 September: “Whereas artillery attacks recently have taken the form of a series of continuous barrages, the attacks to be developed in the future will be in the nature of heavy concentrations upon areas and communications”.<sup>196</sup> In addition, corps BGRAs and their staffs were to make advanced arrangements to meet any heavy bombardment launched against the Passchendaele front. All corps were to maintain vigorous counter-battery work. The artillery of XIX Corps (GOC Lieutenant-General H.E. Watts) was to pay special attention to enemy concentrations<sup>197</sup> capable of bombarding the Passchendaele Ridge from the north and NW. Daily intense bombardments would occur on the fronts of II ANZAC Corps, VIII Corps and II Corps during dawn or dusk. Targets to be engaged were probable places of assembly and roads leading to and from these locations. The German forward area was to be searched simultaneously with shrapnel and machine-gun fire. “The time at which these attacks are developed and the localities against which they are directed” would be “varied frequently”.<sup>198</sup> Corps artillery schemes were to be based on all available intelligence. It was the “duty of those responsible for drawing up the plans to constantly think out the possible and probable action of the Germans if intending to attack on any particular day and to direct the fire accordingly”.<sup>199</sup> In the meantime,

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<sup>195</sup> Further efforts to capture the Passchendaele – Hill 50 – Spriet position were subsequently abandoned. The projected night attack was thus down-graded on 25 November from ‘tenth phase’ to that of ‘local operation’ conducted by VIII Corps and II Corps, a sideshow to on-going offensive operations at Cambrai. See TNA: WO/158/209 for annotated ‘Second Army Order No. 14’, 21 November 1917 and ‘Second Army No. 1/2 (G), Reference Second Army Order No. 14’, 25 November 1917, Second Army Operations File.

<sup>196</sup> LHCMA: ‘Second Army Artillery Instructions No. 28’, 20 November 1917, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/15, King’s College, London.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* The British knew these concentrations as ‘Houthulst Forest’, ‘Stadenreke’ and ‘Brim Polders Luike’ groups.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Chapter 1*

batteries were dispatched south from Second Army to Italy or in support of the Cambrai offensive with increased frequency. Sir Henry Rawlinson lamented the loss of further artillery assets: “Today we got an order to send away 22 Brigade Field Art[iller]y ... This will reduce us greatly [,] but still will leave us enough for defensive purposes. They are also reducing us very much in heavies”.<sup>200</sup> Adequate artillery support for pending operations at Passchendaele and Polderhoek Chateau had been arranged for; only a bare minimum of guns, constantly reduced by enemy action and breakage, remained to defend the Army front.

By late November Second Army had committed to two local operations designed to improve adverse sector-specific (Passchendaele – Westroosebeke and Polderhoek Chateau) situations along the Passchendaele Ridge. Units designated to carry out the fast-approaching large-scale night assault, regardless of having to jump off from disadvantageous positions inside the Passchendaele Salient, were tasked with seizing proximate objectives that appeared, given ready acceptance of a novel, albeit highly controversial hybrid attack plan, obtainable in the eyes of both Army and Corps HQs. Sir Henry Rawlinson confidently expressed this conviction one day before the assault: “I visited the XIX, II and VIII Corps today and was satisfied with the plans for the attack tomorrow night”.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 28 November 1917.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 30 November 1917.

## Divisional Instructions & Orders

*It is a beastly operation.*<sup>202</sup>

### 2.1 Standard Operating Procedure & Formulaic Approach

British and Dominion infantry divisions trained for offensive operations in three ways after December 1916: attacks on prepared trench positions; “the semi-open warfare of subsequent attacks on an enemy turned out of his main positions; and the longed for return to open warfare when the enemy was finally “on the run”. Pre-attack preparations and practice exercises for assaults on prepared positions were based on guidelines found in *S.S.135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* (issued by GHQ in December 1916).<sup>203</sup> This manual of ‘Standard Operating Procedure’ was an update of *S.S.119 Preliminary Notes of the Tactical Lessons of Recent Operations* (July 1916). By disseminating the operational methodology found in *S.S.135* throughout the BEF, “it was intended to get all British divisions working in a similar pattern of experience based on the Somme fighting” of the previous year.<sup>204</sup>

*S.S.135* contained thirty-three section headings and two appendices. It serves as a “useful reminder of just how complex an organisation was an infantry division of the period 1916 -18 and how much work had to go into the planning of an attack by its many

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<sup>202</sup> IWM: 66/541/1: Heneker Diary, 30 November 1917.

<sup>203</sup> *Field Service Regulations 1-Operations* (1909) still applied to open warfare. See Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), p. 64.

<sup>204</sup> John Lee, ‘Command and Control in Battle: British Divisions on the Menin Road Ridge, 20 September 1917’, in Gary Sheffield & Dan Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army’s Experience 1914-1918* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), p. 120.

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component parts". Each section of *S.S.135* was a means of addressing the problem of command and control on the battlefield. Commanders' intentions had to be clear and properly communicated to all component parts of the attacking force. Units were expected, after the commencement of an assault, to make the passing of accurate and timely information to command centres their highest priority. This kept superiors fully up to date as the battle unfolded. Development of an effective communications infrastructure that could withstand, as cables were cut by hostile bombardments and runners became casualties, collapse in battle thus became a crucial aspect of pre-assault planning and organisation. Standard pre-assault signal preparations at division level called for the forward extension of a buried cable system, and the adoption of brigade lines of communication manned by signallers organised into brigade forward parties. Wireless technology was still in its infancy; so telephones, telegraph, signal lamps, semaphore, carrier pigeons and runners were all utilized in order to provide multiple communication avenues.

Clarity of purpose during preparations was achieved before the issue of final operation orders by the distribution of a series of 'instructions' covering seventeen categories of preliminary organisation and work. These documents dealt with artillery organisation and scheme, the action of massed machine-guns, tanks, signal communications, boundaries and liaison with neighbouring formations, rights of passage on communication routes to the frontline, location of HQs, tasks to be assigned to pioneer battalions and Royal Engineers [RE], medical arrangements, handling of prisoners,

## Chapter 2

cooperation with Royal Flying Corps [RFC] contact aircraft and other myriad details that needed to be addressed before any set-piece assault.<sup>205</sup>

S.S. 135 also outlined the relationship and responsibilities of corps and division. Section I ('Issue of Orders by Divisional and Brigade Commanders') stated that Corps HQ would assign tasks, after which division would draw up the infantry plan. Division could issue its scheme to subordinates after review and approval by Corps. This procedure was expanded in Appendix A: "The Corps allots the task to be executed by Division. The Division Commander will be informed of the frontage, objectives, and assembly area allotted to his Division, as well as the artillery support he may expect and the action of the Divisions on his flank". Artillery plans were under the aegis (except for minor operations) of Corps. Barrage schemes would be co-ordinated by the Corps GOCRA after consultation with division, although the latter "were enjoined to suggest any modifications to the plan which might make success more likely".<sup>206</sup>

Section II ('Objectives') articulated the criteria divisions were to utilize when selecting objectives for the infantry in any one operation, so corps involvement was unnecessary. "But in the next section ('Co-Operation Between Artillery and Infantry') it became clear that artillery planning was very much the province of corps".<sup>207</sup> The control of virtually all artillery assets involved made corps HQs the highest operational unit in

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid. p. 122.

<sup>206</sup> Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), p. 64.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2

the BEF: “Army was mentioned in so far as it retained “general control” and would attend to the liaison between corps in consequence”.<sup>208</sup>

Second Army HQ updated *S.S.135* with the army-wide distribution of *Notes on Training and Preparations for Offensive Operations* on 31 August 1917.<sup>209</sup> This pamphlet particularly addressed German defensive measures encountered since the opening of the campaign on 31 July. “The defence in depth was to be overcome by an attack itself organised in great depth, with fresh formations leap-frogging forward to take each successive objective line, always covered by massive creeping and standing barrages, and with each subsequent advance to an objective being shorter than the one before it”. Assigned objectives were based on the infantry’s ability to carry out the task.<sup>210</sup>

Sir Herbert Plumer stressed the need for tactical flexibility: “The enemy has deliberately substituted flexibility for rigidity in his defence, and I think the response should be a corresponding flexibility in our attack”.<sup>211</sup> Gaps in the line did not worry the methodical GOC Second Army: “The old linear tactics were thoroughly redundant by the autumn of 1917”. Emphasis was also placed on the “need for every commander down to company level to keep a reserve in hand to meet and defeat the inevitable counter-attacks”.<sup>212</sup> The usual stress was placed on the need to pass on a steady stream of reliable

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>209</sup> See Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 2* (London: HMSO, 1948) Appendix XXV.

<sup>210</sup> Lee, ‘Command and Control in Battle’, in Sheffield & Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front*, p. 125.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. p.126.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

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information to command centres during an attack. Continued application of the guidelines found in *S.S.135* and the further amelioration of these methods in the booklet circulated by Second Army, provided a template for the measured operational success.<sup>213</sup> Deviations from certain aspects of this template (rushed preparations, unrealistic objectives, dilution of artillery fire support, etc.) combined with bad weather, unsatisfactory ground conditions and consequent logistical difficulties, contributed to the failures of 9 and 12 October. The return to the methodical pre-battle preparations and limited but realistic objectives agreed at a conference on 13 October led to the capture of Passchendaele, but also underlined the diminished post-strategic expectations of British GHQ.<sup>214</sup>

The reduction of Second Army's manpower and artillery assets limited further efforts to improve the local tactical situation on the Passchendaele Ridge after 20 November. Nevertheless, a pattern of tactical experience and increased operational tempo had evolved by the close of the offensive. Though the operations of 20 September to 12 October were "conducted with increasing frequency, they became steadily less successful as the Second Army advanced into a salient and the ground got worse, so ... it was not possible to sustain a tempo higher than the enemy's. The set-piece attack, however, organised by corps, had been fully developed".<sup>215</sup> Corps HQs acted as conduits of information from Army to division. This was a direct result of an increasingly formulaic

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> See Haig diary entry 13 October 1917 in 'The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig's Autograph Great War Diary', Parts 9-10 1917 (NLS Acc., 3155, Reel No. 5. 96, 97 and 141-53 (Brighton: Harvester Press Microfilm Publications LTD, 1987) and Sheffield & John Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 336.

<sup>215</sup> Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p. 224.

## Chapter 2

operational approach by Second and Fifth Armies after 20 September. Orders from Army HQ “almost invariably began with the words “Ref. ‘Attack Map” and objectives were marked on this map, as well as the stages of the attack being described in relation to it. Other than that, the orders were terse statements of the timetable, which corps were involved, any corps movements and when the attack should take place”.<sup>216</sup>

Although Corps remained the principal level of command responsible for the organisation of the battle, a trend, which began at Messines, toward allowing divisions more latitude with their artillery arrangements continued throughout the campaign.<sup>217</sup> This type of arrangement was demonstrated when VIII Corps agreed to allow 62<sup>nd</sup> HAG (a corps artillery asset) to be placed under Major-General Heneker’s command during artillery preparations for the forthcoming night attack, although a level of control was maintained with the stipulation that the GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division was required to submit his orders for review by the Corps GOCRA.<sup>218</sup>

Captain Guy Chapman (adjutant 13<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers) subsequently observed that “the winter of 1917-18 was more prolific of paper than any other period earlier or later”.<sup>219</sup> This evident increase in foolscap ‘bumf’ was indicative of complex operational/organisational details and the means to pass on such information throughout the BEF. The headquarters of 8<sup>th</sup> Division and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division would subsequently issue a

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid. p.106. Third Army’s offensive at Cambrai, groundbreaking use of massed tanks and predicted artillery barrage aside, was planned on similar lines: ‘Army issued its draft scheme in three parts, and ‘subject to such alterations as have already been approved by the Army Commander, the draft scheme will form the basis on which Corps will formulate their schemes’ ... Objectives were shown on attached maps and the principals of the operation ... were stressed’. Ibid p.116. See Appendix 3a.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, pp. 80 and 105.

<sup>218</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 74.

<sup>219</sup> Guy Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p. 223.

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routine plethora of attack orders, instructions and amendments to subordinate units between 18 and 30 November. The contents of these documents were in keeping with the standard operating procedures found in *S.S. 135*, GHQ generated manuals and pamphlets,<sup>220</sup> Second Army's *Notes on the Training and Preparations for Offensive Operations* and lessons learned and disseminated during the summer and autumn fighting.

### 2.2 8<sup>th</sup> Division

Major-General Heneker forwarded to VIII Corps HQ an outline proposal for 8<sup>th</sup> Division's part in the night operation following a meeting with Brigadier-General Aspinall on 18 November. An accompanying map detailed objectives, boundaries, jumping-off line and opening barrage line. A short advance by 25 Brigade of 100 to 300 yards would bring about the capture of Venison Trench and Northern and Southern redoubts on a frontage of 1,020 yards. The GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division believed three battalions would be sufficient to carry out this task – “right battalion holding the line and forming a defensive flank with about a company” south of Southern Redoubt; “centre and left battalions attacking”. The remaining battalion “would be in close support behind the jumping-off line”. Another full brigade would be in close support at Bellevue, Wieltje and St. Jean ready to take over the line on the evening following “Z[ero] / Z[ero] plus one if required”.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> *S.S.148 Forward Inter-Communication in Battle* (March 1917). Reprinted with amendments September 1917) and *S.S. 158 Notes on Recent Operations on the Front of First, Third, Fourth, Fifth Armies* (May 1917). The latter manual related lessons learned during the Battle of Arras.

<sup>221</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G. 97/1/1’, 18 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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Major-General Heneker proposed that 8<sup>th</sup> Division's attached MG companies (23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 218<sup>th</sup>)<sup>222</sup> should be employed in three ways: two companies detailed to form a covering barrage; one company with eight guns sited for close defence of the present front, whilst a further seven guns would be made ready for close defence of the captured area. A reserve company was to be retained at Wieltje "ready to take over the close defence of the forward area from the M.G. Co[mpany] last referred to if required".<sup>223</sup> Speculation that the "present allotment of artillery covering the divisional front was sufficient, was followed by a proposal that the forthcoming operation, supported by a barrage of "lifts of 100 yards in four minutes", should commence at dawn. VIII Corps HQ, as we have seen, subsequently denied this request because of II Corps' insistence for a night attack.<sup>224</sup>

Major-General Heneker observed that "first essential" attack preparations would concern overland communications. The only traversable road to the forward area extended across the elevated spine of the Bellevue Spur. One shell-swept road could not possibly accommodate the traffic of two divisions preparing to attack from the narrow salient. The solution was to lay two extensions of "No. 5 [duckboard] track to run just S[outh] of the Meetcheele [Bellevue] Spur and parallel to it..." These extensions would, after skirting the treacherous Ravebeek<sup>225</sup> quagmire's northern edge, be prolonged as far as the immediate vicinity of Vindictive Crossroads. There was, however, not enough

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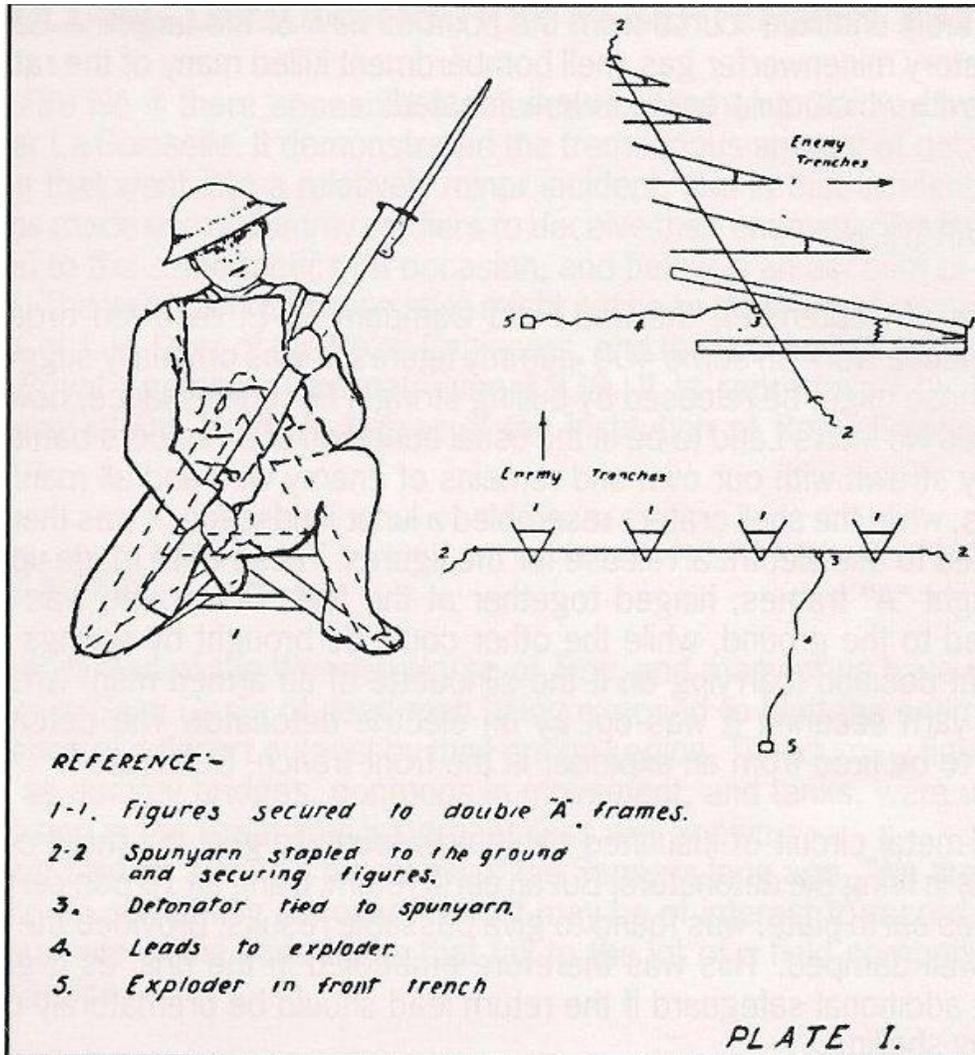
<sup>222</sup> A British machine-gun company consisted of 16 'Vickers .303 inch MK I' heavy machine-guns. A fourth company was added during 1917, thus providing 64 guns per division.

<sup>223</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: '8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G. 97/1/1', 18 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>224</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 54.

<sup>225</sup> This small watercourse, situated in a valley between the Passchendaele and Bellevue spurs, had, by 9 October, become a 'morass 30 to 50 yards wide, waist-deep in water in the centre'. See Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 2*, p. 331.

available labour to carry out this essential work and the construction of certain defended localities; the decision was, therefore, made “to give the duckboard tracks preference”.<sup>226</sup>



**Plate 2.1 Dummy Figure: Plan for construction and layout with electrical discharge method employed during ‘Chinese’ attacks at the time of Third Ypres (Source: Dyer, ‘A Holding Demonstration in September 1917’, *Gun Fire No. 6*) See fn. 228 below.**

Major-General Heneker next submitted a series of requests for VIII Corps’ consideration.<sup>227</sup> He asked that the supporting barrage be extended over the front of II

<sup>226</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G.97/1/1’, 18 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid. These requests concerned the pushing out of forward posts to hinder enemy work on the *Vorfeldzonelinie* opposite designate attack objectives, desired artillery scheme and organisation and the aforementioned application for a dedicated training area.

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ANZAC Corps, VIII Corps and II Corps to mask the actual frontage of the attack. To this end, it would be necessary for 33<sup>rd</sup> Division to cover 8<sup>th</sup> Division's right flank by placing a machine-gun barrage "down the spurs running N.E. and E by S. from Passchendaele", whilst launching a Chinese attack<sup>228</sup> combined with gas and smoke discharges just south of Passchendaele.<sup>229</sup>

The GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division also expressed the view that a boundary adjustment with II Corps should take place at an early date "so that divisions may prepare their own front of attack". He followed this by asking, "as soon as possible, for a précis of all available information about the German defences and topography south of my [Heneker's] present boundary and within my future one". This kind of information would, besides determining the most favourable locale for establishment of a new defensive flank, provide a basis for further sector intelligence gathering in the days leading up to the assault. VIII Corps HQ subsequently agreed to all Major-General Heneker's entreaties, except those concerning time of attack and artillery barrage arrangements. The requested boundary adjustment was scheduled to occur, Brigadier-General Aspinall remarked, "as

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<sup>228</sup> 'Chinese Attack' was contemporary parlance for a feigned assault. In this case, Heneker probably had in mind the employment of life-sized, plywood, cutout figures representing advancing British infantry. These *faux* soldiers would be released to rise vertically with hand-manipulated wires or electrically discharged detonators during accompanying smoke screen, artillery, machine-gun and gas barrages. Such mechanical ruses were designed to convince the enemy that they were under direct attack. 8<sup>th</sup> Division had previously (20 September) carried out one of these 'dummy shows' in the Lys valley sector opposite Warneton to support Second and Fifth armies' offensive operations (Battle of Menin Road) farther north. See Lieutenant-Colonel J. H. Dyer, 'A Holding Operation in September 1917' in *Gun Fire No. 6*, Series 2 (No date) reprint of June 1939 *Royal Engineers Journal* article, pp. 2-7 and the wonderful two-page illustration in Peter Barton, *Passchendaele: Unseen Panoramas of the Third Battle of Ypres* (London: Constable, 2007), pp. 376-77.

<sup>229</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: '8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G.97/1/1, 18 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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soon as you [Heneker] have completed the minor operation [to capture Hill 52 and Vox Farm] discussed at this afternoon's conference".<sup>230</sup>

'8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 1' was issued the following day. This document, the first of a series drawn up by proficient GSO 1 Lieutenant-Colonel Beddington, related the contents of 'VIII Corps Order No. 52' i.e., the notification of the resumption of the offensive, designated objectives, boundary adjustment, etc., to various attached HQs. 25 Brigade's selection to carry out the attack still scheduled for November 30/1December was also confirmed.<sup>231</sup>

'8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 242' was distributed at 8:30 p.m. on 23 November. This document dealt with further organisational details and the forthcoming divisional boundary adjustment (scheduled for the night of 24/25 November) previously related in 'VIII Corps Order No. 54'.<sup>232</sup> DMGOs from the three divisions concerned (8<sup>th</sup>, 32<sup>nd</sup>, 33<sup>rd</sup>) were to arrange for the relief of machine-gun companies during the night of 25/26 November. "Aeroplane photos, all intelligence details, and trench stores" were, as per usual procedure, to be handed over to incoming MG companies.<sup>233</sup>

Use of the single traversable road and distribution of limited available shelter for battalion HQs had already been negotiated between II Corps and VIII Corps: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division was to have "rights of traffic" along the Bellevue Spur – Vindictive Crossroads

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid: 'VIII Corps G. 1990', 21 November 1917. See fn. 60.

<sup>231</sup> See Appendix 6.

<sup>232</sup> See Appendix 3 4 b and 5 b.

<sup>233</sup> See TNA: WO/95/1677: '8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 242', 23 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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road. 8<sup>th</sup> Division had exclusive rights of traffic on the two yet to be extended duckboard avenues. The latter division, however, was permitted to use the road “for pack transport except when otherwise ordered from div[isional] HQ”. These occasions would “be rare and ample notice” given. 8<sup>th</sup> Division would also retain three battalion HQs and an aid post in designated pillboxes situated at Bellevue, Meetcheele and Mosselmarkt.<sup>234</sup>

The first order of business of ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2’ (25 November) notified the cancellation of preliminary operations to capture Hill 52 and Vox Farm. General information concerning the allotment of the two duckboard tracks, battalion HQs, etc., in the vicinity of the Bellevue Spur was then restated. Units were, however, not to use the road (previously allotted to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division) that ran the length of the spur “between dusk and zero hour on the night before the attack”. Specific details concerning pre-attack boundaries between 8<sup>th</sup> Division, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division and 33<sup>rd</sup> Division followed.<sup>235</sup>

Liaison between brigades was spelled out in detail: 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade (CO Lieutenant-Colonel Hon. Roger Brand DSO)<sup>236</sup>, left-hand assault battalion of 25 Brigade, was required to maintain close touch with the battalion on its immediate left. To this end, Brigadier-General Coffin was to “get in touch” with Brigadier-General Blacklock (GOC 97 Brigade), who would “insure that the O.C., 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, left company and

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid. Signaller Corporal Eric Rossiter (7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion) described his unit’s Mosselmarkt pillbox HQ as ‘thick-walled and partitioned inside into four chambers...The walls were thick enough to withstand most light shells, but as it was a German construction the door and several slanted, narrow windows faced the German lines’. See Richard Baumgartner (ed), ‘Death Fugue in Flanders,’ *Der Angriff: A Journal of World War I Military History* (November 1982) p. 28-29.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2’, 25 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>236</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Hon. Roger Brand (1880-1945). Fifth son of the Second Viscount Hampden. Commissioned Rifle Brigade from the Militia 1900; South Africa 1900-02; resigned commission 1910; Lieutenant 5<sup>th</sup> (Special Reserve Battalion) Rifle Brigade August 1914; 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade: Lieutenant, Captain, Major, A/Lieutenant Colonel 1914-16; DSO 1915; CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade February 1916.

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platoon commanders of that Battalion have thoroughly discussed the operation and their part in it, with the O.C. 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and the right company and platoon commanders of that battalion".<sup>237</sup> A liaison officer would also be detailed to make certain that "touch was maintained with 32<sup>nd</sup> Division throughout the operations".<sup>238</sup> Similar arrangements were to be made between assault battalions of 25 Brigade.<sup>239</sup> In the event of Coffin becoming a casualty, "command of the brigade would devolve" on Lieutenant-Colonel Brand. The GOC 25 Brigade, the instructions also stipulated, was to establish his HQ in one of the forlorn pillboxes astride the Bellevue Spur. In keeping with Section 30 of *S.S.135*, a number of officers and men from each battalion were chosen to remain behind before the attack. These select personnel would, if necessary, provide a readily available nucleus for unit reconstruction and absorption of new drafts should heavy losses occur.<sup>240</sup>

*S.S. 135* also observed that officers and men "should not be overburdened with maps",<sup>241</sup> so a single map ('Message Map No. 27 1/10,000') was issued to be carried

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<sup>237</sup> CO and OC: Technically these terms are not interchangeable in the British Army, 'CO' being the officer in command of a battalion, artillery brigade, RE company, etc. 'OC' is the officer appointed to command a sub-unit or ad-hoc grouping. This was normally an infantry company or artillery battery or, for example, a body of men on a train i.e., 'OC troops' or 'OC train'. Nevertheless, anachronistic usage of OC in reference to battalion commanders is prevalent in a large number of consulted contemporary documents. The aforementioned accepted terminology will be used, exclusive of direct quotations, throughout this study.

<sup>238</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2', 25 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. In addition, the 'G.O.C. 25<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde' would 'arrange that units are especially told off to fill any gaps that may occur, especially at the flanks of battalions, and in particular on the left flank of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade'.

<sup>240</sup> 'Officers and other ranks will be left out of the action in accordance with section XXX of *S.S.135* 'Instructions for the Training of Divisions in [sic] Offensive Action'. See Ibid: '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2', 25 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>241</sup> See Section XXXIII. 'Documents and Maps', General Staff Training Manual *S.S.135, Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* (December 1916).

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forward into action.<sup>242</sup> Red ground flares, originally chosen for communicating with designated RFC contact aircraft, were subsequently exchanged for green flares the following day (26 November).<sup>243</sup>

POW arrangements were organised as follows: Prisoner escorts from 25 Brigade were to hand over captives to an escort detail of two platoons from 22<sup>nd</sup> Durham Light Infantry [DLI] (8<sup>th</sup> Division Pioneers) near Waterloo Farm.<sup>244</sup> Prisoners would then “be escorted thence to the div[isional] cage... where they will be taken over by the APM”.

Escorts were to be of the following approximate strength:

- Up to 5 prisoners – Escort of 1
- From 5 to 19 – Escort of 2
- Over 10 – In proportion of 1 escort to every 10 prisoners

Lightly wounded men were expected, “as far as possible”, to act as escorts. No examination of prisoner documents was to occur forward of the divisional cage, where all captured officers and men would be searched under the supervision of the divisional APM. Any documents found on the person of a POW were to be “tied in separate bundles for each prisoner and docketed with labels stating the owner’s name, rank and regiment.

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<sup>242</sup> The reverse side listed eleven *pro forma* situation statements that required completion by company and platoon commanders during action. Sample statements were: ‘My Company/Platoon has reached \_\_\_\_, My Company/Platoon has consolidated \_\_\_\_, I need Ammunition, bombs, rifle grenades, water, etc., Counter-attack forming up at \_\_\_\_, I am in touch on right/left at \_\_\_\_’. Annotated maps would be sent back by runner to Battalion HQ. The practice of issuing this type of tactical map to battalions was a further attempt to facilitate communications with men at the sharp end of an assault. See TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Message Map No. 127, 1/10,000’, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid: 8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 3’, 26 November 1917.

<sup>244</sup> The prisoner escort detail from 22<sup>nd</sup> DLI was to be in position by Zero - 30 minutes, ‘and will report their arrival to 25<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. HQ., [at] Bellevue. The OC party will post sentries...to direct escorts of 25 Inf. Bde. with prisoners of war to their positions’. See Ibid: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 5’, 27 November 1917 and ‘Amendment No. 1 to 8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 5’, 28 November 1917.

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All such bundles were to be “handed over to the divisional IO for transmission to VIII Corps”.<sup>245</sup>

Instructions No. 2 also detailed organisation for the evacuation of casualties. Standard practice allowed for an injured Tommy to be carried by stretcher-bearers (usually 32 per battalion) as far as the regimental aid post [RAP], commanded by the regimental medical officer, “where essential first aid was carried out, splints were applied as necessary, and the wounded sorted out as well as possible into groups for treatment”.<sup>246</sup> This was followed by transport to the brigade field ambulance and beyond. “It was common to need eight men to carry a stretcher in the Ypres salient in 1917, and both bearers and casualties – if they arrived at all – would be exhausted by the time they reached a suitable aid post”.<sup>247</sup> The regimental aid posts of the attacking left and centre battalions would be situated at Mosselmarkt. The aid post of the right battalion was to be established in the northern outskirts of Passchendaele.<sup>248</sup> Stretcher-bearers of the left and centre battalions were made responsible for clearing the ground of casualties as far as the RAP at Mosselmarkt. The bearers of the right battalion were expected to “clear [casualties] from their regimental aid post to Mosselmarkt”.<sup>249</sup>

The CO 25 Field Ambulance was responsible for evacuation of the wounded. To accomplish this herculean task, a total of 260 stretcher-bearers were placed at his

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 3’, 26 November 1917. For a general outline of the POW handling organisation by division and corps see James Beach, ‘British Intelligence and the German Army, 1914-1918’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis. London: University College, 2004), pp. 28-29.

<sup>246</sup> Geoffery Noon, ‘The Treatment of Casualties in the Great War’, in Paddy Griffith (ed), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 97.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>248</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2’, 25 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

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disposal. The transport of wounded from aid posts situated at Mosselmarkt would be achieved by “hand carriage” down the Bellevue Spur road, and along No. 5 track to Waterloo Farm. From there, stretcher parties would carry their loads westward along the section of road Gravenstafel – Wieltje, as far as the advanced dressing station [ADS] at Somme Redoubt.<sup>250</sup> This insalubrious accumulation of trenches, tunnels and dugouts, subsequently described – along with Waterloo Farm – in one Field Ambulance history as “dirty holes”, was where “emergency primary surgery, particularly in arresting haemorrhage” would be carried out.<sup>251</sup> These complicated medical procedures had, “after it became apparent that lack of delay was vital for many types of wounds”, become routine undertakings for ADS personnel by 1917.<sup>252</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s wounded would, following treatment at Somme Redoubt, be transported by motor ambulance to the ‘VIII Corps Main Dressing Station’ [CMDS] at Ypres Prison.<sup>253</sup>

Instructions No. 2 concluded by providing schemes for brigade reliefs before and after the attack: 25 Brigade was scheduled to relieve 23 Brigade the night before; a brigade from 14<sup>th</sup> Division was scheduled to relieve 25 Brigade the night after. Three assault battalions of the latter (2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade) were to march to assembly positions from camps in the vicinity of Wieltje and St Jean on the eve of the attack. Assigned routes extended along the “Wieltje – Bellevue Road, thence the northern extension of No. 5 Track, No. 5 Track and its

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Anonymous, *With the Forty-Fourths: Being a Record of the doings of the 44<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance (14<sup>th</sup> Division)* (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne & Co., 1922), p. 47 and Noon, ‘The Treatment of Casualties in the Great War’ in Griffith (ed), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*, p. 98.

<sup>252</sup> Noon, ‘The Treatment of Casualties in the Great War’, in Griffith (ed), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*, p. 98.

<sup>253</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2’, 25 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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southern extension” to the frontline positions held by the remaining battalion (1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles [RIR]) of the brigade.<sup>254</sup>

Instructions No. 3 were issued the following day. 25 Brigade was informed that an RE 8 contact plane of No. 21 Squadron would “fly over the attack area at 7:30 a.m. or as soon as the weather is sufficiently clear, and will call for flares by sounding its KLAXON HORN and by firing Very lights”. This low-flying aircraft would be distinguished by placement of a “black plaque extending behind the lower planes and a dumbbell [the squadron sign] painted on the fuselage”.<sup>255</sup> The most advanced infantry posts were, in response to a plane bearing these markings, “to light green flares and wave Watson Fans”.<sup>256</sup> The discharge of coloured flares, which burned for approximately one minute, along the extreme front of a captured objective proved to be the most satisfactory means for troops to signal from newly captured positions. “So successful did this method prove, that it became part of operation orders for an attack, that flares were to be lighted by troops at intervals along their frontline, and in all blocks, sap-heads, and other advanced positions...”<sup>257</sup> A ‘Contact Counter-attack aircraft’ would also be aloft the

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 3’, 26 November 1917. No.21 Squadron was formed at Netheravon in July 1915. Dispatched to France in January 1916, it initially operated in an army role until being converted to a corps reconnaissance squadron in February 1917. Attached to VIII Corps in November 1917, its aerodrome was situated near La Lovie. See Air of Authority – A History of RAF Organisation <<http://www.rafweb.org/Sqn021-25.htm>> and TNA AIR 1/1186/204/5/2595: ‘Location of R.F.C. Units – 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1917,’ RFC War Diary.

<sup>256</sup> Watson Signalling Fan: A visual shutter device apparatus designed for signaling over short distances. Inconspicuous when closed up, when spread out on the ground with its face uppermost, it was utilized to point out the presence of troops to contact planes. See R.E. Priestley, *The Signal Service in the European War of 1914 to 1918 (France)* (Chatham: The Institution of Royal Engineers & Signals Association, 1921), p. 139.

<sup>257</sup> Air Historical Branch, *The Royal Air Force in the Great War* (Nashville, Tennessee: Battery Press, 1996 reprint of 1936 edition), p. 118.

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morning after the assault for the “special purpose of locating and notifying by wireless any enemy counter-attack”.<sup>258</sup>

The establishment of a complex communications network facilitated the passing of reliable information to divisional, brigade, battalion and artillery commanders. ‘Diagram A’, attached to instructions No. 3, laid out the divisional scheme: Three cable routes (buried, ground, ladder) were to extend from 8<sup>th</sup> Division HQ (situated at Canal Bank) through brigade HQ at Wieltje, Gallipoli Dugouts and Korek (near Gravenstafel) as far as Bellevue.<sup>259</sup> A single ladder line was also to be extended from Bellevue to left battalion HQ at Meetcheele. Two more ladder lines were to be run from Meetcheele to the south and east, as far as battalion HQs situated near Passchendaele and Mosselmarkt. Three wireless stations were to be established along the cable route Wieltje – Bellevue, while a VIII Corps continuous wave [CW] wireless set was to be setup in the forward area. Nine visual signal stations were to be established at Gallipoli Dugouts, Bellevue, Meetcheele, Mosselmarkt, and with the five companies holding the frontline. Runner relay posts were also to be established along routes extending from company HQs to Meetcheele, Bellevue and Korek.<sup>260</sup>

‘Diagram B’ illustrated the ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Artillery Group’ liaison scheme. Three buried cables were to be run eastward from 8<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> divisional artillery HQs at Canal

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<sup>258</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 3’, 26 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>259</sup> Telephone cable was extremely vulnerable to shellfire. In an attempt to counter this, lines would be laid above ground in a ladder pattern in order to provide multiple redundant paths.

<sup>260</sup> A buried lateral line ran north from Gallipoli Dugouts to the support brigade HQ of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division at Kansas Cross and south to the right brigade of 33<sup>rd</sup> Division. Another buried cable extended from Bellevue to the frontline brigade HQ of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division located at Kronprinz Farm. See TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Communication Scheme: Diagram A, 8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 3’, 26 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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Bank to Gallipoli Dugouts. Two more buried lines were to be extended from the latter location as far as Korek, where additional buried and overland cable routes, placed by the gunners, had already been extended to Brigade HQ at Bellevue. The VIII Corps forward zone wireless station was also to be placed in direct touch with a station situated near the divisional artillery HQs. Five visual signalling stations (established at Korek, Bellevue, Passchendaele, Meetcheele and Mosselmarkt) were assigned to support the artillery. Lateral cables were also to be extended – from a cable junction situated between Canal Bank and the exchange at Gallipoli Dugouts – north and south to supporting batteries.<sup>261</sup> By the close of November, 8<sup>th</sup> Division's communications infrastructure had been successfully extended west to east for approximately 11,000 yards from Canal Bank to the apex of the Passchendaele Salient.

Instruction numbers 4 and 5 followed on 27 November. The former related detailed information concerning attack preparations by 8<sup>th</sup> Division's four attached machine-gun companies. Company commanders were to arrange for at least 15,000 rounds per gun to be concealed in positions constructed during a night selected by the DMGO. They would also ensure that new barrels were utilized and depression stops issued; wooden tripod stands were to be used for anti-aircraft work, while "calculations made for the error of the day" would be based on current meteorological reports. All machine-gun companies, excluding those designated for close defence of the captured area, were to be placed under the direct command of the DMGO throughout the attack. The seven designated close defence guns would be under orders of the GOC 25 Brigade.

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid: '8<sup>th</sup> D.A. Group Liason [sic] Scheme: Diagram B, 8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 3', 26 November 1917.

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Four tables of data concerning earmarked machine-gun sites to be occupied before the attack, along with barrage scheme details, were attached.<sup>262</sup>

Instructions No. 5 provided detailed schematic drawings of battle insignia worn by 2<sup>nd</sup> King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry [KOYLI] (right battalion of 97 Brigade). Both 8<sup>th</sup> Division and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division had instituted a complex scheme of patches for identification purposes, so it was necessary for officers and men of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade to distinguish those worn on sleeves and below the collar of the neighbouring battalion. Information concerning the whereabouts of 97 Brigade HQ followed: "KANSAS at present ... at CANAL BANK" on the 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>263</sup> Battalion HQs for 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade and 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI would be established at Meetcheele. A liaison officer from 25 Brigade was to be attached to 97 Brigade HQ throughout the operation. The GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division Artillery (Brigadier-General H.G. Lloyd DSO) was also expected to detail "a senior liaison officer to be at Headquarters 25 Inf. Bde. during the operations, and for a liaison officer to be with each attacking battalion HQ".<sup>264</sup>

Special precautions, organised before the assault by "mutual arrangement" between 25 Brigade and 97 Brigade, were taken "to ensure that 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade and 2<sup>nd</sup> K.O.Y.L.I. are in touch on [the] forming up line". A party of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Company RE was to be placed at the disposal of the GOC 25 Brigade "to assist in placing the [jumping-off] tapes in position". All arrangements would be made directly between 25

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid: '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 4', 27 November 1917.

<sup>263</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI were at Dambre Camp near Vlamertinghe.

<sup>264</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 5', 27 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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Brigade and 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Company. In addition, the CRE was to have maintenance parties situated along the two assigned duckboard tracks on the night of assembly.<sup>265</sup>

Instructions No. 5 next addressed the on-going consolidation of positions currently held by 23 Brigade. Brigadier-General Grogan's infantry, whilst continuing to strengthen the forward line of posts, were to see that "three platoon posts in the frontline as taken over from 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division are made strong with good firesteps, and inconspicuous wire put round them." Four additional mutual supporting platoon posts, covering gaps between front posts, were to be established some 300 yards to the rear. These positions would be constructed and wired on similar lines to the existing front posts. Brigadier-General Coffin was required to supply garrisons for the posts "and will arrange that they carry up wire with them to strengthen that already put out". Captured ground was required to be "consolidated in depth in posts". The bulk of available Lewis Guns would be pushed forward to the final objective to repel inevitable German counter-attacks.<sup>266</sup>

Brigadier-General Coffin was, as per Instructions No. 5, also to arrange for one battalion (1<sup>st</sup> RIR) less one company, to be placed south of Mosselmarkt and Meetcheele, to "immediately counter-attack any enemy counter-attack". The most likely fronts where a strong German counter-attack would originate were listed in order of importance:

- WRANGLE FARM from low ground in W. 19 Central
- WRATH FARM – the approach is very narrow

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

- WRATH FARM – WRAP COTTAGE from about WRITTEN FARM

Immediate local counter-attacks could also be expected to emerge from shell hole positions about Wrath Farm and Salter's Corner. All of these sites were situated on the gently sloping ground beyond Venison Trench and its redoubts. In conclusion, the assaulting infantry were reminded that they must "rely on their own rifles, bayonets, and Lewis Guns" when confronted by enemy counter-attack.<sup>267</sup>

Instructions No. 6 followed on the 28<sup>th</sup>: Two battalions (2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade) were, on the eve of the attack, to proceed – via the Wieltje – Bellevue road and No. 5 track and its southern extension – from camp sites south of St Julian approximately 6,500 yards to jumping-off positions NE of Passchendaele. The remaining two battalions (2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire would now deploy on the right of 1<sup>st</sup> RIR) would take over the frontline two nights before the attack.<sup>268</sup> Overland routes assigned to machine-gun units and their mule transport were also related. Traffic control posts would be established by the divisional APM at selected points along assigned avenues of approach. The divisional CRE was to arrange for additional notice boards to be erected as a guide to troops traversing duckboard tracks. In addition, Brigadier-General Coffin was to make certain that the un-planked routes beyond the end of No. 5 Track and its extension were thoroughly reconnoitered and marked with white

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> 63<sup>rd</sup> RND's educative after-action report noted: 'It is suggested that when, as at present, objectives are strictly limited, the assaulting troops should only be brought into the line just before Zero, and should be withdrawn on the evening following the attack, their places in the new line being taken by troops holding the original line, who, during the attack, would act as a reserve. If this were done the assaulting troops could be relieved of much weight, and need only carry one day's rations'. See Leonard Sellers (ed), 'Western Front: Report on Operations During the Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele, 24<sup>th</sup> October to 5<sup>th</sup> November 1917', *RND: Royal Naval Division. Antwerp, Gallipoli & Western Front 1914-1918*, Issue Number 22 (September 2002), p. 2184.

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posts as far as the jumping-off positions. German patrols were to be kept at arm's length: "Wherever forming up will take place within 250 yards of our [8<sup>th</sup> Division] present advanced line of posts, posts will be pushed out to cover it. This will be done nightly till the assault".<sup>269</sup>

Instructions No. 6 next addressed machine-gun communications, anti-aircraft measures and reports. The DMGO and his signal counterpart were to cooperate by organizing runners and visual signaling stations for machine-gun companies. The experience on 10 November demonstrated the need for infantry to be able to defend against marauding German aircraft: "The G.O.C. 25 Inf. Bde. will arrange that heavy rifle and Lewis Gun fire is brought to bear on all hostile low-flying aeroplanes. It is of the utmost importance that they should be brought down or driven off at once, as accurate and heavy hostile shelling of our position is sure to follow a successful reconnaissance at a low height". One machine-gun per company was also equipped for anti-aircraft duties during daylight hours.<sup>270</sup>

Instructions No. 6 concluded by stressing the importance of maintaining communications throughout the attack. A confirmation report verifying the completion of the forming-up of 25 Brigade would be forwarded to 8<sup>th</sup> Division HQ prior to Zero; situation reports were to follow at Zero + 40 minutes and every half-hour afterwards till

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<sup>269</sup> See TNA: WO/95/1677: '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 6', 28 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force: 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), p. 326 and Lieutenant-Colonel H.S. Jervis, *The 2<sup>nd</sup> Munsters in France* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1922), p. 39.

<sup>270</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 6', 28 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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Zero + 8 hours 45 minutes. Brigadier-General Coffin was to impress on all ranks “the importance of frequent reports giving full information in writing or on situation maps”.<sup>271</sup>

‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 247’ was circulated the same day as Instructions No. 6.<sup>272</sup> It began by stating that VIII Corps was to continue offensive operations on a date “which has been communicated to all concerned”. This was followed by recapitulation of the operational details previously articulated in the series of instructions forwarded to subordinate formations since 22 November:

- The 32<sup>nd</sup> Division (II Corps) will attack on the left of [,] and simultaneously with 8<sup>th</sup> Division. The 33<sup>rd</sup> Division, on the right of 8<sup>th</sup> Division [,] will not be attacking.
- The attack of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division will be carried out by 25<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde., H.Q., Bellevue.
- The objective of the division and its boundaries, are shown on map G.31 issued with 8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 1 of 22 November.
- The attack will take place at an hour zero [sic]; which will be notified later.
- At zero hour the infantry will advance to the assault.

25 Brigade was tasked with advancing to the objective line; old enemy trenches were, “so far as possible”, to be avoided, but final consolidation “must be in depth”.<sup>273</sup>

Machine-gun companies attached to 23 and 25 Brigades were ordered to support the assault by placing an indirect barrage<sup>274</sup> immediately behind Venison Trench and its

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid: Orders No. 243 (Movement and billeting of machine-gun companies), 244 (Details of relief of 8<sup>th</sup> Division by 14<sup>th</sup> Division following the attack), 245 (Brigade reliefs from 29 November to 1 December), and 246 (Cancellation and substitution of Order No. 244), were issued during 24 to 28 November.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 247’, 28 November 1917.

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redoubts at Zero + 8.<sup>275</sup> The barrage would lift to a “M.G. S.O.S barrage line” further forward at Zero + 9 (**Map 5**). Here it would remain until Zero + 25. Harassing fire would be maintained on this line at intervals from Zero + 37 to Zero + 6 hours and 10 minutes, “and on the afternoon after the attack from 3:00 p.m. till 6:18 p.m.”<sup>276</sup>

24 Brigade machine-guns – less seven guns – would deal with German counter-attacks originating beyond the M.G. S.O.S barrage line by searching “all avenues of approach east of that line” from Zero + 15 to Zero + 16 hours and twenty-minutes, “and on the afternoon after the attack from 3:00 p.m. till 6:20 p.m”. The remaining seven guns would be “employed for close defence” of the captured area. Machine-gun companies of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division and 33<sup>rd</sup> Division would prolong the “M.G. S.O.S. barrage line to the S[outh] and N[orth] respectively, and would “be searching all enemy approaches on their fronts under similar arrangements.” All machine-gun units were to be in “allotted positions for the attack by Zero - 2 hours”.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> ‘The British began to develop use of MGs *en masse* to provide covering fire for their infantry as one solution to the enemy’s own MGs’. Machine-guns were employed from the Somme onwards ‘for overhead fire to cover advancing infantry, for establishing barrages against counter-attacks and for holding in advance captured trenches to cover consolidation’ and to provide ‘a machine-gun barrage in depth of 1000 yards’ freeing the infantry to deal with the enemy infantry. Following the experiences of Fourth Army in the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line, GHQ noted in April 1917 ‘the value of machine-guns in covering the advance of troops with enfilade, oblique, or over-head fire was most marked’ especially when employed well forward’. See Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-18: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 105.

<sup>275</sup> The 218<sup>th</sup> Machine-gun Company was attached to the ‘25 Inf. Bde. Group’ throughout the operation. See TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 246’, 28 November 1917 and ‘Addendum No. 1 to 8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 246’, 29 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid*: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 247’, 28 November 1917.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid*.

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Order No. 247 concluded with instructions for the synchronization of watches just prior to the attack.<sup>278</sup> Its concluding sentence informed subordinate formations: “8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 1-6 [,] which have been already issued are hereby confirmed and rendered operative as orders”.<sup>279</sup>

The artillery scheme (dated 29 November) was detailed in ‘Addendum No. 1 to 8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 247’. Eight field artillery brigades and the ‘Northern Bombardment Group’ of VIII Corps Heavy Artillery would carry out the complex fire support scheme (**Map 6**). Field artillery batteries were to maintain the “usual harassing fire” prior to Zero + 8. “Occasional rounds” would be fired on the barrage start line throughout the night of the attack and the preceding nights, in order to mark the line where the barrage would fall. Four field artillery brigades were to fire on ‘Line A’ in the immediate rear of Venison Trench and the redoubts at Zero + 8. All eight field artillery brigades were to fire in combination at Zero + 9. The advancing curtain of fire, consisting of 100% HE that Major-General Heneker “found best for night work”, would proceed 100 yards to ‘Line A + 100’, where it would remain until Zero + 13. From Zero + 13 to Zero + 40, the barrage would lift 100 yards every four minutes (lines ‘B’ to ‘O’) until it reached the ‘protective barrage line’ (‘Line P’), behind which the infantry would dig-in

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<sup>278</sup> ‘Watches will be synchronized as follows:

- (a) By Staff Officer from 8<sup>th</sup> Div. H.Q. with 32 Div. At their H.Q. at 12:30 p.m. and with 8<sup>th</sup> Div. Arty at 1p.m.
- (b) A Staff Officer from 8<sup>th</sup> Div. H.Q. with representatives of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincoln Regt., 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, 25<sup>th</sup> and 218<sup>th</sup> machine gun companies, at the Brigade H.Q., WIELTJE, at 2 p.m.
- (c) By Staff Officer from 8<sup>th</sup> Div. H.Q. at 25<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. H.Q. at 2:45 p.m.
- (d) D.M.G.O. will arrange to synchronize watches with D.M.G.O. , 33<sup>rd</sup> Division and with 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> M.G. Cos.
- (e) The telephone will not be used for synchronization of watches except for artillery units.’

<sup>279</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 247’, 28 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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and consolidate their gains.<sup>280</sup> 4.5-inch howitzer batteries were to fire “with mean point of impact 200 yards in advance” of the protective line. From Zero + 90 to 6:00 a.m., bursts of fire were to be placed on ‘Line P’ at “irregular intervals”. Additional bursts were to be placed 100 to 400 yards in advance of the same line.<sup>281</sup>

Heavy guns were to commence firing at Zero + 15 “to search roads of approach and 200 yards each side of them, and to bombard assembly places and areas where German support and reserve battalions are located”. Counter-batteries were to open up after Zero + 8 “or prior to that hour if necessary,” to engage German artillery concentrations; gas shells would be employed only if the “weather is suitable”.<sup>282</sup>

### 2.3 32<sup>nd</sup> Division

32<sup>nd</sup> Division was entrusted with the primary operational task of opening out the Passchendaele Salient to the west and north on a frontage of 1,850 yards by securing Hill 52 and Vat Cottage Ridge. This would be accomplished by advancing the line to a depth of 400 yards on the right and left and 700 yards in the centre. The first inkling Major-General Shute received about the projected attack was while his division was resting, following a lengthy staggered march from the Flanders coast, around Lederzeele in early November: II Corps informed him that 32<sup>nd</sup> Division “would move into the line at an

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<sup>280</sup> The barrage would reach ‘Line A + 200’ at Zero + 17. Between Zero + 13 to 17, 18-pdr batteries were to fire 30% smoke shell on Line B if the ‘wind lies between SW and NW’. This would ‘produce a smoke screen lasting about ten minutes commencing about 100 yards beyond the objective’. If the wind was unfavourable, ‘only one gun per battery will fire 30% smoke shell’. Utilization of smoke projectiles, Major-General Heneker later observed, ‘would prevent bodies of men from advancing too far and getting too much down on to the low ground to the east of the objective line’.

<sup>281</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Addendum No. 1 to 8<sup>th</sup> Division Order No. 247’, 29 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

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early date in the neighbourhood of BELLEVUE and would attack northward with a view to improving our position at PASSCHENDAELE”.<sup>283</sup> Subsequent operational orders and instructions were based on the following factors governing the plan:

- It was impossible for 32<sup>nd</sup> Division to form-up by day because the desired jumping-off area was in full view of the enemy.
- So many previous attacks having commenced at dawn, the decision was made to risk the inherent dangers of a night attack on a large scale.
- The artillery, operating from an extremely long range, could only fire from west to east in support of an attack along high ground from south to north. Approaches due west of the enemy’s position were impassable.
- The idea of a creeping barrage was dispensed with. It was, therefore, decided to advance the first 200 yards without the customary artillery support (exclusive of a preliminary bombardment within safety limits) in order to achieve surprise and overwhelm the enemy’s most advanced posts with the bayonet.
- The supporting barrage was to open at Zero + 8 with all available artillery and machine-guns in a series of area concentrations. Those engaging targets inside the objective to lift as the infantry advanced.
- Conceivable exposure of infantry to unsuppressed hostile machine-gun fire for six to eight minutes appeared preferable to running the risk of drawing, with the start of the normally anticipated attack barrage, the enemy’s intense defensive barrage. This controversial decision was further strengthened by the fact that hostile artillery concentrations displayed such superiority in firepower that previous attacks sustained debilitating casualties before reaching the objective.
- Attacking at night decreased the risk of casualties from hostile machine-guns.

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<sup>283</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section I, General’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 2.

## Chapter 2

- Moonlight was perceived to be a critical element of this operation; therefore the attack date was fixed for a night when the moon was certain to be full or just past full sphere.<sup>284</sup>

Division HQ issued the first attack instructions on 21 November.<sup>285</sup> ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No.1: Outline Plan of Operations’ provided general information to attached infantry brigades and other subordinate units regarding operational phases, tasks, troops to be employed, attack scheme, probable direction of enemy counter-attacks, artillery plan, machine-guns, etc.<sup>286</sup> These four-page instructions, the first of a series prepared by Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. McNamara (GSO 1 32<sup>nd</sup> Division), were in keeping with recognised *S.S. 135* guidelines.

II Corps’ objective was to “continue operations at an early date to drive the enemy from the PASSCHENDAELE RIDGE”. VIII Corps was to “operate on the right of the II Corps”. The first phase would be the capture of the red line objective (Hill 52 and Vat Cottage Ridge) by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, whilst 35<sup>th</sup> Division remained in place on the immediate left.<sup>287</sup>

Instructions No. 1 originally entrusted the capture of these objectives to the four battalions (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, 16<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry, 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, 17<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry [HLI]) of 97 Brigade; two battalions of the 14 or 96 brigades would be responsible for the frontline during the attack. This was later adjusted to an

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid. See Chapter 1, p. 53.

<sup>285</sup> See Appendix 7.

<sup>286</sup> Amendments and updates to these offensive instructions followed on 24 and 25 November. These are included in the narrative review of the document issued on 21 November.

<sup>287</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 1: Outline Plan of Operations’, 21 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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assault by 97 Brigade “with two battalions [15<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers [LF] and 16<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers [NF] of 96 Infantry Brigade attached”. One detached battalion (16<sup>th</sup> NF) would be held in reserve as a “counter-counter-attacking force on the right flank in the vicinity of VIRILE FARM”. Major-General Shute had thus concluded that an attack by a reinforced brigade of six battalions was necessary in order to provide the proportionate number of men to assault and consolidate the dispersed objectives. In addition, definite and distinct units from each battalion were “to be told off to capture, garrison, and consolidate each known strongpoint and defended locality”.<sup>288</sup>

The general scheme of attack called for the capture of the final red line objective by night attack; “the essence” of the operation was surprise. In order to meet this condition, the *Vorfeldzonelinie* from Void Farm (dominating gently sloping ground as far as the western extremity of Vat Cottage Ridge) to Veal Cottages (inclusive) “had to be rushed at Zero without an artillery or machine-gun barrage”. At the calculated hour when the German outposts were overrun (Zero + 8), the artillery would “open fire on all known and suspected strongpoints and machine-gun positions lying beyond...” The bombardment, timed to lift as the attacking troops reached the final objective, would “form a protective barrage which will be specifically thick on the enemy’s most likely lines of counter-attack (i.e., Venison Farm – Verse Cottage – Valuation Houses – Mallet Wood (exclusive))” and assembly areas. Exact details relating to open fire and lift-off times on targeted strongpoints were, it was related, still unavailable to Division HQ as of 21 November. This yet to be shared information was dependent upon orders received

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid: ‘Amendment No. 1 to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 1’, 24 November 1917.

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from II Corps, the plans of the neighbouring VIII Corps and ground conditions at the time of the attack.<sup>289</sup>

Presumed locale and direction of German counter-attacks were addressed next. Examination of aerial photographs and other related sources precluded the flooded low ground west of Mallet Wood as an avenue for defenders to emerge from, although small local ripostes might originate from this area. The most probable direction would be north and NE from Racket Wood, Heidengod Copse and along the main ridge via Valuation Houses. Likely positions of enemy reserves at Roodkruis and Oostnieuwkerke (east of Westroosebeke) were also noted.<sup>290</sup>

32<sup>nd</sup> Division's four attached machine-gun companies were to be organised into two groupings: Close defence weapons under the GOC 97 Brigade and barrage guns under the CMGO (II Corps).<sup>291</sup> 97<sup>th</sup> MG Company was to remain under Brigadier-General Blacklock's orders for close defence of the captured line. The remaining three companies (14<sup>th</sup>, 96<sup>th</sup>, 219<sup>th</sup>) would contribute to the indirect barrage by providing protective fire in front of objective areas where counter-attacks in force were expected. They were also tasked with maintaining area concentration fire on likely assembly areas or over ground which hostile troops could pass. Target areas were to extend as far back into the enemy hinterland as possible. Defended localities on the left flank would be kept

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid: '32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 1: Outline Plan of Operations', 21 November 1917.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid: After-action report, 'Part II, Plan of Operations, Section I, General', 11 December 1917.

<sup>291</sup> It was unusual for a CMGO to be appointed commander rather than advisor since officers acting in this capacity usually coordinated barrage arrangements on a corps front. Control of the machine-gun barrage on each subordinate divisional front was normally placed entirely in the hands of the respective divisional commanders at the start of an attack. See Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p. 66.

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under fire, in order to engage machine-guns and snipers in areas beyond attack objectives.<sup>292</sup>

It was stressed that infantry should immediately consolidate objectives. All available Vickers and Lewis guns would be “pushed up for the defence of the captured ground, the majority being advanced to the final objective”. Strongpoints for all-round defence were to be constructed by 219<sup>th</sup> Field Company RE and 100 attached infantry in the vicinity of Hill 52, Void Farm, Volt Farm, Mallet Copse, Veal Cottages and the “enclosures” approximately 300 yards west of Veal Cottages. Two officers and eight sappers were specifically assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI “for the purpose of siting and consolidating strongpoints at HILL 52 and VOID FARM”.<sup>293</sup>

Battalions of 97 Brigade were to move forward from assembly positions at Wurst Farm (1 battalion), Irish Farm (2 battalions), and the dugout complex at Hilltop (1 battalion) on the night of the assault. “The problem of the assembly of troops prior to the attack was a serious one as even with extra [duckboard] tracks made, it would necessarily take a long time to move so large a body of troops in single file a distance of some 6 to 7 miles by night”. This difficulty was further exacerbated by the fact that hostile batteries had carefully registered all tracks and shelled them continuously.<sup>294</sup> Careful reconnaissance failed to identify locations in close proximity to the start line. Alternative

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<sup>292</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 1: Outline Plan of Operations’, 21 November 1917 and ‘Addendum No. 1 to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 1’, 25 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid and IWM 4723: ‘A.4/2’, 6 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2). 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s 3 component field companies had 100 infantry permanently attached. Lieutenant-Colonel Pollard (CRE) subsequently observed: ‘They live and work with, and are rationed by the RE, and are entirely under the control of the OC Field Coy’.

<sup>294</sup> See fn. 152.

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sites “were waterlogged and it was decided that the exposure entailed on the men would militate more against their fitness for the assault than the march up”.<sup>295</sup>

Possible delays whilst passing through the heavily shelled zone east and west of the flooded Steenbeek valley made it essential to identify the time taken by units to traverse the approximately 2,000 yards from Wurst Farm and 8,000 yards from Irish Farm and Hilltop.<sup>296</sup> Brigades carrying out reliefs prior to the attack were thus required to record marching times and distances. This data would, after careful checking, be forwarded to Division HQ the following morning. There were only three available routes as of 21 November: Mouse Trap and No. 3 duckboard tracks and the Gravenstafel Road. It was “hoped to get a fourth route constructed by the night of the attack”, but this could not be relied on due to serious labour shortages in Second Army.<sup>297</sup>

The final section of Instructions No. 1 related chosen sites of various HQs: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division at the Canal Bank, 97 Brigade advanced HQ at Kronprinz Farm and 14 Brigade (in support during the attack) inside a small pillbox at Kansas Cross. Brigadier-General Blacklock was to select battalion HQs after undertaking “necessary reconnaissance” of the forward area. The divisional signal officer was to ensure that buried cables reached brigade and battalion HQs before the attack.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section IV, Assembly’, 11 December 1917, p. 8.

<sup>296</sup> It took 2nd RMF and 1<sup>st</sup> SWB 11 hours to traverse the same distance prior to the attack on 10 November. See Chapter 1, pp. 19-20.

<sup>297</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Instructions No. 1: Outline Plan of Operations’, 21 November 1917 and After-action Report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section IV, Assembly’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Instructions No. 1: Outline Plan of Operations’, 21 November 1917 and Brigadier-General A.W. Pagan, *Infantry: An Account of the 1<sup>st</sup> Gloucestershire Regiment in the War 1914-1918* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1951), p. 180.

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‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 134’ followed at 7:00 p.m. on 23 November. Its contents dealt with specifics concerning the boundary adjustment (scheduled for the night of 24/25 November) between II Corps and VIII Corps. Right of passage along the Bellevue Spur – Vindictive Crossroads Road “except between dusk and zero hour on the night before the attack” and the apportioning out of limited HQ accommodation astride the Bellevue Spur were also clearly delineated on the neighbouring 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s behalf.<sup>299</sup>

Order No. 135 was circulated at 8:30 p.m. on 24 November. 14 Brigade – now in reserve at Irish Farm, Canal Bank and Dambre Camp near Vlamertinghe – was to dispatch a battalion to relieve 97 Brigade’s close support battalion at Bellevue on 25 November. In addition, 96 Brigade would provide a battalion to relieve the reserve battalion at Wurst Farm on 26 November. The former brigade was scheduled to replace the latter opposite Vat Cottage Ridge on the night of 27/28 November: “The first two battalions of the 96 Infantry Brigade to go into the frontline will be prepared to stay in till the night 30 November/1 December”. Days and nights spent in jumping-off positions allowed time for assault units to become accustomed to a new sector, whilst also directly observing attack objectives by day and patrolling approaches to enemy positions at night. Subsequent reliefs by units from sister brigades would also allow time for additional training and organisation in the rear. A table outlining brigade movements for the period 24-28 November was attached.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 134’, 23 November 1917.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 135’, 24 November 1917.

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Instructions No. 2 (24 November) dealt with vital preliminary work on railway and duckboard communications and further extension of buried cables. Two Pioneer battalions and eight RE field companies with attached infantry (commanded by the CRE) were to carry out this vital work. General policy now called for the bulk of available labour to extend two existing duckboard tracks whilst constructing two more. Brigade and battalion HQs were to be improved, tramways extended and roads repaired. Provision of additional shelter east of the canal was also to be undertaken by constructing a new forward camp at Wurst Farm. Extensions of an existing line of buried cable to Bellevue and an additional “main buried line” as far as 97 Brigade HQ at Kronprinz Farm was the responsibility of the CO Signals.<sup>301</sup>

Details concerning liaison between 97 Brigade and 25 Brigade were explained in Instructions No. 3 (26 November). Brigadier-General Blacklock was ordered, as per instructions issued by 8<sup>th</sup> Division the previous day, to “arrange with the G.O.C. 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, for the Commanding Officer, Company Commanders and Platoon Commanders of the 2<sup>nd</sup> K.O.Y.L.I. and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade to meet and discuss their various parts in the operations”. Special mutual precautions were to be taken to ensure that both battalions were in touch on the jumping-off line prior to Zero, whilst “definite parties” from 97 Brigade were “detailed to join hands” with 25 Brigade in the vicinity of Teall Cottage and on the final objective. Liaison officers would be attached to brigade HQs throughout the attack. Battle insignia worn on the upper sleeves and below the collars of officers and ORs of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade and 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI were depicted in

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Offensive Instructions No. 2: Preparatory Work for Forthcoming Operations’, 24 November 1917.

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diagrammatic drawings to illustrate identification schemes of units sharing the inner boundary between 25 Brigade and 97 Brigade. Chosen HQ locations for both brigades and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade followed.<sup>302</sup>

Order No. 136 (26 November) concerned the forthcoming relief (scheduled for the night of 27/28 November) of 97 Brigade. All details would be “arranged between the Brigadiers concerned”.<sup>303</sup> Instructions No. 4 (‘Employment of RE and Pioneers’) and No. 5 (‘Machine-guns’) were distributed the following day. The former provided projected details and unit distribution information for the necessary preliminary work found in Instructions No. 2.<sup>304</sup> Instructions No. 5 related that five additional machine-gun companies (80 guns) would be at 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s disposal.<sup>305</sup> Unfavourable ground conditions that hampered the deployment of field artillery on II Corps’ front, made it necessary to reserve all available heavy machine-gun assets as a substitute force multiplier tasked with carrying out offensive barrage and SOS support fire.<sup>306</sup> Two batteries (16 guns), under orders of the GOC 97 Brigade, would provide close defence of the captured line. Ten batteries (80 guns), under orders of II Corps MGO, were to fire a protective barrage in front of the objective (**Map 7**). The latter would also search and sweep areas where enemy reserves were sheltering. Six more batteries (48 guns), under

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 3: Liaison’, 26 November 1917. One battalion commander appears to have made his own inter-battalion liaison arrangements, the CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF (‘counter-attack counter attack’ battalion) subsequently stating: ‘I had liaison officers with Nos. 1 [2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI], 2 [16<sup>th</sup> HLI] and 3 [11<sup>th</sup> Border] B[attalio]ns of 97<sup>th</sup> Bde.’ See IWM 4723: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33’, 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>303</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Order No. 136’, 26 November 1917.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 4’, 27 November 1917.

<sup>305</sup> 63<sup>rd</sup> Division would provide 64 of the 80 additional guns.

<sup>306</sup> Vickers machine-guns often ‘assumed the role of light artillery’ and ‘were increasingly used for overhead fire to fill the gap between battalion weapons and the artillery’. See Shelford Bidwell & Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons & Theories of War 1904-1945* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004) p. 123.

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the latter officer, were tasked with providing area concentration fire on selected locales. Information about sites where this formidable array of 144 Vickers guns would be established prior to the assault, along with attached charts containing the usual barrage data, were also included.<sup>307</sup>

Information regarding communications infrastructure was outlined in Instructions No. 6 (27 November). The cover letter of this four-page document informed those concerned: “The attached scheme of communications will be adhered to during forthcoming operations.” General particulars related that 97 Brigade forward signal station would be established immediately behind the frontline at Virile Farm. This station, however, would not follow-up the advancing infantry as laid down in *S.S. 148 Forward Inter-Communications in Battle* (March 1917), due to the limited nature of the operation “and of the ground over which it is being carried out...”<sup>308</sup>

Every effort would be made to maintain telegraphic communications between assault battalions and artillery forward observation officers [FOO] and their brigades and groups. Liaison between infantry and artillery was to be centralized at Virile Farm and 6,500 yards farther back at Cheddar Villa. Visual signal and runner communications between battalion HQs and companies were to be thoroughly organised. Telephone lines would be extended forward as soon as possible after the start of the attack.<sup>309</sup> Of the

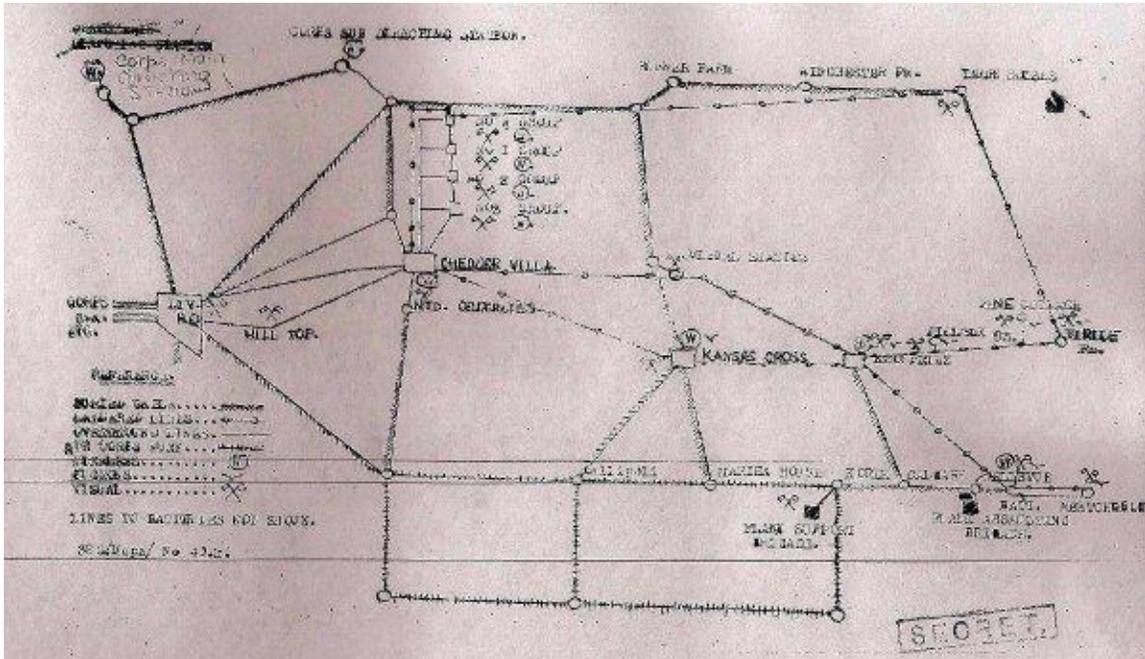
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<sup>307</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 5’, 27 November 1917. Participating units, in addition to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s component 14<sup>th</sup>, 96<sup>th</sup>, 97<sup>th</sup> and 219<sup>th</sup> MG companies, included 188<sup>th</sup>, 189<sup>th</sup> and 223<sup>rd</sup> (63<sup>rd</sup> Division) companies. See IWM 4723: ‘G.188/4/1’ (14<sup>th</sup> MG Company report), 14 December 1917 and ‘Action December 2, 1917’ (188<sup>th</sup> MG Company report), Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>308</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Offensive Instructions No. 6’, 27 November 1917.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

“auxiliary means of communication” available, chief reliance would be placed on visual signaling organised to provide a “complete chain of communication in the event of the telegraphic system being destroyed”. Communication by runners and aircraft were also arranged. Contact between 97 Brigade and 25 Brigade would thus be maintained by a complex network of buried wire, visual signals, runners and wireless”.<sup>310</sup>



**Plate 2.2 Schematic drawing of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division communications infrastructure**  
(Source: TNA: WO/95/2370)

Use would be made of the already established “VIII Corps bury” system for communication between 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ at Canal Bank and the HQs of artillery groups and infantry brigades; this system had been extended as far as Bellevue by 27 November. The VIII Corps bury was supplemented by a complete system of ladder lines “connecting the division to the artillery groups, infantry brigades with Cheddar Villa, also the artillery groups and infantry brigades with their batteries and battalions and with the brigade forward signal station at VIRILE FARM”. Linemen and relay posts would be established

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

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at select points along ladder routes. These were to be arranged, “as far as possible, to coincide with visual stations and other points where auxiliary means of communication are available”.<sup>311</sup>

Spark wireless sets were to be employed during the attack.<sup>312</sup> Power Buzzer, amplifier and CW sets would not be utilized. Five wireless stations (established at Bellevue, Kronprinz Farm, Kansas Cross, Cheddar Villa, and II Corps Directing Station) were in place before the assault.<sup>313</sup> All messages, except in cases of emergency, had to be sent in code: “If handed in “in clear” they will be enciphered and deciphered by the wireless operators unless franked “in clear” by an officer. In all cases messages must be brief”.<sup>314</sup> Wireless stations would, in order to communicate with supporting artillery groups, make direct contact with RFC receiving sets only during hours of darkness (4:30

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Use was likely made of the 50-Watt Spark transmitter at division and brigade HQs, and the newly adopted ‘W/T Forward 20-Watt Spark Transmitter’. The latter had a range of 2,000 to 3,000 yards. Major E.E. Eveleigh (CO 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Signal School) subsequently remarked that ‘Spark wireless was found very reliable on this occasion and good use was made of it’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report: ‘Appendix ‘I’: Communications’, December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>313</sup> Any W/T station could communicate with any other. Set 1 was for communications with MG companies on the Bellevue Spur, artillery observations posts, and 25 Brigade. Set 2 was located at 97 Brigade HQ (Kronprinz Farm). Set 3 at 14 Brigade HQ (Kansas). Set 4 at Cheddar Villa for communication with artillery groups. Set 5 (II Corps Directing Station) would be in ‘close touch’ with 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ and II Corps Heavy Artillery.

<sup>314</sup> Divisional communications infrastructures were often hampered by institutionalized constraints. John Ferris notes that signals security ‘fed from communications systems, and like all parasites, sapped the strength of its host. The purpose of these systems was to maintain command and control. Their success shaped operations’. The proliferation of listening sets utilized by both sides to monitor enemy phone traffic up to 3,000 yards from the forward line, brought about the establishment of measures whereby one’s own telephone traffic also had to be monitored. Armies sought to minimize this security threat by limiting telephone usage. ‘They often stripped telephones from their battalions, precisely where these were most needed, while the reluctance of personnel to face the lengthy process of enciphering messages hampered the adoption of radio until the armistice. As a senior British wireless officer noted in 1917: ‘Ciphers have always been the bugbear of wireless. People don’t like, or they have not the time, to do the encyphering [sic]. The result is that messages are sent by some other means than that which requires ciphers or code, such as runner’. By 1918, wireless provided the solution to the signals problem in the field, ‘but the stranglehold of signals security throttled its use’. See John Ferris (ed), *The British Army and Signals Intelligence During the First World War* (Stroud: Allen Sutton & Army Records Society, 1992) pp. 5-6.

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to 6:30 p.m.).<sup>315</sup> Special attention was to be paid to this means of communication “especially in the case of S.O.S messages and cancel S.O.S. messages”.<sup>316</sup>

A network of seventeen visual signaling stations, for use by infantry battalions, machine-gun companies and artillery, was to be extended from the frontline to Canal Bank. Company runners were to deliver messages to battalion HQs. Runners dispatched from battalions and the brigade forward signal station would carry messages to the rear by a series of relay posts set up near established linemen posts at “intervals of 400 yards along duckboard tracks from VIRILE FARM to KRONPRINZ FARM ... thence to KANSAS CROSS and CHEDDAR VILLA and on to artillery groups”. Mounted orderlies, the last link in the chain, would then carry messages from artillery groups to Division HQ. Responsibility for the organisation of visual signals and runners devolved on signal officers attached to assault battalions, forward brigade, support brigade and artillery groups.<sup>317</sup>

Assault battalions were issued 8 pigeons which, on release, would fly directly to a pigeon loft at Vlamertinghe. Artillery FOOs were expected to “draw on the nearest battalion for any birds they require”. In addition, Brigade HQs were issued 16 pigeons that would home-in to a loft at Watou. This means of communication, it was pointed out, “is not as reliable as usual owing to the time of year. Any messages of great importance

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<sup>315</sup> RFC wireless operators were permanently attached to artillery batteries and moved with them since the close of 1916. They remained under the control of the corps squadron with which the battery was working. See Air Historical Branch, *The Royal Air Force in the Great War*, p. 203.

<sup>316</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Instructions No. 6’, 27 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

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must be sent by at least two birds”. Messenger dogs would not be employed, because they “were not sufficiently trained”.<sup>318</sup>

No. 7 Squadron<sup>319</sup> was tasked with providing signal and ‘contact-counter-attack’ aircraft throughout the assault. Fuselage mounted Klaxon horns would be sounded to “call attention and to signal to the infantry”, while warnings of impending counter-attacks were to be signalled by “wireless and dropping a white parachute light”. The signal plane was detailed to accept signals by lamp from brigade and battalion HQs “and will acknowledge the same by lamp”. Lamp messages received from the ground were required to be air dropped at divisional HQ within five minutes of receipt.<sup>320</sup>

Each assault battalion would be issued 15 signal rockets to be carried forward by HQs and companies. Caution for placing too much reliance on this device followed: “These rockets are unreliable owing to faulty manufacture”.<sup>321</sup> By the close of November, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s communications infrastructure had been successfully organised and extended west to east for approximately 10,000 yards from Canal Bank to the vicinity of Vat Cottage Ridge.

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> No. 7 Squadron was formed at Farnborough in May 1914. It remained in Great Britain carrying out experimental duties until April 1915. Subsequently dispatched to France, it served as a corps squadron throughout the remainder of the war. Attached to II Corps in November 1917, its aerodrome was located at Proven. See Air of Authority - A History of RAF Organisation <<http://www.rafweb.org/Sqn021-25.htm>> and TNA: AIR 1/1186/204/5/2595: ‘Location of RFC Units – 1<sup>st</sup> December 1917’, RFC War Diary.

<sup>320</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Instructions No. 6’, 27 November 1917 and ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Divisional Artillery Group Instructions No. 15’, 30 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

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Order No. 137 (27 November) provided an updated table denoting routes and timetables for battalions marching to reserve and support positions at Dambre Camp, Hilltop Farm, Irish Farm and Wurst Farm. All moves were scheduled to occur following the exchange of brigades on the night of the 27/28. “The moves of battalions for 28<sup>th</sup> inst. as notified in table issued with 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order 135” were cancelled. Units would now commence their march on the 28<sup>th</sup> in accordance with the newly issued table.<sup>322</sup>

‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’ – the entire seven-page attack plan in outline – was also forwarded on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Sections one through six related previously articulated details: The general objectives of the attack were Volt Farm, Mallet Copse and Veal Cottages. Map reference particulars concerning the boundary between II Corps and VIII Corps followed. Organisation and deployment of brigades for the attack were: 97 Brigade, reinforced by two battalions from 96 Brigade, to carry out the assault; 14 Brigade, in support with the remaining battalions of 96 Brigade, to act as reserve. Assault troops would be distributed on a frontage of five battalions. An additional battalion would be held in reserve near Virile Farm to deal with German counter-attacks.<sup>323</sup>

Sections seven and eight dealt with method of attack (**Map 8**). Three objective lines (yellow, green, red) were delineated: “At Zero, the advanced posts of the enemy will be rushed without an artillery barrage to a depth of 200 yards” (yellow line). At Zero + 8, the artillery was to commence firing at all “known and suspected strongpoints lying

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Order No. 137’, 27 November 1917.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’, 27 November 1917.

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outside the line 350 yards from the forming-up line. The bombardment would then pause on the '350 yards' or 'dotted green line' intermediary objective for six minutes in order to allow the infantry to "close up". At Zero + 14, the artillery was to lift back at a rate of 100 yards in six minutes. Infantry detailed to capture strongpoints were to advance as close to the barrage as possible and "rush each defended locality when the artillery lifts". The gunners' final task was to place a protective barrage 300 yards outside the red line objective. This would be maintained until "Zero plus one hour 36 minutes unless ordered to continue". Definite and distinct units were expected to "capture and hold each known enemy strong point and defended locality". Troops were required to be "collected and company and battalion reserves reformed at the earliest possible moment after the capture of each position" in order to avoid confusion and straggling.<sup>324</sup>

Consolidation of objectives and deployment of RE field companies and divisional pioneer units were covered in sections nine and ten. The captured area was to be "consolidated in depth and all [Vickers] machine-guns detailed for close defence and Lewis Guns will be pushed up for the defence of the captured ground, the majority being advanced to the final objective". The position would be further strengthened by the construction of the six strongpoints extending from Hill 52 to the enclosures west of Veal Cottages. 219<sup>th</sup> Field Company was to supervise this work with 100 attached infantry. This unit was also tasked with the responsibility for patrolling and maintaining 'Mousetrap Track' forward of 97 Brigade HQ at Kronprinz Farm.<sup>325</sup> Four RE field companies (206<sup>th</sup>, 218<sup>th</sup>, 247<sup>th</sup>, 248<sup>th</sup>, 249<sup>th</sup>) and 14<sup>th</sup> Worcestershire Regiment (less two

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> IWM 4723: 'A.4/2', 6 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

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companies) were to be employed by the CRE “under special instructions” relating to track patrol and maintenance.<sup>326</sup>

Section eleven related how attacking battalions were to deploy on the start-line prior to jumping-off. Section twelve provided more general forming-up instructions:

- The assaulting troops will form up close behind our frontline.
- The routes to the forming up places are to be carefully reconnoitered and clearly pegged out and marked with white posts.
- The forming up place of each platoon is to be marked with white posts and tapes.
- Patrols and Lewis Guns will cover the forming up. These patrols must be pushed out every night previous to the assault so that the enemy may become accustomed to them.
- 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade will ensure that the forming up is carried out in complete silence and that during the first rush there is no noise or shouting if possible.

“Every possible means and device for ensuring direction” needed to be employed. All officers and “as many N.C.O’s as possible” would be issued with compasses and “know the compass bearing of their objective”. In addition, each company assembly area was to be provided with a luminous notice board on which would be painted “the bearing of the first company objective and the distance in yards to it”.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’, 27 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary and IWM 4723:‘A.4/2’, 6 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2). The 17<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers (attached pioneer battalion) left Major-General Shute’s command to be employed as ‘GHQ Railway Construction Troops’ on 13 November. See Major A.F. Becke, *Order of Battle Divisions, Part 3B - New Army Divisions (30-41); and 63<sup>rd</sup> (RN) Division* (London: HMSO, 1945), pp. 24-26.

<sup>327</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Section 13 provided additional information concerning when the barrage was scheduled to open fire and lift on to targeted strongpoints. Fire was to remain normal on the eve of the attack until Zero + 8. From Zero + 8 onward, the action of the artillery would be as follows:

- The artillery firing on strongpoints in the area to be attacked will act as detailed in Paragraph 7 (i.e., on known and suspected enemy positions lying 350 yards from the forming up line).
- All known strongpoints and machine-gun emplacements outside the area to be attacked will be kept under fire.
- A protective barrage will be maintained 300 yards in front of the objective until Zero + 1 hour 30 minutes (4/5 shrapnel, 1/5 smoke).<sup>328</sup>
- From Zero + 1 hour 30 minutes onwards a combing barrage will be put down on all enemy centres of activity and suspected assembly places for counter-attacks.
- North and west of the line LIND COT – CLEAR FARM – V. 17 central – V. 18 central (southern and eastern outskirts of Westroosebeke) [will be deluged with] a proportion of smoke and, if safe, gas shells. These projectiles will be mixed with other ammunition by guns firing on strongpoints, farms, etc., to blind machine-guns in this area and confuse the enemy as to the direction of the attack.

Detailed artillery plans would be forwarded at a later date. Liaison with the supporting artillery was further facilitated in Section 14: The CRA would “detail a RFA battery commander to be attached to Headquarters of the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade”. This officer’s battery was to be at Brigadier-General Blacklock’s direct disposal throughout the operation.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid. Major-General Shute noted that it was ‘advisable to keep this barrage well back on account of the long range at which the guns were firing’. See Ibid: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section II, Detailed Plan’, 11 December 1917, p. 13.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’.

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Section 15 outlined details for the employment of Vickers machine-guns. Two close defence batteries would move forward to the vicinity of the final objective in order to provide direct support during consolidation. Ten batteries, to operate against sites where enemy reserves were believed to be sheltered, were allocated for indirect barrage work beyond the objective. A further six batteries, furnished by 96 Brigade, were to be employed as area concentration guns targeting enemy assembly areas and likely threats from localities beyond the left flank. One battery allotted for area concentration work was to be withdrawn from this task at Zero + 1 ½ hours, and, following up the advancing infantry, position a half-section each at Hill 52, Void Farm, Mallet Copse and Veal Cottages. Liaison would be further facilitated by having both II Corps and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division MGOs attached to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division and 97 Brigade HQs respectively. “Careful arrangements” were necessary in order “to preserve communication with all machine-gun batteries by runners and all other means of communication”.<sup>330</sup>

Section 16 concerned the deployment of Stokes Mortars after all objectives had been attained. Ten tubes would be carried forward from Virile and Tournant farms to the vicinity of Hill 52 (six tubes), Volt Farm (2 tubes) and Veal Cottages (2 tubes) about one hour and thirty minutes after Zero. Their rapid indirect fire – 30 to 40 rounds per minute – was expected provide considerable assistance during consolidation of the newly captured ground.<sup>331</sup> 14 Brigade would deploy two additional tubes against targets west of Tournant Farm “for the express purpose of being available to deal with strongpoints

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Sixty rounds of ammunition were dumped at each Stokes Mortar position prior to the assault.

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which might hold up our advance on the left flank”.<sup>332</sup> They would also engage any possible counter-attack developing from inundated ground west and SW of Vat Cottage Ridge.<sup>333</sup>



**Plate 2.3 Map overlay: Tournant Farm from the air  
(Source: MMP)**

Section 17 stated: “Every possible means of communication will be organised as laid down in *S.S. 148* and utilized to the fullest extent.” The assaulting infantry would, as with 8<sup>th</sup> Division, utilize green ground flares and Watson Fans to communicate with contact aircraft. Each man would also be issued two flares to carry forward (Section 18).<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’, 27 November 1917 and after-action report ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section II, Detailed Plan’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>333</sup> See Appendix 8.

<sup>334</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’, 27 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Liaison arrangements (Section 19) were “as laid down in ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Instructions No. 3’ (26 November). In addition, the placement of a senior artillery officer at 97 Brigade HQ and a junior artillery officer “with the headquarters of each assaulting battalion” would further facilitate communications with the infantry.<sup>335</sup>

The infantry were to be equipped to advance in “battle order” – steel helmet, rifle, bayonet, 170 rounds of standard .303 calibre ammunition carried in equipment pouches and issue cotton bandoleers, haversack, water bottle, mess tin, entrenching tool, box respirator and PH ‘tube helmet’. Each man would also carry a shovel (Section 20). Leather jerkins were probably worn over tunics as additional protection from the cold.



**Plate 2.4 Reconstruction: Private ‘B’ Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI in ‘Battle Order’  
Goudbergstraat 2 December 2007  
(Source: Author)**

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

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Section 21 reminded officers and men not to carry “any document likely to be of value to the enemy” on their persons. German insignia and equipment denoting unit identity, captured documents, etc., was to be immediately sent back to Division HQ for examination.<sup>336</sup>

Cadres from each of the six assault battalions’ establishment of approximately thirty officers would remain behind during the attack as per *S.S. 135*. (Section 22): “No more than 21 officers will accompany their units into action”. Select NCOs and specialists were also to be held back.<sup>337</sup>

Section 23 reminded all concerned that “Separate instructions have been issued as to medical arrangements, prisoners of war, positions of dumps, S.A.A., etc”. Situation reports (Section 24) would be forwarded to Division HQ “at zero and at least every subsequent half-hour during the attack. Subordinates were reminded of the “importance of very frequent reports giving full information in writing or on situation maps must be impressed on the troops”. In addition, artillery liaison officers attached to battalions were responsible “for collecting all possible information from F.O.O.’s and forwarding it, through Infantry Brigade Forward Station and Infantry Brigade Headquarters to Divisional Headquarters”.<sup>338</sup>

Section 25 related that orders for the synchronization of watches would follow shortly. Section 26 related HQ locations for 32<sup>nd</sup> Division and its three subordinate

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

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infantry brigades. A final note, almost identical to a section found in ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 6’, explained the expected response to German reconnaissance aircraft: “It must be impressed on all troops that it is of the utmost importance that the heaviest possible rifle and Lewis Gun fire must be brought upon all low-flying enemy areoplanes”. All planes that escaped would, it was ominously observed, “certainly report our positions and bring down a very heavy artillery concentration”.<sup>339</sup>

A supplement to ‘Offensive Instructions No. 1’ was also issued on the 27<sup>th</sup>. ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Administrative Arrangements’ provided information on the positions of ammunition, supply, ordnance, water, salvage and RE dumps. Soup kitchens at St. Julian and south of Cheddar Villa were established to offer soup, tea, biscuits and cigarettes to men returning from the frontline. Hot food would be “issued to the troops at the latest possible moment under brigade arrangements”. Three straggler posts, manned by the military police, were to be established west and SW of St Julian. A straggler collection station would also be situated NW of Wieltje. All prisoners were to be escorted to the divisional cage at Canal Bank. A Division forward cage would be established NW of Wieltje, the APM arranging for escorts from this point to the enclosure at Canal Bank. The document concluded with instructions for the removal and burial of the dead.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> (b) DIVISIONAL BURIAL PARTY 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut[enant] W. Thomson, 15<sup>th</sup> High[land] L[ight] Inf antr[y], is Divisional Burial Officer, and with the Divisional Burial Party of 80 O.R., is located at Irish Farm; The Divisional Burial Party is responsible for burying all bodies up to the line ADLER FARM, D. 3. a. 7. 3, YETTA HOUSES, D. 3. d. 3. 7, BELLEVUE, D. 4. D. 7. 2. The responsibility for clearing forward of the above mentioned line rests on brigades; Bodies from the forward area placed by the [tramway] tracks at the limits of the area controlled by the Divisional Burial Party, will be brought back by them to the cemeteries and buried there; Rods and discs for marking graves may be had on application to Divisional Burial Officer; Special attention is drawn to the importance of keeping the Divisional Burial Officer informed of all burials carried out by units so that his records may be complete; Identity discs must not be removed from bodies left for burial by the Divisional Burial Party’. A main cemetery was situated near Hill Top

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These grim but necessary provisions were part of the routine administrative arrangements made before an attack.

32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ issued a further supplement to accompany Order No. 138 the following day: “Definite distinct and complete units would be detailed to capture, mop up, and garrison each known enemy strongpoint”.<sup>341</sup> Careful arrangements were to be made for maintaining direction by ready knowledge of easily identified landmarks. All ranks were required to know distances from the jumping-off line to each strongpoint or trench. The direction faced on the final objective – north, south, east or west – was compulsory knowledge for everyone concerned: “Every officer and as many N.C.Os as possible must be in possession of compasses and know the compass bearing of their objective”.<sup>342</sup>

Hostile counter-attacks were expected to commence shortly after the attackers reached the final objectives:

Troops must hold out against them [counter-attacks] to the last man and no one must retire under any circumstances. Should any individual or individuals retire [,] troops behind them must never under any conditions conform to the retirement. On the contrary [,] they must advance and counter-counter-attack the enemy at once [underlined in original].<sup>343</sup>

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Farm, while a forward cemetery was placed in the vicinity of Cheddar Villa. An advanced cemetery would also be established near Yetta Houses. Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Administrative Arrangements: Supplementary to Offensive Instructions No. 1’, 27 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>341</sup> 63<sup>rd</sup> RND’s after-action report noted: ‘In the majority of cases the enemy uses his pillboxes as a barrack, and defends them from neighbouring shell holes, or from a small trench just in rear. Pillboxes must therefore be approached from the flanks’. See Sellers (ed), ‘Western Front: Report on Operations During the Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele, 24<sup>th</sup> October to 5<sup>th</sup> November 1917’, *RND: Royal Naval Division. Antwerp, Gallipoli & Western Front 1914-1918*, Issue Number 22 (September 2002), p. 2184.

<sup>342</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division No. G.S. 1357/0/2’, 28 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

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All ranks “must be made to realise that experience has proved that troops who retire invariably suffer 3 or 4 times greater losses than troops who advance”.<sup>344</sup> This section of “cyclostyled sheet” was viewed by the postwar history of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI as indicative of a “desperate attack for important ground ... Every inch on Passchendaele Ridge was valuable”.<sup>345</sup>

Junior officers were reminded to keep subordinates from scattering in search of souvenirs: “Every opportunity for reforming troops as reserves for repelling counter-attacks” was to be made use of. “Counter-counter-attacks must be delivered on the initiative of the officer on the spot”. Subsequent success depended on “intelligence, dash and initiative of junior commanders”.<sup>346</sup>

Extreme care was to be taken that adequate “moppers up” were detailed from “rear platoons to mop up the captured area”. Secured ground was “not to be too thickly held.” Formed bodies were to be carefully placed in the rear to engage enemy counter-attacks. It was necessary that close touch be maintained between the “O.C., counter-counter-attacking troops” and the frontline commander, “so that the former may have all arrangements made for a sudden move forward which must be made on his own initiative”. Battle patrols would also be immediately pushed forward to “points of vantage where they can give early notice of approach of any counter-attacks”.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Thomas Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland: History of the 16<sup>th</sup> The Highland Light Infantry (City of Glasgow Regiment)* (Glasgow: John M’Callum & Co., 1930), p. 110.

<sup>346</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division No. G.S. 1357/02’, 28 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

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The importance of maintaining an unbroken line and secure flanks was stressed: “Touch must be maintained with units on the right and left and no gaps must be left”. All units were to be prepared to form a defensive flank following attainment of objectives. “If the troops on their flanks are checked they “must make every endeavour to join up with troops on either flank should there be a gap when the objective is reached”. Flanking fire from neighbouring battalions could, it was also stressed, be expected to provide valuable assistance to units held up during the advance.<sup>348</sup>

Every available Vickers and Lewis gun would immediately be brought forward once the final objective had been gained and “the main defences of the newly captured area entrusted to them while the men are digging in”. All guns needed to be placed some distance in advance or rear of the final objective to avoid hostile shelling. Work on organising defences and consolidation “must be begun at once no matter how tired the men are”; the enemy, previous experience had demonstrated, would waste no time preparing a strong counter-attack. It was, therefore, crucial that the consolidation period “be utilized to the utmost to get cover and prepare for the counter-attack which is certain to come and which can be easily beaten off if machine-gun defence is organised at once and our trenches are prepared with energy”.<sup>349</sup>

Timely information was essential if Division and brigade HQs were to gauge the situation and provide the attackers with essential fire support: “Without such reports it is impossible for the commanders behind to organise efficient artillery support for the

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

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troops in front. Early information, although it may appear of little value to the sender, may be a great factor of success”.<sup>350</sup>

Steps were to be taken to ensure all ranks had serviceable rifles despite muddy conditions that often rendered them useless: “It must be understood that rifle fire invariably wins the day”. Wire to clear muzzles and brushes to clean breaches and bolts would be distributed; issue canvas breach covers would also be kept in place as long as possible.<sup>351</sup>

The success of any assault was dependent on “lines of the assaulting troops being square on the objective to be attacked” during the forming-up. Jumping-off lines for each platoon had to be carefully marked by pegs and taped: “Failure to do this will lead to loss of direction which is fatal”. Advancing troops were reminded to maintain touch with rear units: “Neglect of keeping this touch has lately resulted in failure”.<sup>352</sup>

Bypassed strongpoints that continued resistance were to be left alone “until the attacking troops have securely established themselves beyond them” and consolidated their positions against inevitable counter-attack. “Then and not till then call on them to surrender”. Prisoners were to be sent back immediately, as “the tide of battle may turn and the prisoners lost become a source of danger”. The lengthy document concluded with an appeal to divisional *esprit*: “It must be remembered that it is a point of honour for

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

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every man in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division that any position captured is held to the last and that not an inch of ground gained is ever given up”.<sup>353</sup>

The final series of instructions and orders were issued during the period 28 to 30 November. Three instruction documents (7, 8, and 9) were forwarded on 28 November. Technical information (organisation, rates of fire, communication, equipment and rations, preparation and camouflage of emplacements) and pre-attack movements concerning deployment of the 128 barrage and area concentration machine-guns were related in Instructions No. 7.<sup>354</sup>

Instructions No. 8 were based on the contents of ‘II Corps Operation Order No. 172’ of 27 November.<sup>355</sup> ‘Part A’ elaborated additional air to ground communication details: “A contact aeroplane will fly over the line at 7:30 a.m. on the morning of the attack [,] and will call for flares by sending a succession of ‘A’s on the Klaxon Horn and dropping a white light”. The most advanced line of infantry would burn green flares at that hour “as soon as called for by the aeroplane”. Issue green flares were not to be expended unless specifically called for from the air or, accompanied by manipulated Watson Fans, at all other times on request. “Two oblong black panels fixed at right angles to the rear edge of the lower plane, one on each side of the fuselage and about three feet from it” would identify the contact aircraft. Ground flares were only to be lit for a machine bearing these markings. The ‘Contact Counter-attack Aeroplane’ would, as

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<sup>353</sup>Ibid.

<sup>354</sup>Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Instructions No. 7: Machine-guns’, 28 November 1917. Barrage and area concentration duties were to be carried out by MG companies (14<sup>th</sup>, 96<sup>th</sup>, 219<sup>th</sup>) from 32<sup>nd</sup> (188<sup>th</sup>, 189<sup>th</sup>, 233<sup>rd</sup>) 63<sup>rd</sup> and (32 guns) 35<sup>th</sup> divisions.

<sup>355</sup> See TNA: WO/95/643: ‘II Corps Operation Order No. 172’, 27 November 1917, II Corps War Diary.

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in 8<sup>th</sup> Division's attack scheme, be in the air "from dawn on the morning of the day of the attack [,] to watch for any indication of impending counter-attacks and to give warning of same by wireless and by dropping a WHITE PARACHUTE LIGHT". 'Part B' provided additional details for the synchronization of watches.<sup>356</sup>

Instructions No. 9 stressed that "every officer and NCO and as many men as possible moving to position of assembly must know the details of the route he is to follow". Elaborate measures were to be taken to ensure that assault troops reached their positions prior to Zero. 97 Brigade HQ, with attached infantry and engineers, would move to the assembly area on the night of 1/2 December. Chosen routes were to be marked by notice boards, which were not to be placed by any other troops except for road control and track maintenance parties. "Any individuals or parties meeting troops of 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade on any route will give way to them and get off the road or track" until clear. All duckboard tracks in the divisional area were reserved for the exclusive use of 97 Brigade from 4:00 p.m. on 1 December to 6:00 a.m. on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Care was to be taken that carrying, artillery and signal parties were clear of these avenues during that time. Traffic control and reconnaissance of overland routes were the respective responsibilities of reserve brigade and assault brigade: 14 Brigade would establish a reliable traffic control post at the junction of the Gravenstafel – Bellevue Road with 'Peter Pan' track to deny access to 8<sup>th</sup> Division's allotted tracks. 97 Brigade was to see that all tracks and roads to assembly positions were carefully reconnoitered, while also ensuring traversable

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<sup>356</sup>Ibid: '32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 8', 28 November 1917. The scheme for synchronization of watches called for an officer to be sent from Division HQ to the HQs of all three brigades, the CRA and CRE 'between 12 noon and 1 p.m. on the day of attack'. This would be repeated between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. The DMGO would be provided with time information by divisional HQ at 11:30 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.

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paths forward of established duckboard tracks were marked with white-washed guide posts.<sup>357</sup>

Communication with the ‘Contact Counter-attack Aeroplane’ was articulated in Instructions No. 10 (30 November). This machine was not to be confused with the contact aircraft referred to in Instructions No. 8. It would be identifiable by a single streamer attached to its tail. The observer was prepared to receive messages from the infantry by signal lamp. A chart containing thirty signal instructions for the attack was attached. One example required the infantry to signal “CAR.CAR.CAR”. This meant, “Enemy counter-attacking on our right flank”. Confirmation of receipt from the air would be a repetition of any lamp signal received from troops on the ground.<sup>358</sup>

Brigadier-General F.W. Lumsden’s 14 Brigade was placed in divisional support.<sup>359</sup> Part ‘A’ of Instructions No. 11 (30 November) related its assigned role: “You [Lumsden] will be in command of the brigade in divisional support (14 Brigade, less 14<sup>th</sup> MG Company on barrage fire work) during the forthcoming operations”. Arrangements were to be made to have his four battalions (5/6<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots, 1<sup>st</sup> Dorsetshire Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Manchester Regiment, 15<sup>th</sup> HLI) deployed at Irish Farm, Hilltop, Wurst Farm and Bellevue for the immediate defence of the Bellevue Spur. These units would be ready “to

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Instructions No. 9: Assembly’, 28 November 1917 and ‘Addendum No. 1 to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 9’, 29 November 1917.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Offensive Instructions No. 10: Communication with Contact Counter-attack Aeroplane’, 30 November 1917.

<sup>359</sup> Brigadier-General Frederick W. Lumsden VC CB DSO (1872-1918). Commissioned Royal Marine Artillery 1888; Staff College 1910; General Staff Singapore 1910-14; CO Royal Marine Howitzer Brigade 1915; General Staff First Army 1916-17; A/Brigadier-General and GOC 14 Brigade April 1917; DSO (2 bars) and VC for period January-April 1917. See Gerald Gliddon, *VC's of the First World War: Arras and Messines 1917* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), pp. 33-38.

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move at notice of ½ hour from Zero onwards”. They were not to be employed “unless the enemy should make such a determined counter-attack as to endanger the present frontline.” In any case, Lumsden was “to keep in close touch with the general situation and with the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, and have a liaison officer at the 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade Headquarters”.<sup>360</sup>

14 Brigade was also tasked with establishing observation posts in the vicinity of Bellevue in order to provide divisional HQ with frequent reports “as to your [Brigadier-General Lumsden’s] view of the situation and all events that come to your knowledge.” Lumsden would assume command of operations in the event of the Brigadier-General Blacklock becoming a casualty. He could “probably” expect to relieve 97 Brigade two nights after the attack, “but must be prepared to do so earlier if required”. Appendix A of Instructions No. 11 outlined deployment (against troublesome snipers, strongpoints and possible counter-attacks just beyond the left flank of 97 Brigade) of the two detached Stokes mortars from 14 Brigade. At Zero + 2 hours, both tubes were to be brought forward to the vicinity of Tournant Farm, where they would provide additional fire support assistance to the left battalion [15<sup>th</sup> LF] of 97 Brigade.<sup>361</sup>

Part ‘B’ informed Brigadier-General A.C. Girdwood (GOC 96 Brigade)<sup>362</sup> that his command – less two battalions and 96<sup>th</sup> MG Company attached to 97 Brigade – would be in divisional reserve. The remaining two battalions (2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and

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<sup>360</sup> See Appendix 8.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> A/Brigadier-General Austen Claude Girdwood DSO. Commissioned Northumberland Fusiliers 1896; Sudan 1898; South Africa 1899-1902; Staff College; Mohmand Expedition 1908; Major 1915; A/Lieutenant-Colonel and CO 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment 1916-17; GOC 96 Brigade August 1917.

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16<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers) were to be ready to move forward from Canal Bank and Irish Farm “at maximum notice of 2 hours from Zero onwards”.<sup>363</sup>

Organisation for the evacuation of casualties was divided into two sectors: Wounded in the right sector would be carried along a mule track by stretcher-bearers from the RAP at Mosselmarkt, through relay posts at Meetcheele and Waterloo; wounded from the left sector were to be carried (via duckboard and connecting timber track) from the RAP near Wallemolen, through relay posts at Kronprinz Farm, Lump House and Kansas. The interim destination for both routes was the ADS at Somme Redoubt. These paths, treacherous enough in the daytime, would be carefully flagged and night-lights placed “close to them to direct stretcher-bearers and walking wounded cases to the Advanced Dressing Station”. All stretcher cases would, following treatment, be transported by ambulance car and Red Cross lorry westward along the section of road Gravenstafel – Wieltje, to the entraining point at Bridge House. Casualties, after being transferred to a light railway, would then be carried as far as the ‘II Corps Main Dressing Station’ just north of Ypres. The DDMS II Corps was also to make arrangements for trains to be in place at Somme Redoubt at Zero + 2 and Zero + 3 hours. “Subsequent trains could be called up as required from the control point at BRIDGE HOUSE in 1 ½ hours”.<sup>364</sup>

The CO 92<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance would be responsible for evacuation of casualties from RAPs to ADS. Stretcher-bearers from divisional field ambulances were to be placed

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<sup>363</sup> See Appendix 8.

<sup>364</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘G’, Report on the Medical Arrangements During the Recent Operations: Night 1/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 15 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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at his disposal to accomplish this task. “It was known the carrying of the wounded would be very arduous and arrangements were made with [the] General Staff, whereby 2 officers and 100 O.R. of infantry battalions of 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade could be called upon to act as stretcher-bearers after the R.A.M.C. bearers were too fatigued to carry on”.<sup>365</sup>

Sir Henry Rawlinson was pleased with the organisational efforts of both divisions:

I went into details of their attack with the 32 and 8 and I was well satisfied with their preparations – Heneker’s arrangements and plans were particularly good ... Shute has an excellent model of the Passchendaele Ridge which he is going to lecture his men on so that each and all may know exactly what is required of them – both divisions have been very thorough in the details of their barrages.<sup>366</sup>

Maintenance and prolongation of roads and tracks remained problematic. On 28 November Rawlinson wrote: “We are suffering much from the difficulty in communication from the frontline – the condition of Passchendaele is terrible with dead all over the place and no chance of burying them so long as the shelling continues”.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> CAC: RVLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 27 November 1917.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid. 28 November 1917.



**Plate 2.5 33<sup>rd</sup> Battalion MGC Sector Model: ‘Passchendaele-Broodseinde Ridge Defences’ February 1918. Tabletop and outdoor scale models in relief were popular and effective tools for pre-operational instruction and sector orientation (Source: IWM Q56263)**

It is remarkable, given the dreadful conditions and almost impossible task of subduing active German battery concentrations ringing the salient that necessary preparation for, and consequent execution of any sort of coherent attack occurred. This had much to do with organisational and logistical aspects, as comparison of 8<sup>th</sup> Division and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division orders and instructions readily demonstrate, of *S.S. 135* and the formulaic operational approach adopted by Second Army as standard operating procedure after 20 September. Adequate advance dumps of rations, water, ammunition and HE stores were in place by the close of November. Overland communications infrastructures<sup>368</sup> were maintained and extended.<sup>369</sup> The lengthening of vital duckboard

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<sup>368</sup> ‘[I]n November 1917, the state of mapping of the British area in the Ypres Salient was so poor that the [4<sup>th</sup> Field Service] Company [FSC] had to obtain information about the roads constructed for and during the Flanders offensive of June to November by referring to captured German maps. The information had simply not been recorded by 2<sup>nd</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> FSC [attached to Second and Fifth armies respectively] during the operations’. See Peter Chasseaud, *Artillery’s Astrologers: A History of British Survey and Mapping on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Lewes: Map Books, 1999), p. 379.

tracks across the impassable mud from Canal Bank to the forward area was duly noted by Major-General Shute: “This extension reflects great credit on the R.E”.<sup>370</sup> All such efforts were a triumph over extreme adversity.

## 2.4 Loss of Teall Cottage

Aggressive German defenders, worried by three successful British efforts to reduce the depth of their established *Vorfeldzonelinie*, re-captured Teall Cottage – now an advanced outpost previously occupied without resistance by a British patrol on the night of 21/22 November – after overwhelming its small garrison of 14 men on 30 November.<sup>371</sup> Second

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<sup>369</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel G.C. Pollard (CRE 32<sup>nd</sup> Division) outlined what was accomplished in a report dated 6 December: ‘On taking over from 1<sup>st</sup> Division work was pushed on with duckboard tracks toward the frontline. The following tracks were in existence: MOUSETRAP TRACK up to V.28.d.2.5 (vicinity of Source Farm), No. 6 TRACK up to D.3.d.9.9 (vicinity of Kronprinz Farm). It was decided to make a third track from WINNIPEG or its vicinity to KRONPRINZ [FARM] where it carried on along what had been No. 6 TRACK to direct through PETER PAN and on to VIRILE FARM, thus giving 3 distinct tracks to the frontline exclusive of the BELLEVUE ROAD. C.[R.]E., II Corps agreed to deliver 1,200 duckboards daily and this was found to be as much as could be carried up. The length of the track laid was decided by the strength of the carrying party. Dumps were a long way back and not more than one journey could be done at night. MOUSETRAP TRACK was got through to the frontline by 28/11/17. No. 6 Track through VIRILE FARM by 1/12/17. Cross tracks were also put in. The centre track (KRONPRINZ TRACK) was got to VAPOUR FARM by 1/12/17. Progress was slow on this track as it was badly shelled and the ground was boggy in places. The new track from WINNIPEG to KRONPRINZ [FARM] was pushed through by 29/11/17, as much as 1,500 yards being laid in one night. Great credit is due to Major Waters of the 218<sup>th</sup> Field Coy. RE for his energy and determination in pressing on the work’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section 1, General’ 11 December 1917, p. 3 and ‘Appendix ‘F’, Report on RE Work during Operations by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division on 2/12/17’, 6 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. Nine field companies (206<sup>th</sup>, 218<sup>th</sup>, 219<sup>th</sup> of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, 23<sup>rd</sup> of 1<sup>st</sup> Division, 247<sup>th</sup>, 248<sup>th</sup>, 249<sup>th</sup> of 63<sup>rd</sup> RND and 446<sup>th</sup>, 447<sup>th</sup> of 50<sup>th</sup> Division) were employed to carry out road, track and tramway work. Two pioneer battalions (1/5<sup>th</sup> Welsh of 1<sup>st</sup> Division, 14<sup>th</sup> Worcestershire of 63<sup>rd</sup> RND) and 1 infantry battalion (Howe of 63<sup>rd</sup> RND) provided additional labour.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section 1, General’, 11 December 1917, p. 8 and ‘Map Showing Tracks Scale 1:20,000 32G/MAPS/46.M’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>371</sup> Teall Cottage became the responsibility of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division following the scheduled boundary adjustment with 8<sup>th</sup> Division on the night of 24/25 November. Belated discovery of its loss after nightfall delayed immediate local counter-attack. An attempt to regain the position by 16<sup>th</sup> NF (96 Brigade) before dawn on 1 December was repulsed with the loss of 2 officers and 100 ORs. See TNA: WO/95/1677: 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, WO/95/1718: 24 Brigade War Diary, WO/157/120-121: Disposition maps in ‘Second Army Intelligence Summaries’, 11 November to 5 December 1917, Second Army Intelligence File and TNA: WO/95/2398: 16<sup>th</sup> NF War Diary. For the tragic circumstances by which a decorated company commander (Captain C. Cundall MC) of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers was killed while unknowingly approaching the German-occupied post – thus alerting the British of its capture the previous morning – on the night of 30 November/1 December see WO/95/2397: 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers War Diary.

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Army intelligence confidently noted an “easy repulse with no gains”; II Corps’ intelligence summary for 1 December stated:

At 6:00 a.m. this morning [30 November] the enemy massed for attack behind the high ground at V.30.a and at the same time opened a heavy barrage in front of and immediately behind our frontline. Our artillery barrage prevented the attack from developing in force and only straggling parties advanced. They were easily driven off and several of the enemy were seen to be hit.<sup>372</sup>

The war diaries of II Corps, VIII Corps, 8<sup>th</sup> Division and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division also failed to register the loss of Teall Cottage, while 96 Brigade’s diarist laconically observed days later: “It is surmised that during barrage in the morning enemy must have taken the post unnoticed”. Subsequent events would soon demonstrate that the capture of this seemingly insignificant concrete blockhouse had placed its hostile garrison – estimated at thirty men with one machine-gun – in a convenient position (32<sup>nd</sup> Division side of its boundary with 8<sup>th</sup> Division) to disrupt at the outset, the imminent night operation.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> TNA: WO/157/289: II Corps Intelligence Summary, 1 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File. This belated attempt to regain portions of the *Vorfeldzonelinie* (gained by 8<sup>th</sup> Division on the nights of 18/19, 20/21 and 24/25 November) is indicative of the local German commander’s elastic response – as opposed to adhering to any rigid tactical doctrine – to prevailing battlefield situations and conditions. This flexible approach, retained throughout 1914-18 as part of the Imperial German Army’s pre-war cultural ethos, ignored, in this particular circumstance, doctrinal expectations that the *Vorfeldzonelinie* would be regained quickly: ‘The Outpost Zone – In a large attack a deep advanced zone prevents the enemy from destroying, with his artillery fire, great numbers of our garrisons and thereby penetrating our front. In local attacks, however, the troops must not withdraw from it without serious fighting. *If momentarily abandoned it will be retaken immediately*’ (my emphasis). See Introduction by Robert T. Foley in Captain G.C. Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West* (Brighton: Tom Donovan unexpurgated edition, 2008), p. xxvi and Historical Sub-section, General Staff, A.E.F., *A Survey of German Tactics 1918* (Washington DC: War Department, December 1918), p.33.

<sup>373</sup> See TNA: WO/157/120: ‘Second Army Intelligence Summary’, 30 November 1917, Second Army Intelligence File, WO/157/288: ‘II Corps Summary of Information’, 1 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File, WO/95/643: II Corps War Diary, WO/95/821: VIII Corps War Diary, WO/95/1677: 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, WO/95/2370: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, WO/95/2396: 96 Brigade War Diary, Captain H. FitzM. Stacke MC, *The Worcestershire Regiment in the Great War Vol. 1* (Kidderminster: G.T. Cheshire & Sons, 1928), p. 300 and IWM 4732: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33’ (CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF after-action report), 5 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).



**Plate 2.6 Site of Teall Cottage from site of Northern Redoubt (Source: Rob Thompson)**

## **2.5 Final Hours**

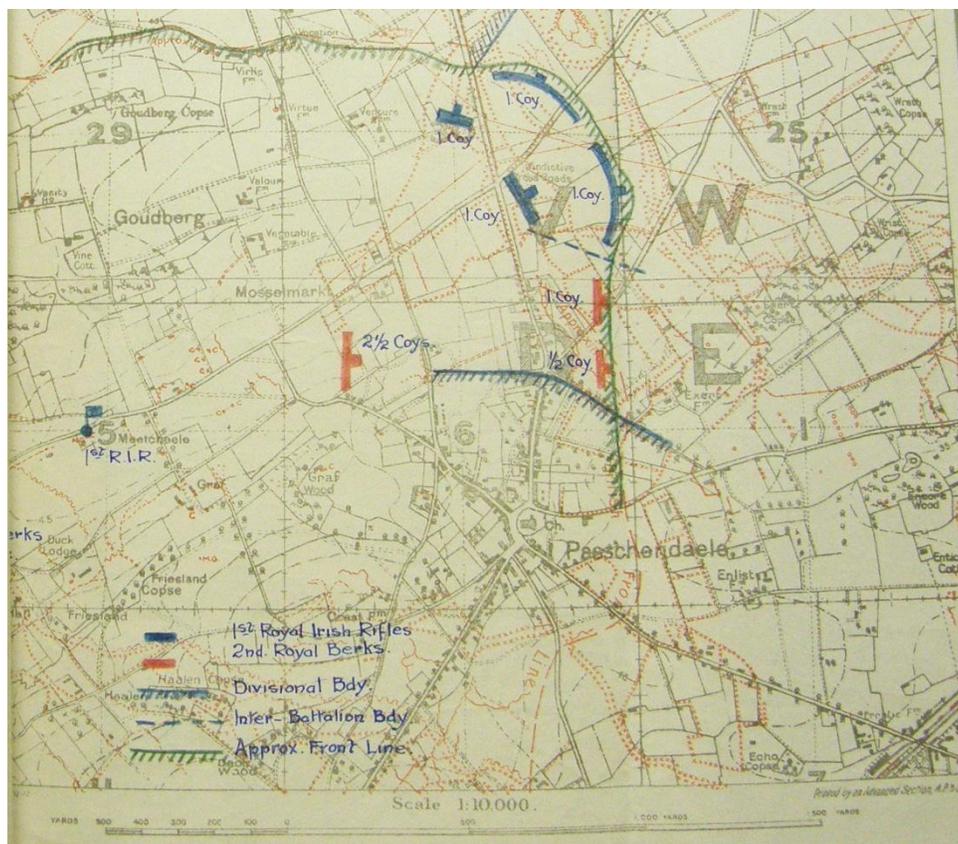
Pre-arranged brigade reliefs commenced after dark on 30 November. On the right, two companies each from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment and 1<sup>st</sup> RIR (25 Brigade) took over a frontline extending west of Exert Farm to Teall Cottage exclusive from 23 Brigade (**Text Map 2.1.1**).<sup>374</sup> On the left, 16<sup>th</sup> NF and 15<sup>th</sup> LF (attached 97 Brigade) relieved 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and 16<sup>th</sup> LF (96 Brigade) from opposite Teall Cottage to Tournant Farm. Forward movements by 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment to 97 Brigade support and reserve positions at Bellevue and Wurst Farm occurred simultaneously.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: 'Narrative of Operations Carried Out by 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup> /2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917', 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, p. 1.

<sup>375</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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**Map 2.1.1 8<sup>th</sup> Division: Dispositions Morning 1 December**  
(Source: TNA: WO/95/1677)

1 December dawned with low clouds and thick mist; visibility remained very poor. The meteorological station at Vlamertinghe recorded temperature values of a 47° high during the day and 37° low after dark. Sunset was at 3:47 p.m.; moonrise at 6:21 p.m.<sup>376</sup> Sir Henry Rawlinson continued to express reserved optimism, regardless of intelligence that the enemy was alert and expectant, about the impending night operation:

The weather is better and I have great hopes that we shall do the trick at Passchendaele all right [,] but the Bosch is expecting us. I visited the 32 & 8 divisions this PM and was well satisfied with their arrangements – They are two

<sup>376</sup> LHCMA: Second Army War Diary, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/16, King's College, London, TNA: WO/95/15: 'Temperature Values during December 1917: Degrees Fahrenheit', in GHQ War Diary and WO/157/288: 'Calendar for December 1917: Times Calculated for Second Army Front and Greenwich Mean Time', II Corps Intelligence File.

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very good div[isions] and will [,] I am sure [,] do all that is possible.<sup>377</sup>

Battle preparations (priming Mills bombs, examining rifles, gas masks, Lewis guns, field dressings, iron rations, identity discs, etc.) by assault battalions of 25 and 97 brigades were being made in dank dugout complexes, dismal hutted camps and shattered farms west of the Passchendaele Ridge. 25 Brigade, for example, had previously issued (27 November) a final itemized list of equipment and ammunition to be carried forward by the attacking troops; every combat necessity appeared to be provided for.<sup>378</sup> The long, arduous journey to the jumping-off positions was scheduled to commence after dark, time being allowed for the attackers to reach their destination before zero hour at 1:55 a.m. on 2 December.

Brigadier-General Aspinall (BGGs) submitted the weekly operations report, outlining activity in VIII Corps sector during 24 to 30 November, to Army HQ on 1 December: “During the week harassing fire has been carried out on enemy’s trenches and several concentration shoots on suspected areas”. Ammunition dumps in the German rear were observed to be “blown up, and from prisoners statements, our artillery appears to have been successful”. German guns were noted to be “extremely active” on the

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<sup>377</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 1 December 1917.

<sup>378</sup> The 3 assault battalions of 25 Brigade were equipped as follows: ‘1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lines (a) Riflemen: Rifle and bayonet, 170 rounds of SAA, 1 shovel, valise, iron rations, rations for day of attack, water bottle full, 2 sandbags, 2 ground flares, Small Box respirator, leather jerkin, groundsheet, 1 Watson Fan per section. (b) Bombers: As for (a) except – 120 SAA only, 5 Mills grenades. (c) Rifle Bombers: As for (a) except – 50 rounds of SAA only, 8 rifle grenades, 16 cartridges for same. (d) Lewis Gunners: As for (a) except – Nos. 1 & 2 carry no rifle or bayonet, 50 rounds of SAA only, 20 drums SAA per gun, only two shovels per gun. 2. 3<sup>rd</sup> Wave: As for 1 except the following will be carried in addition: Riflemen: 100 rounds of SAA (i.e. 270 in all). Bombers: 2 men 16 L[ewis] G[un] drums, remainder 100 rounds of SAA (i.e. 270 in all). Rifle Grenadiers: 100 rounds of SAA (i.e. 270 in all). Lewis Gunners: 10 extra drums (i.e. 30 in all) SAA per gun. 3. 10 SOS grenades per company, divided between Company HQ, Platoon Commanders and Sergeants. 1 Box “Very” Lights divided between companies’. See TNA: WO/95/1727: ‘25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade Instructions No. 3’, 27 November 1917, 25 Brigade War Diary.

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Passchendaele Ridge, special attention being paid to Seine and Levi cottages. Hostile artillery shoots of “short duration” were also directed on the new 18-pounder battery positions in the vicinity of the Abraham Heights. The enemy infantry, “though quiet, have shewn [sic] themselves to be alert and awaiting any signs of a renewal of the attack by our troops”. 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s steady success in narrowing the distance to Venison Trench and adjacent redoubts was also noted:

No minor operations have been undertaken, but the line of posts has been gradually pushed forward until the forward posts are now in close proximity to the enemy’s main position, thus denying him the use of the defended zone in front of his main defences.

German machine-guns, however, had been active by night during the previous week, “but have fired very little during the day”. Despite this, active patrolling was continued after dark; no enemy patrols were encountered.<sup>379</sup>

Major-General Heneker, suffering from a severe bout of Lumbago and still harbouring extreme reservations about the impending “beastly operation”, wrote tersely of “last preparations” in his diary. One detects a certain amount of fatigue, irritability and semi-fatalism in his correspondence prior to the attack. 1917 had been an arduous campaign year for the GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division. Recurrent lumbago complaints, coupled with discomfort from a thigh wound received in December 1915, no doubt contributed to the pessimistic outlook.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> BL: 48359: ‘VIII Corps, G. 2283, Weekly Report on Operations for week ending 6-0 p.m., Friday 30<sup>th</sup> Nov., 1917’, 1 December 1917, VIII Corps Official War Diary with Appendices and Addenda, Hunter-Weston Papers, Vol. V.

<sup>380</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and IWM: 66/541/1: Heneker Diary, 1 December 1917.

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The weekly operations report, outlining activity in II Corps' sector during the same period as that covered by VIII Corps' report, described the general policy of preparation for the forthcoming operation: Patrols had been "very active throughout the week, with the idea of denying the superiority of no man's land to the enemy, and also to find out the nature of the ground over which we are to fight". Several machine-gun positions were also identified. British machine-guns carried out harassing fire each night. This took the form of "concentrated shoots on communications and occupied posts". British gunners concentrated "twice daily on enemy occupied areas and used tracks". Counter-preparation took place "at dawn for the first three days of period under review", after which concentrated bursts of fire were "directed on selected places in addition to harassing fire by day and night on enemy's approaches, roads, tracks, and centres of activity". German activity varied in intensity. Their patrols seemed to have diminished, while hostile artillery fire was "normal except that his [German] shelling of duckboard tracks and of the GRAVENSTAFEL – MEETCHEELE road has become intense". There was, however, little sign of a decrease in shellfire during the week.<sup>381</sup> "Very little activity" by German machine-guns was also noted: "On a few occasions our roads and tracks received attention, but generally speaking, the enemy appears to have confined himself to direct fire [,] which has consisted of occasional sweeping of no man's land". Prompt fire was directed on spotted British patrols, "but these bursts have been short".<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> 'The WESTROOSEBEKE group has been most active. Little fire has been reported from HOUTHOUST [sic], but shelling from POLDERS WOOD and SHAW WOOD has been reported almost daily. Considerable decrease in gas shelling is noticeable, but there has been no active gas bombardment, merely gas shelling over wide areas'. See TNA: WO/95/643: 'II Corps No. 227 G., II Corps Summary of Operations for Week-ending 30. 11. 17', II Corps War Diary and IWM 4723: 'HARASSING FIRE MAP (To Accompany II Corps Artillery Instructions No. 10)', Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>382</sup> Ibid. Casualties for the period covered by this report were 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Officers - 3 killed, 15 wounded; ORs - 97 killed, 337 wounded, 108 missing, 35<sup>th</sup> Division: Officers - 3 killed, 8 wounded; ORs -

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Enemy shellfire remained normal on 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's front during the remainder of the 1<sup>st</sup>. Divisional artillery responded with the usual concentration and harassing barrages on German trenches, pillboxes, dugouts and tracks to the frontline. The following moves were to be carried out after dark "in accordance with table" attached to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division O.O. 139:

1. HQ 97 Infantry Brigade to move from Canal Bank to Kronprinz Farm.
2. All four battalions of 97 Infantry Brigade into the frontline.
3. HQ 14 Infantry Brigade from Canal Bank to Kansas relieving HQ 96 Infantry Brigade, with 16<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers and 15<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers assembled in accordance with 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Instructions No. 9, with 5 battalions in line.<sup>383</sup>

Dusk and the march forward to assembly tapes along allocated roads and slimy duckboard tracks were fast approaching. Time remained to consume one more hot meal and conduct final administrative and equipment checks. Battalion commanders discussed a myriad of last minute details with their staffs, while company and platoon officers, dressed like ORs with unobtrusive pips on shoulders and carrying rifles, performed inspection parades of equipment-laden men. Two heavy rain showers occurred after nightfall "making the ground greasy". Previous tours of the horrific salient, a certain amount of unease about the attack plan and Major-General Heneker's consequent semi-fatalism had left their mark on subordinates, so some pessimism appears to have

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18 killed, 116 wounded, 63<sup>rd</sup> Division: 4 ORs wounded, Corps Troops: Officers - 6 wounded; ORs -17 killed, 66 wounded, 1 missing.

<sup>383</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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prevailed at brigade and battalion level.<sup>384</sup> As Lieutenant Charles Carrington (1/5<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwickshire Regiment) observed whilst recounting preparations for an earlier operation in his postwar memoirs: “Men going into action support themselves by a sort of enforced hysterical cheerfulness, but no one could be cheerful in the Third Battle of Ypres”. The official termination of that dreadful campaign on 20 November was of no consequence to the morale, cheerful or otherwise, of troops primed for another advance along the Passchendaele Ridge.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> See John Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns: An Infantry Officer on the Western Front* (London: William Kimber, 1979), p. 115.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid* and Charles Edmonds (Pseud.), *A Subaltern's War* (London: Anthony Mott, 1984 reprint of 1929 edition), p. 105. Edmonds/Carrington, while certainly not a member of the ‘disenchantment school’ of postwar literature, was writing over a decade after the war. Morale was, of course, still reeling, albeit only temporarily, in the immediate aftermath of the Third Ypres campaign. Similar observations of troop despondency can be found in other inter-war memoirs. Gunner Aubrey Wade, for example, recalled a poignant scene during the autumn fighting: ‘Reinforcements of the New Army shambled past the guns with dragging steps and the expressions of men who knew they were going to certain death. No words of greeting passed as they slouched along; in sullen silence they filed past one by one to the sacrifice’, while a former Lieutenant-Colonel, writing to Lloyd George in the 1930s, recollected ‘fresh divisions coming up, spick and span, from rest billets, but coming up hopelessly knowing what they had to face (the only time I have ever seen British soldiers anything but cheery and confident)...’ See Aubrey Wade, *The War of the Guns* (London: Batsford, 1936), pp. 57-58 and the manifestly polemical David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs Vol. 2* (London: Odhams Press abridged edition, 1937), p. 343.

## A Moonlight Massacre

*It may be said at the outset that the element of surprise intended in the Passchendaele attack failed entirely, as the enemy were aware of the British intentions and fully prepared.*<sup>386</sup>

### 3.1 Assembly

Saturday 1 December 6:21 p.m.: A full moon rose with singular brilliance against an expansive backdrop of a starry winter sky. Scuddy clouds, propelled westward by winds of 5 to 10 mph, interspersed the quasi-luminous atmosphere. Occasional flares cast an ephemeral gloss on swollen streams and the roily liquid surface of hundreds of shell holes. Afternoon showers failed to wash away a light coating of snow.<sup>387</sup> Major-General Heneker's after-action report noted: "The night was fine and clear and the moon was particularly bright. Individual figures could be distinguished at 100 yards, and bodies of men at 200 yards. The ground had been severely torn up by artillery fire, but was on the whole, unusually dry and the going was good", so earlier anxiety about being "heard squelching through the mud" was abated.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> J.W. Arthur & I.S. Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry (Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Battalion): Record of War Service 1914-1918* (Glasgow: David J. Clark, 1920) p. 67.

<sup>387</sup> TNA: WO/95/15: 'Weather Diary, December 1917', GHQ War Diary.

<sup>388</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 'Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917', 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and Edward Beddington, 'My Life' (UK: Privately Printed, 1960), p. 119.



**Plate 3.1 Passchendaele December 1917**  
(Source: IWM Q56257)

Seven and one half assault companies from three battalions of Brigadier-General Coffin's 25 Brigade were detailed to assemble in three waves inside the line of their advanced posts on a frontage of 1,020 yards from opposite Exert Farm to the vicinity of Northern Redoubt (**Map 9**). Coffin hoped to reduce recognised dangers by having the attackers form-up in rear of his advanced positions:

On account of our outpost line being close up to the enemy's advanced posts, and owing to the fact that it was only three days after a full moon and the nights were very light, forming up had to be carried out 200 yards inside our outposts on a line about 350 yards from the enemy's main position on the N[orth] and 250 yards from his main position on the S[outh] ... The outpost line which was held by 2 ½ companies was to be responsible for covering the advance of the attacking troops by rifle and Lewis Gun fire until the attacking troops passed through it. We knew where the enemy's M.G.'s were and directly they opened, 2

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Lewis Guns at least were to concentrate on to each M.G. and endeavour to neutralize it.<sup>389</sup>

The right battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment), tasked with forming a defensive flank in order to protect the “attacking battalions from an attack from a SE direction”, would advance with one and one half companies. The “object was a line running from NW to SE, passing one hundred and fifty yards west of Wrath Farm to a point about two hundred yards north of Exert Farm, where it curved back towards the south-west. The left boundary of the battalion’s area was directed NE towards Wrath Farm”. Assault companies were organised in three waves: half of ‘D’ Company on the right, ‘B’ Company on the left, ‘C’ assigned to form defensive flank “on the right in the latter part of the advance”, while ‘A’ Company remained in reserve. The remaining half of ‘D’ was detailed to hold the outpost line.<sup>390</sup> “In the case of 2/Rifle Brigade and 2/Lincoln Regt. on the left and centre respectively, three companies were told off to do the attack while one company was told off to hold the outpost line and so cover forming up”. One of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire’s three assault companies was assigned to fill an anticipated gap as the inner flanks of the former battalion (advancing due east) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade (advancing NE) diverged. 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade’s left company was also detailed to “form up behind the left flank” to fill another anticipated gap on the left. The out-going 1<sup>st</sup> RIR would proceed to Brigade reserve at Meetcheele following relief of its companies in the outpost line. “Guides were provided from the head of the tracks [,] under [25] Brigade arrangements [,] to lead battalions to the right of their forming up tapes”. Forming up was to be carried

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<sup>389</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>390</sup> BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers and F. Loraine Petre, *The Royal Berkshire Regiment Vol. 2* (Reading: The Reading Barracks, 1925), p. 96

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out “on a single tape laid from 150 yards SE of Teal [sic] Cottage” to west of Exert Farm. “This tape was laid on iron pickets each bearing a sign painted white denoting the frontage of various battalions”. Direction tapes, “leading from the forming up tape in the direction of the advance [,] had also been laid” to aid the assembly.<sup>391</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment, responsible for the right half of 25 Brigade’s line since the night of 30 November/1 December, began to deploy on a frontage of 200 yards as soon as darkness permitted. ‘D’ Company “took over the frontline on the frontage allotted to the battalion with one platoon of ‘C’ Company on the right in position as the beginning of the defensive flank, which was to be formed on the right”. The remainder of the latter company was withdrawn from the line following relief, “pending the time for it to form up on its tape later”. ‘A’ Company, in reserve during the attack, began the march forward from the neighbourhood of Meetcheele just after dusk. “Owing to the extreme darkness” this company became lost and, suffering “numerous casualties” from shellfire while traversing the southern extension of No. 5 Track, did not reach its assigned reserve position, where it dug in, until about 9:00 p.m.<sup>392</sup>

At 7:15 p.m., ‘B’ Company (left assault company of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire) and two platoons of ‘D’ Company (right assault company) moved forward from Meetcheele along No. 5 Track South under intermittent shelling. The going was rough and several men were lost:

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<sup>391</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and TNA: WO/95/1727: ‘25<sup>th</sup> Brigade No. G.1/1’, 21 November 1917, 25 Brigade War Diary. See also WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division No. G.97/1/1’, 18 November 1917 for Heneker’s hand-written marginalia diagrams of proposed assembly tape layout.

<sup>392</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: ‘Appendix B’, 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary.

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B Company [,] which was leading found great difficulty in getting across the gaps in the duckboards caused by shellfire and a great many men got badly stuck in the mud with the result that they and the leading half of D Company were [,] by the time they reached the head of the duckboards [,] in a state of disorganisation. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Giddings (OC B Company) got together 1 platoon and led it forward to the tapes with one of the guides provided by Bat [alion] HQ leaving 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut[enant] s Upton and Tremellan to get the remainder out of the mud and into their sections and platoons again. By 9:30 p.m. this re-organisation was complete [,] but 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Giddings has not returned. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut[enant] Rice and Lieut[enant] Francis (B[riga]de Intelligence Officer) went forward to look for him.<sup>393</sup>

Twenty-three-year-old acting Lieutenant-Colonel C.R.H. Stirling MC (former CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Cameronians)<sup>394</sup> extricated and took forward the stalled elements of ‘B’ and ‘D’ companies “as the congestion at the head of the track was great, many men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolns and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade having arrived there”. The forming up was carried out with “little further trouble”. Stirling reported to Brigade HQ that his battalion was ready to attack at 11:30 p.m.<sup>395</sup>

Twenty-one-year-old 38243 Private Frederick John Wakely was a gunner in the ‘Heavy Branch Machine Gun Corps’ or recently designated – by Royal Warrant on 28 July 1917 – ‘Tank Corps’, who somehow ended up in the ranks of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire.

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Captain and A/Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Robert Hoste Stirling MC replaced a physically and mentally exhausted Lieutenant-Colonel Hanbury-Sparrow (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire) just before the attack. Son of Brigadier-General J.W. Stirling CB CMG (CRA 59<sup>th</sup> Division April 1917-June 1918). Commissioned Cameronians 1913; Lieutenant 1914; Captain A/Lieutenant-Colonel 2<sup>nd</sup> Cameronians. A ‘jolly decent chap’ according to one 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire subaltern, Stirling had also been A/GOC 24 Brigade until Brigadier-General R. Haig assumed command on 21 November. See Lieutenant-Colonel A.A. Hanbury-Sparrow, *The Land-Locked Lake* (London: Arthur Barker, 1932), pp. 290-317, Loraine Petre, *The Royal Berkshire Regiment Vol. 2*, p. 96 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant C. Morris *op. cit.*, quoted in Ian Cull, *The Second Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment in World War One: The China Dragon’s Tale* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005), p. 85.

<sup>395</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: ‘Appendix B’, 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary.

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Military authorities, possibly influenced by manpower deficits, deemed 'Fred' was required for service in a line infantry battalion. Fate thus necessitated that the experienced young veteran should find himself, instead of the noisome, stifling confines of a Mark IV tank, ensconced in a shell hole ready to advance with his company in the icy pre-dawn hours of 2 December 1917.<sup>396</sup>



**Plate 3.2 Private F.J. Wakely (Source: MMP)**

Numbed sentries of 'C' and 'D' companies 1<sup>st</sup> RIR, responsible for the left half of 25 Brigade's line since the night of 30 November/1 December, anxiously anticipating their imminent withdrawal to Brigade support, scanned a narrow no man's land irradiated by moonlight. German activity, other than the staccato rattle of a machine-gun, sharp report of a rifle or a bursting flare, appeared almost non-existent opposite the advanced line of outposts extending from the vicinity of Teall Cottage to the right boundary of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire. The expected relief would occur following the arrival of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire and

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<sup>396</sup>Special thanks to Jan Van der Fraenen (Coordinator Passchendaele Archives Project 2005-07) for providing details about Pte. Wakely's war service.

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2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade (centre and left assault battalions of 25 Brigade) whose men, burdened with Lewis Guns, hand grenades, ammunition, magnesium flares, picks, shovels, etc., made slow progress along assigned roads and serpentine duckboard tracks traversing the barren expanse of shell holes and swamp. “The journey, however, was ultimately accomplished and, once they arrived, the troops, assisted by Lieutenant O.S. Francis, M.C., Brigade Intelligence Officer, succeeded in getting into their correct forming-up positions without further difficulty”.<sup>397</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade commenced their march of approximately 6,500 yards to the forward area shortly before nightfall. Exiting California Camp near Wieltje at 4:30 p.m., companies of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire proceeded along Track No. 5 and the southern extension. ‘C’ Company, assigned to relieve ‘A’ Company 1<sup>st</sup> RIR in the centre of the outpost zone, had been dispatched earlier at 3:15 p.m. The march was especially onerous along the southern extension, which was “in a deplorable state”:

The boards [,] which had laid on trestles high up off the ground, were severely shelled and there were few cases of more than 20 yards in one stretch in good condition. The height of the boards from the ground and the bad state of the ground in the vicinity of the track made it very difficult to regain the track after passing a point where the boards had been blown away.<sup>398</sup>

To “step off the track was to become engulfed in deep clinging mud, and across country the “going” was impossible.” The battalion adjutant subsequently wrote: “The condition of the duckboard track No. 5 S[outh] was heartbreaking ... It took an unloaded man over

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<sup>397</sup> Lieutenant Colonel J.H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, *The Eighth Division: 1914-1918* (London: Naval & Military Press reprint of 1926 edition), p. 165.

<sup>398</sup> TNA: WO/95/1727: ‘Report on Operation’, 7 December 1917, 25 Brigade War Diary.

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3 ½ hours to walk from WIELTJE to MOSELMARKT instead of under 2 hours by road”.<sup>399</sup>

2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, after departing from a campsite near Capricorn (a section of British frontline prior to 31 July) at 5:00 p.m., marched without mishap along the Wieltje – Gravenstafel – Bellevue Road as far as Waterloo Farm, and thence astride the northern extension of No. 5 track to its terminus near Mosselmarkt. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire were not so fortunate, ‘C’ Company suffering heavy casualties from shellfire at the head of No. 5 Track. Twenty survivors eventually arrived to relieve two left posts and form a strongpoint approximately 150 yards in the rear of the outpost line. Lieutenant-Colonel N.M.S. Irwin (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire) took immediate steps to ensure his frontline was adequately defended by ordering ‘D’ Company, 1<sup>st</sup> RIR to remain in place, its spot in brigade reserve being taken by a company of 2<sup>nd</sup> West Yorkshire Regiment (23 Brigade).<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Major-General C.R. Simpson, *The History of the Lincolnshire Regiment 1914-1918* (London: Medici Society, 1931), p. 284 and TNA: WO/95/1730: ‘Report on Action of Battn from 2:30 p.m. 1.12.17 – M.N. 2/3 .12. 17’, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary.

<sup>400</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, ‘Report on Action of Battn from 2:30 pm. 1-12-17 – M.N. 2/3-12-17’, 6 December 1917, WO/95/1730: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary, Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 164 and James W. Taylor, *The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), p. 119.



**Plate 3.3 Lieutenant-Colonel N.M.S. Irwin**  
(Source: Creagh, *The Distinguished Service Order*)

Forward outposts had already been occupied by what remained of ‘C’ Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire and ‘D’ Company of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, when 25 Brigade guides led the six remaining assault companies forward from ends of the northern and southern tracks. The Lincolnshire regimental history later recalled the exhausting ordeal: “[S]ome idea of the terrible nature of moving up at that period may be gathered from the fact that it took the first [‘C’] Company *five hours* to arrive at the head of the duckboard track”. Shambling lines of encumbered men were then conducted across an un-planked gulf of approximately 700 yards that separated the two duckboard avenues eastern extremities from the near edges of carefully laid direction tapes. The Lincolnshire’s adjutant observed: “For the attack men were not overloaded, although the condition of track No. 5 made the men dead tired before Zero”. Direction tapes, connected at right angles every fifty yards with the single tape, were easily followed to a jumping-off line 480 yards in length. “No difficulty was experienced in getting into position”, though it was believed

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“that individual groups of men were observed by the enemy, their rifle fire being fairly severe, the hostile artillery, however, was unusually quiet”.<sup>401</sup>

Close-range sniping, however, was received from an unexpected quarter on the left of 25 Brigade front, as tapping-parties of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade began to prepare for the arrival of ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ companies at the designated 340 yard jumping-off line. Teall Cottage, it was soon realised, was still in the hands of the enemy; 32<sup>nd</sup> Division had failed to secure the lost strongpoint despite several attempts. This small bastion, recaptured by the Germans on the morning of 30 November, still threatened the junction of 8<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> divisions. Hostile enfilade fire could now be brought to bear on any advance toward Northern Redoubt and Hill 52. Division and brigade staffs, it appears, had hoped this threat would be dealt with by local counter-attack in the hours before dawn on the 1<sup>st</sup>; their expectations remained unfulfilled.<sup>402</sup>

To add to this misfortune, Lieutenant-Colonel Hon. Roger Brand DSO (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade) was “wounded by a rifle bullet while reconnoitering the forming-up line”. The Battalion adjutant (Lieutenant G.H.G. Anderson MC) immediately assumed command.<sup>403</sup> 25 Brigade’s diarist recorded this incident, along with other trials and tribulations during the final march to the jumping-off line:

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolns Regt., the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berks and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle  
Brigade moved up into position on the tape ready for the

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<sup>401</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and Simpson, *The History of the Lincolnshire Regiment*, p. 284.

<sup>402</sup> TNA: WO/95/1731: ‘Report of the part played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Rifle Brigade in the recent operations at Passchendaele’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary and R. Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918 Vol. 2* (London: Rifle Brigade Club, 1927), p. 165.

<sup>403</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 165.

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attack on the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> December. The enemy was shelling rather heavily when the battalions were marching in [,] so they suffered some casualties. The weather was fine on the whole [,] though there was some occasional showers. Bde Hdqtrs moved up to Bellevue about 7 p.m. Lt. Col. the Hon. R. Brand [,] commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Rifle Brigade [,] was wounded early in the evening. The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles came out in to support. The relief was carried out according to Bde. Order No. 257.<sup>404</sup>

Two hundred yards inside the forward line of outposts, massed ranks of 25 Brigade's assault infantry hunkered down in cursory shelter of disparate trench sections or shell holes of various shapes and sizes, while others not so fortunate lay prostrate on the algid earth. Fleeting figures of officers and NCOs were occasionally observed treading between companies, platoons and sections in the moonlight. Many anticipated the approach of zero hour with customary apprehension; while to some it seemed apparent that 'Fritz' could not have missed their presence at the jumping-off tape.

Twenty-one-year-old Lieutenant John Nettleton (IO 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade) had been detailed to act as liaison officer, as per '8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2', with the neighbouring battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI) of 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade for the attack's duration.<sup>405</sup> The boyish veteran (he volunteered for active service in 1914) recalled a flawed attack scheme in a vitriolic postwar indictment:

For this show, the staff put their great brains to work and decided on a surprise attack. It was to start at the unusual hour of 1:55 a.m., instead of just before dawn, and the troops were to dash forward and 'overrun' the enemy's outposts before he knew what was happening. Then our barrage was to come down at zero plus 8 minutes and pulverize the enemy's main position.

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<sup>404</sup> TNA: WO/95/1727: 25 Brigade War Diary.

<sup>405</sup> See Chapter 2, pp. 91-92.

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This may have looked all right on paper back at GHQ but in fact was sheer raving lunacy under the existing conditions. To begin with, on the night of 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Dec: the moon would be only just past full;<sup>406</sup> there was no cover of any sort, not even a blade of grass, to hide the advance from the enemy; and there was no possibility of rushing forward and ‘overrunning’ anything; it was only with difficulty that one could advance at all at a dead slow stumble.

All these objections were put forward, to my certain knowledge, by battalion commanders to Brigade and by Brigade to Division. And our Divisional Commander is reported to have backed them up to the higher command, saying specifically that ‘hostile machine-gun fire from prepared positions on a bright moonlight night was more to be feared than any barrage’ and making several alternative suggestions. But he was over-ruled and, in the event, everything went exactly as anticipated; as anticipated, that is, by us and not by the staff.

Nettleton observed signs of low morale before the attack. He was certain the operation had been compromised:

Everybody realised that the whole thing was going to be a shambles. That is not a good mood to start any operation. Then, in my opinion, the Boche knew all about it from the start. I feel sure he spotted the RE’s laying out jumping-off tapes on the night before the show. Even if I’m wrong about this, he had many other chances to learn about it. There can seldom have been a ‘surprise’ attack of which so much clear notice was given to the enemy.

The newly designated liaison officer’s misgivings grew as he trudged, enfiladed by sporadic indirect machine-gun fire, up the corpse-strewn road from Gravenstafel to Mosselmarkt with 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> The moon was actually full. See National Schools Observatory, *Universe Now: A Month of the Moon*, National Grid for Learning. <<http://www.schoolsobservatory.org.uk/ngfl.htm>>

<sup>407</sup> John Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns: An Infantry Officer on the Western Front* (London: William Kimber, 1979), p. 115.



**Plate 3.4 Lieutenant J. Nettleton**  
(Source: Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns*)

Five assault battalions, four from Brigadier-General Blacklock's 97 Brigade and one attached from Brigadier-General A.C. Girdwood's 96 Brigade, formed up on a frontage of 1,850 yards below the barely perceptible summit of Hill 52 and the gently rising southern slope of Vat Cottage Ridge (**Map 10**). Battalions deployed from right to left as follows: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI with 3 assault companies and 1 support company; 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, 11<sup>th</sup> Border and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI "on a two company frontage with Nos. 3 and 4 companies in rear of Nos. 1 and 2 companies respectively", and 15<sup>th</sup> LF (holding the line with 16<sup>th</sup> NF since the night of 30 November/1 December) with 3 assault companies and 1 support

company. The 16<sup>th</sup> NF retired to Brigade reserve in the vicinity of Virile Farm following relief in the right sub-sector.<sup>408</sup>

Brigadier-General Blacklock's battalions assembled on a two or three company frontage forming four successive waves. Standardized small unit formations – known as 'worm' or 'snake' columns – were adopted to lead off and manoeuvre round the flank and rear of dispersed objectives:

1<sup>st</sup> wave: 3 sections of each of Nos. 1 and 2 platoons in line of sections in snake formation (i.e. not extended).

2<sup>nd</sup> wave: Lewis Gun sections and platoon H.Qrs. of Nos. 1 and 2 platoons in snake formation.

3<sup>rd</sup> wave: No. 3 Platoon in line of sections

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<sup>408</sup> Available intelligence related what was known about the organisation and state of the scattered enemy defences: 'Points of Resistance. (a) General. All farms and buildings may be regarded as strong points. VALUATION HOUSES [north of Volt Farm], the district around them, the region between them and the WESTROOSEBEKE ROAD, also TOMBOLA FARM to CLEAR FARM, WESTWOOD HOUSE, MALLET FARM, VOLT FARM, MALLET COPSE and the houses just east of it (V.23.d.7.5.), VEAL COTTAGES and the "Pill-boxes" west of it in V.25.c. are all points of resistance. VAT COTTAGES are held by posts at night and possibly by day. VOX FARM is strongly held. Although the main [Passchendaele – Westroosebeke] road in V.24.c. [...] east of the flooded portion (to which it acts as a dam) looks passable, it is probably commanded from many points, such as VALUATION HOUSES and the shell-holes just S.E. of them and from N.E. VOLT FARM probably commands the whole tongue of dry land [Vat Cottage Ridge] running S.W. from it. A new enemy strongpoint has been established on the southern side of the [Passchendaele – Westroosebeke] road in V.30.a.60.60. (East of VOCATION FARM). It is circular and 12 to 15 feet across, manned by about 8 men, who appear to have a M.G. The enemy's defences immediately in rear and running from west to east have been worked upon and appear to be held with increased personnel. (b) Front Line. The enemy has a line of outposts [*Vorfeldzonelinie*] in shell-holes, running east from V.29.a. (S.W. of VAT COTTAGES) along the dry ground just north of the road [present-day *Goudbergstraat*] in V.29.a & b. towards VOX FARM and from VOX FARM in a S.E. direction in front of HILL 52 (V.30.a.). The line from V.29.b.d.7. to 7.9. (N.W. of VIRILE FARM) is probably held. In addition to farms and Pill-boxes in the forward zone, his main line of resistance [*Hauptwiderstandslinie*] (which is constantly changing) probably runs as follows: From VAT COTTAGES along the road in front of VEAL COTTAGES [...] the dotted trench in V.23.d., V.29.b., to a point just north of VOX FARM. Continuing east from that point as a line of small trenches or linked up shell-holes just north and east of HILL 52 (a prisoner stated that this line beyond HILL 52 is to be held). (c) Supports. The support line is very uncertain, but is thought to run approximately from V.17.b., west of the WESTROOSEBEKE – PASSCHENDAELE ROAD. Supports also line in ruins and pill-boxes just north of the SPRIET ROAD. There is also a line of occupied shell-holes or short trenches running S.E. from V.17.c.0.8. towards MILLET [sic MULLET] FARM.(d) Reserves. Reserves lie about OOSTNIEUWKERKE (W.3.) and can counter-attack within 3 hours or even less'. See TNA: WO/95/2370: 'Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15 to V.30' November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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4<sup>th</sup> wave: No. 4 Platoon in line of sections<sup>409</sup>

“In 1917 XVIII Corps<sup>410</sup> ‘advocated a more elastic infantry formation for the attack’ employing platoons ‘working in depth rather than battalions stereotyped in waves’ so that behind the initial assault wave ‘worms’ of ‘little columns of units in depth’ were ready to ‘stalk’ the enemy on a narrow front’ close to the barrage”. Second Army also observed that attack waves employed by the end of Third Ypres “did not ‘give sufficient elasticity’ to counter the new conditions being experienced and abandoning linear formations advocated that the troops ‘should move in small columns in file, the formation which the nature of the ground forces the men to adopt eventually”. Common practice during 1917-18 called for two lines of skirmishers to act as an advanced guard for loose groups following in worm formation. “By early 1918 the platoon attacked with either one section thrown out as skirmishers and three sections advancing behind in single file or ‘worms’ of each section advancing in single file preceded by its two scouts”. Brigadier-General Coffin’s 25 Brigade adapted the former battle formation (platoons of the 1<sup>st</sup> wave in a 4 section skirmish wave trailed by two platoons, in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> waves, of 4 sections in column) to tackle what was a rudimentary linear defence. Major-General Shute and Brigadier-General Blacklock chose the latter formation for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> waves in order to apply the connate tactical flexibility of worm or snake columns advancing across

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<sup>409</sup> TNA: WO/95/2400: ‘97<sup>th</sup> Brigade Operation Order 178’, 21 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary.

<sup>410</sup> Lieutenant-General Sir (Frederick) Ivor Maxse (appointed GOC XVIII Corps in January 1917) was well known throughout the BEF as a progressive trainer of troops. His XVIII Corps was involved in the Flanders offensive as part of Fifth Army from its opening on 31 July until relieved by II Corps in early November. Historians have since noted Maxse’s considerable influence on tactical development and training. Some junior contemporaries, however, were not impressed. Guy Chapman recalled a spirited lecture given by the GOC XVIII Corps in April 1917: ‘We stayed there for five days, in which the only diversion was a lecture by the Corps Commander, General Maxse. ‘Infantry, gentlemen’, he began, ‘is a rectangular animal’; and then delighted with his trope, proceeded to draw a parallelogram on the blackboard. I glanced around the room. The rectangular animal sat with sullen face. Dim hopelessness settled on features as the Corps Commander warmed to his theme, a sullen resignation. They felt they had little enough time to live: it was cruel to waste a spring afternoon listening to this high-falutin’ chatter’. See Guy Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p. 153.

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broken ground against the enemy's diffused *die Leer des Gefechtsfeldes* positions. Distances between their attacking waves and companies were set at 20 and 40 yards respectively.<sup>411</sup>

Assembly areas had been “carefully reconnoitered and pegged out by the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade when in the line between November 23<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>”. Assembly areas for each battalion were plotted with wire on the night of 30 November/1 December, and checked by compass bearing during the day. “On Z night [1/2 December] the assembly positions of each platoon were marked out with tapes and the position of its flanks marked with white discs”. Luminous notice boards had also been “erected in company assembly areas on which were painted the bearing of the company objective and the distance in yards to it”, while “tapes or wire on screw pickets” were placed to distinguish routes from the heads of duckboard tracks. Strong patrols and Lewis Gun teams entered no man's land, as per ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’, to cover the forming up after nightfall.<sup>412</sup>

‘C’ and ‘D’ companies of 16<sup>th</sup> NF<sup>413</sup> easily repulsed a small German attack with rifle and Lewis Gun fire at 5:15 a.m. on 1 December. A wounded prisoner was brought in after the enemy was driven off. Designated reserve or “Counter-counter-attacking Battalion” following relief by 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, its companies assembled on the

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<sup>411</sup> See Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 101 and TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Map C, Dispositions of 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Bde: Diagrammatic Only’, ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>412</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action Report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section 4, Assembly’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p.8.

<sup>413</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion NF was formed in Newcastle by the Newcastle and Gateshead Chamber of Commerce in September 1914.

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right flank in the vicinity of Virile Farm, “as all available information indicated that any serious counter-attack would come from this flank on account of the known dispositions of the enemy’s reserves and the supposed impracticability of the ground west of MALLET WOOD”. At 9:00 p.m., Battalion HQ moved from Meetcheele to Virile Farm, while parties from 97 Brigade laid forming-up tape along the 1,850 yard front from Teall Cottage to NE of Tournant Farm.<sup>414</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, billeted at Irish Farm throughout the 1<sup>st</sup>, had three hot meals served up during the day and “a final hot meal at 5:45 p.m.”. Companies paraded at 6:55 p.m. before trekking 8,000 yards to a taped 400 yard jumping-off line. “Order of march was D, C, A, B companies, and Battalion Headquarters, at platoon intervals of 100 yards”. The leading platoon passed the starting point (road junction north of Irish Farm) at 7:10 p.m. “and proceeded to the line via BUFFS ROAD – ROAD junction [NE of Wieltje] C.23.a.5.3 – No. 6 Track and PETER PAN SWITCH to BELLEVUE – MEETCHEELE – MOSSELMARK [T] – pillboxes at road junction [Gravenstafel Road with present-day *Osselstraat*] V.30.c.45.15 – VENTURE FARM – Assembly Position, a distance of about 8 kilometres altogether”.<sup>415</sup> Lieutenant Nettleton recalled a nightmare journey:

I was detailed as Liaison Officer with 32<sup>nd</sup> Division on our left, so I went up the metalled [Gravenstafel] road with them. We ... had a sticky time and one incident must have given the Boche fair warning of what was happening, even if he hadn’t known before. As we came up to the top of the ridge, a man carrying a sandbag full of Verey lights and SOS signals was hit by a machine-gun bullet, which set off the flares he was carrying. He blazed like a torch and

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<sup>414</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action Report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section 4, Detailed Plan’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary pp. 7-8 and WO/95/2398: 16<sup>th</sup> NF War Diary.

<sup>415</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

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though we rolled him in the mud, we couldn't stop the fire-work display, which must have been visible for miles.<sup>416</sup>

The postwar battalion history also noted the “element of surprise was all important for a successful attack. This night was bright with moonlight. The movement of troops before “Zero” hour had been only too easily observed”.<sup>417</sup>

Thirty-two-year-old acting Lieutenant-Colonel L. Lamotte (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI since 26 November)<sup>418</sup> marched at the head of his battalion:

The battalion was led by the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel L. Lamotte, and paused at KANSAS CROSS for a halt of ten minutes. The commanding officer personally guided the battalion to the “jumping-off” tape and saw each section of the battalion into its correct position and after synchronizing the watches of every officer, gave to each the correct angle of advance and made certain that it was perfectly understood by the platoon and section commanders. The march between BELLEVUE and MOSSELMARK[T] was rendered difficult owing to congestion, but energetic measures prevailed, and plenty of time was allowed for assembly, and every man was in his proper position by 1:20 a.m., or thirty-five minutes before ZERO. The commanding officer reported this fact [from his newly-established HQ at Meetcheele] to brigade headquarters accordingly.<sup>419</sup>

Nettleton, unlike the 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI war diary, recollected surprise and consternation engendered by the discovery that Teall Cottage was still in enemy hands:

This [Teall Cottage] was supposed to have been captured by the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division two days previously and it had been so reported. But when we got there we were met with machine-gun fire and found the Boche were still in

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<sup>416</sup> Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns*, p. 116.

<sup>417</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald C. Bond DSO, *The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War Vol. 3* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1929), p. 911.

<sup>418</sup> A/Lieutenant-Colonel Lewis Lamotte: Commissioned Royal Sussex Regiment 1905; Lieutenant 1909; A/Major March-June and August-December 1917. Appointed CO 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI December.

<sup>419</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary and WO/95/2400: ‘97<sup>th</sup> Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary.

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possession. This fairly put the cat among the pigeons, because this position was the hinge between the two attacks and could enfilade either one of them. I went off at once to our own battalion [2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade] HQ to report this bad news, only to find that they had some more of their own. Roger Brand, our CO, had been wounded and Anderson, the Adjutant, had just got back to HQ after seeing him carried off.<sup>420</sup>

One platoon, however, was subsequently detailed by 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI to tackle Teall Cottage during the main assault.<sup>421</sup>

How was it that the left and right battalions of 8<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> divisions were unaware of the failure to regain Teall Cottage until just prior to the attack? Post-operational reports and diary entries only recount resultant disruption and heavy casualties caused by machine-gun fire from the hostile strongpoint, while two battalion war diaries (2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and 16<sup>th</sup> NF) record a single unsuccessful attempt to recapture the position during the early hours of 1 December. It appears, if Lieutenant Nettleton was correct, that 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ failed to perceive the threat, although, given the circumstances, a further counter-attack to regain the position would have had to be made under cover of darkness. The loss of Teall Cottage was not revealed until the night of 30 November/1 December; time remained for only one abortive counter-attack before daybreak. Perhaps it was hoped the situation would be cleared up – one more obstacle to overcome – once the main advance had begun. It is also possible that the serious danger posed by a German garrison in the seemingly insignificant pillbox was not immediately recognised. This is a reasonable hypothesis when one considers the rapid course of events, available intelligence and confused nature of the battlefield.

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<sup>420</sup> Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns*, p. 116.

<sup>421</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

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The 16<sup>th</sup> HLI,<sup>422</sup> in 97 Brigade support at Bellevue since the 30<sup>th</sup>, spent the daylight hours of 1 December at rest, despite “frequent bursts of hostile shell-fire” that failed to inflict any casualties. Its nominal strength at the time was 16 officers and 404 ORs. Numbers changed with the arrival – during the distribution of “a hot meal of tea and rum” – of a reinforcement consisting of 4 officers and 65 ORs at 5:30 p.m. These new drafts were hurriedly amalgamated into the battalion strength, now increased to 20 officers and 469 ORs. One hour later, a battalion taping party, under Lieutenant J. McLellan MC with 18 ORs, departed to lay engineer tape from the vicinity of Mosselmarkt “to frontline position via VENTURE FARM”.<sup>423</sup>

Lieutenant McLellan, assisted by Corporals Hilley, Gilmour and four NCOs per company, successfully extended a march line tape to the forming-up area. “They then taped the assembly position and erected luminous numbered boards to mark the right of each platoon”. The jumping-off tape was set along a battalion frontage of 300 yards and “within a depth of 30 y[ar]ds as experience had shown that this position was forward of the enemy’s S.O.S. Barrage lines”.<sup>424</sup>

At 9:30 p.m., the 16<sup>th</sup> HLI moved forward (order of march: ‘D’, ‘B’, ‘C’, ‘A’, companies) from Bellevue with a distance of 100 yards maintained between platoons. Among their numbers was twenty-year-old 350220 Private Hugh Cairns (previously

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<sup>422</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion HLI was formed in Glasgow by the Lord Provost and City on 2 September 1914. Many of its original recruits came from the Glasgow Boy’s Brigade.

<sup>423</sup> TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid and TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘Table to accompany Addendum No. 3 to 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. C.C. 178’ and ‘Addendum No. 4 to 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 29 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> (Works) battalions Royal Scots Fusiliers) a native of Glasgow's poverty-stricken east end where he was raised, along with nine siblings, in a two-room tenement. Hugh, according to family lore, emulated three older brothers already in the service by enlisting, much to his father's fury, while underage. Was he a member of the newly arrived and swiftly assimilated draft? Whatever the circumstances, there is no doubt the young Glaswegian volunteer kept pace with equally burdened comrades as they slogged up Bellevue Spur toward the battalion jumping-off position.<sup>425</sup>



**Plate 3.5 Private H. Cairns (Source: Dr Joanne Coyle)**

The first leg of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI's journey was complete by 9:25 p.m.; Bellevue crossroads were cleared at approximately 10:10 p.m. A guide from battalion HQ led the column "up to the position of assembly where the tape leaves the [GRAVENSTAFEL – ] MOSELMARKT road". Five men had been lost to enemy shellfire before companies

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<sup>425</sup> TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary and Telephone interview with Dr Joanne Coyle (Pte. Cairns' niece) 29 May 2010.

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deployed along the jumping-off tape at 11:10 p.m. The Battalion diarist subsequently recorded that 16<sup>th</sup> HLI was now “in line with 11<sup>th</sup> Borders on its left. The 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI had taken up a position on a parallel line to our right 100 yards in rear. Liaison was obtained with both units”. Advanced HQ had already (10:30 p.m.) been established at Vocation Farm and connected, by the Battalion Signaling Officer (Lieutenant S.M. Roberts), with Battalion HQ at Bellevue. Meanwhile, the OC ‘B’ Company detailed two guides to meet the attached heavy machine-gun detachment near Bellevue. The rendezvous did not occur until, as directed, 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI passed up the road from Gravenstafel, after which the Vickers Gun teams were led to their allocated positions.<sup>426</sup>

The 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment,<sup>427</sup> in 97 Brigade reserve at Wurst Farm since the 30<sup>th</sup>, arrived, after a 2,000 yard tramp via “MOUSETRAP TRACK – SOURCE FARM” (platoons separated by 100 yard intervals) at the 300 yard jumping-off line without loss. Battalion HQ was established in the vicinity of Bellevue at Point 83. “The initial stages of the attack, assembling, etc., were successfully carried through”, the battalion diarist noted, “but the enemy – as was afterwards learned – had been appraised of our intentions and had made strong preparation against them”.<sup>428</sup>

Twenty-two-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant William Thomas Ridgway (attached 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment), armed with revolver, rifle and bayonet and garbed in OR’s Service

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<sup>426</sup> TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary and WO/95/2400: ‘97<sup>th</sup> Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary.

<sup>427</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Border Regiment (Lonsdales) was formed in Penrith (HQ), Carlisle, Kendal and Workington by the Earl of Lonsdale and an executive committee in September 1914.

<sup>428</sup> TNA: WO/95/2403: 11<sup>th</sup> Border War Diary, WO/95/2400: ‘97<sup>th</sup> Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary, WO/95/2370: ‘Table to accompany Addendum No. 3 to 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. C.C. 178’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary and IWM 4273: ‘Preliminary Report on Operations, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> [1917]’, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

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Dress [SD] like other company officers, awaited the approach of zero hour with his platoon. ‘Will’ hailed from the picturesque rural village of Tingewick, where his father was parish clerk, in North Buckinghamshire. He chose, after completing his education at Tingewick Council School, to pursue a career in journalism. Eighteen months at the National Union of Journalists (Northampton and Peterborough) Typographical School led to employment as a young sports reporter for the *Cambridge Times*. Short service enlistment in the RAMC – Will had been a member of St John Ambulance Brigade – was attested at the busy East Anglia railway town of March on 12 September 1914. Six months training was followed by eighteen months service with the BEF. During that time he was promoted to local acting Sergeant (January 1916) while serving in the battle area, although the temporary rank was reverted, when employed behind the lines at No. 18 General Hospital Camiers, to Corporal five months later. At the end of August 1916, Will, having regained his Sergeant’s stripes applied for a temporary commission in the Regular Army and was subsequently accepted. RAMC comrades expressed their admiration and appreciation for the popular NCO by presenting him with a cigarette case inscribed: “Presented to Sergeant Wm. T. Ridgway, ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS, as a mark of respect and esteem, from His Brother Members No. 18 General Hospital British Ex. Force, France. Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup> 1916”.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> Special thanks to Ms Sue Floyd, Ms Brenda Eastaff (William Ridgway’s niece) and Mr Alan Ridgway for providing material concerning 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Ridgway’s background and war service.



**Plate 3.6 Sergeant (later 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant) W.T. Ridgway**  
(Source: Brenda Eastaff)

Sergeant Ridgway returned to England for instruction at Cambridge University. Training at No. 5 Officer Cadet Battalion [OCB], accommodated amidst the aristocratic precincts of Trinity College, began on 4 November 1916. No. 5 OCB, one of twenty-three similar institutions established throughout the United Kingdom, was “a mixture of boot camp and public school or Oxbridge college”, where ex-rankers and other potential officer material learned, besides military skills, to emulate the ethos of pre-war Regular officers.<sup>430</sup> Will spent the holidays with his parents, two sisters and 6-year-old brother Fred: “I remember him coming home on leave during Christmas 1916”, Fred recalled; “He looked very smart in his officer’s uniform”. One can almost visualize the upright,

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<sup>430</sup> Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), p. 55. ‘At a time when there were very few students at Cambridge University, the members of the three OCBs housed in the colleges provided a semblance of normal undergraduate life, playing sports, indulging in amateur dramatics, and producing magazines. Billeted in gracious surroundings very different from their peacetime environment, living a relatively carefree life far removed from the drudgery of the office or factory, many lower-class cadets proved particularly responsive to the need to play the role that was demanded of them’. Ibid, pp. 55-57.

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enthusiastic cadet – white-banded service cap in hand – attired as ‘on parade’ in tailored khaki tunic, polished Sam Browne belt, whipcord breeches, carefully wrapped puttees and ankle boots, joining in hymns with his kindred during celebration services at St Mary Magdalene Church.<sup>431</sup>

2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Ridgway was posted, after passing out of No. 5 OCB, to the Border Regiment the following February. His commission was duly confirmed in the *London Gazette* on 23 March 1917. Departure for the front followed sometime afterward. It had, by early December, been almost a year since the youthful subaltern, formed up in the moonlight with 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment along the shell-churned southern slope of Vat Cottage Ridge, last visited with his family at their residence on Buckingham Road just outside Tingewick.

The 17<sup>th</sup> HLI<sup>432</sup> moved off, after “resting all day” at Hilltop Farm, to march, with platoons at 100 yard intervals by way of “MOUSETRAP TRACK – SOURCE FARM”, approximately 8,000 yards to its allotted assembly position. The Battalion, passing by Wurst Farm at 8:55 p.m., arrived at the 400-yard long jumping-off tape without serious incident. HQ was, as with 11<sup>th</sup> Border, setup at Point 83. Companies were to deploy at the start of the advance “from a two platoon frontage to snake formation – this method having been adopted owing to the shell torn nature of the ground...”<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Angela Foster, ‘Fred Paid His Final Tribute’, *Buckinghamshire Advertiser* (November 2000).

<sup>432</sup> The 17<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion HLI (3<sup>rd</sup> Glasgow) was formed by the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce in September 1914.

<sup>433</sup> TNA: WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary, WO/95/2400: ‘97<sup>th</sup> Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary, WO/95/2370: ‘Table to accompany Addendum No. 3 to 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. C.C. 178’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary and Arthur & Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry*, p. 68.

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Led by an attached American Medical Officer<sup>434</sup> – a “rational and very welcome acquisition” for 17<sup>th</sup> HLI – Private Albert Elshaw and his fellow stretcher-bearers began the lengthy trek from Hilltop Farm to the forward area. All were encumbered by a “white man’s burden of ropes, ladders, spades, etc.” and standard infantryman’s kit:

After a full briefing we set off again a day or two later – armed with rifles, grenades, picks, shovels, ladders, ropes and Uncle Tom Cobley and all. We carried all but the arms, but had in addition, stretchers, extra dressings and huge Red Cross armbands. ‘Jerry’ was not to be trusted to respect anything less and even that was no guarantee of immunity, for stretcher-bearers trying to get at casualties became casualties themselves.

Struggling “up by” that night each human pack mule, not only due to his burden, but also due to the necessity of keeping “eyes down” to avoid floundering in the mud was very nearly nose to the ground. A halt was called where the duckboards wound between heavy batteries – owing mainly to the fact that we had progressed so well as to be in front of schedule. This provided a welcome break for those who may have been at liberty to avail themselves of the hospitality of the gunners – but the rest of us merely stood and waited, waited for what we deemed inevitable – and sure enough over came ‘John’s’ souvenirs intended presumably for the discomfort of the artillery personnel – though perhaps with an eye on a passerby. They were in the shape of 5.9 HV shrapnel. I never heard the one that hit me, raised a bump under my tin hat and left me with a helpless left arm. That shell sprayed its “bulls eyes” down one side of the halted column and inflicted wounds – all on the left side – from hand to toe on a dozen to twenty men.

After first-aid treatment I set off with a limping squad back down the line, being fully aware that “Zero” and its accompanying barrage was due all too soon. I hustled my fellow patients past local aid posts and our recently left

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<sup>434</sup> On 7 April 1917 the United States government agreed to attach 1,000 medical officers to the British forces. 1,649 subsequently served with the BEF at one time or another. See Michael Rauer, ‘Yanks in the King’s Forces: American Physicians Serving With the British Expeditionary Force During World War I’ (Paper. Washington DC: Office of Medical History, Office of the Surgeon General United States Army, no date).

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billets – stopping only to report – and made for the Corps Main Dressing Station. This involved a five-mile tramp in anything but ideal conditions and I marveled at the stoicism of those with foot and leg wounds – but none wished to dally in the vicinity of the “hate” that was due to breakout once our guns opened up – communications [routes], especially unprotected ones would be decidedly unhealthy – besides having “touches” for a spell out who wanted to be greedy and stop another one? The journey took us nearly three hours.

Elshaw, wounded seriously enough to avoid the impending embrace with “Johnnie” on the Westroosebeke ridge, was subsequently dispatched, along with injured companions, by motor ambulance to a CCS.<sup>435</sup>

Sometime after 10:30 p.m. companies of 15<sup>th</sup> LF,<sup>436</sup> holding the 97 Brigade’s left since the night of 30 November/1 December, began to concentrate opposite their objective following relief on a frontage of 700 yards by Lewis Gun teams of the incoming 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI.<sup>437</sup> The forming-up line was reconnoitered and marked out, as per brigade instructions, with wire by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant J.S. Scrivener (‘A’ Company) before dawn on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Confirmation of its accurate placement was ascertained by compass the following morning. On the night of 1/2 December the “wire was replaced with tape and the flank of each platoon’s position was marked with a white disc”. Companies (‘A’ on the right, ‘B’ in centre, ‘C’ on the left) were thus re-deployed without difficulty or loss along the assigned three-company frontage of 450 yards:

Since any sort of landmark had been utterly obliterated by the colossal weight of shellfire which pulverised this area

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<sup>435</sup> IWM: PP/MCR 49: Elshaw unpublished memoir.

<sup>436</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion (1<sup>st</sup> Salford Pals) LF was raised in Salford by Mr Montague Barlow MP and the Salford Brigade Committee on 11 September 1914.

<sup>437</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘Addendum No. 4 to 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 29 November 1917. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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for months beforehand, the Fusiliers' company objectives were identified by boards at the start lines, each one giving a compass bearing and distance to be covered with the details in luminous paint.

'D' Company remained in support immediately behind 'A' Company. The Battalion was formed-up without loss and ready to move by 1:30 a.m. HQ was placed under cover in a vacant pillbox SW of Tournant Farm.<sup>438</sup>

Approximately 2,000 yards to the SW, Brigadier-General Blacklock and the red-tabbed staff of 97 Brigade settled into their large pillbox HQ just east of the swampy Stroombeek at Kronprinz Farm. Sheltering beyond narrow entryways (screened by heavy, solution-saturated anti-gas blankets) in cramped, fuggy, coke fume permeated ferro-concrete recesses where odorous paraffin lamps and flickering candles cast spectral shadows on clammy walls, they patiently awaited confirmation that each assault battalion had taken its designated place along the attack frontage of 1,850 yards. These prearranged messages – “Assembly Complete CONTACT” – dispatched either by wireless or runner from sundry low-roofed, largely windowless battalion HQs, crowded to capacity by colonels, adjutants, artillery liaison officers, signallers, runners, medical officers and stretcher-bearers, duly arrived one by one during the hours leading up to Zero. At 1:40 a.m. 97 Brigade verbally reported to Division HQ: “Forming up complete. All quiet”.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> TNA: WO/95/2397: 15<sup>th</sup> LF War Diary, Major-General J.C. Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes Vol. 1* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949), p. 276 and Michael Stedman, *Salford Pals: A History of the Salford Brigade – The 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalions the Lancashire Fusiliers 1914-19* (London: Leo Cooper, 1993), p. 154 and IWM 4723: ‘Narrative of Operations 2/3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917, 15<sup>th</sup> (S) Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers’, 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>439</sup> Advanced report centres were situated at Point 83 and Virile Farm. Prearranged battalion messages arrived at the following times: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI (1:20 a.m.), 16<sup>th</sup> HLI (12:00 a.m.), 11<sup>th</sup> Border (12:05 a.m.), 17<sup>th</sup>

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Sir Henry Rawlinson's diary entry for 1 December: "I have great hopes that we shall do the trick at Passchendaele all right [,] but the Bosch is expecting us", implies some foreknowledge of British intentions by the enemy.<sup>440</sup> Available war diaries, postwar unit accounts and memoirs also express the conviction that surprise was not achieved due to lack of available cover and increased visibility in the prevailing moonlight. Were the Germans aware of the impending night attack? Were the attackers detected on the forming-up tape prior to Zero? The history of *IR115* (responsible for the left sector of 25<sup>th</sup> Division) noted: "From the relief of opposing infantry, the possibility of attacks in sector was assumed; for 28 November, heightened readiness was ordered", but added "these by-the-book precautions proved premature". This precipitate alert is confirmed by a Second Army intelligence summary dated 3 December: "Two prisoners of 6<sup>th</sup> Coy., 117<sup>th</sup> Inf. Regt. captured in E.1.a [vicinity of Exert Farm] at 1:30 a.m. on 2<sup>nd</sup> inst., state: A big attack by the British was expected on the 28<sup>th</sup> Nov[ember]. The advanced posts to retire on frontline and supports were to reinforce".<sup>441</sup> A captured *Feldwebel* of 3<sup>rd</sup> Company, *IR94* (left regiment of the recently arrived 38<sup>th</sup> Division) subsequently related during interrogation:

#### Dispositions.

The III Battalion has been holding the line since 30/1<sup>st</sup> [December] and the I Battalion was ordered to the support positions last night with a view of relieving III Battalion in

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HLI (1:25 a.m.), 15<sup>th</sup> LF (1:33 a.m.); 37 casualties were sustained before Zero. See TNA: WO/95/2400: '97<sup>th</sup> Brigade Operation Order No. 178', 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary, WO/95/2370: After-action Report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary and IWM 4723: 'Preliminary Report on Operations, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>440</sup> CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 1 December 1917.

<sup>441</sup> Victor von Frankenberg und Ludwigsdorff, *Das Leibgarde Infanterie Regiment (I. Grossherzoglich Hessisches Nr. 115) im Weltkrieg 1914-1918* (Stuttgart: Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1921), p. 163 and TNA: WO/157/121: 'Annexe to Second Army Summary, Dated 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917: Information Obtained from Prisoners', Second Army Intelligence Files.

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the frontline tonight [2 December]. Subsequent orders were, however, issued at 10 p.m. last night [1 December] resulting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> companies being sent forward to reinforce the frontline. The 1<sup>st</sup> Company was at VELDT FARM. From this statement it seems apparent that an attack was expected this morning, but the time and method was a complete surprise to the enemy.

#### Prisoner's Opinion of This Morning's Battle.

It seems that although the higher command expected an attack on our front today, the men of the foremost posts [*Vorfeldzone*] had either not received timely warning or did not act upon it. Prisoner states that too many men were asleep and that a large majority were running back from the line instead of putting up any resistance.<sup>442</sup>

It appears, despite the conclusion reached by British intelligence officers, that the German defenders remained, as a matter of course, especially vigilant in sectors (Venison Trench and its redoubts, the ridge route toward Westroosebeke, Vat Cottage Ridge) where British assault troops could expect reasonably good going across vital traversable high ground. The determination reached by II Corps intelligence that “the German higher command had received information of our intentions, for at 10 p.m. on the night of the 1<sup>st</sup> a warning order was issued stating an attack was expected and at least one of his frontline battalions was reinforced by two companies of the battalion in support”, was likely based on enemy reaction to “important disclosures” made by “three Englishmen” captured opposite *IR94* sometime after dark on 1 December. The content of these revelations are, unfortunately, not related in the postwar regimental history, but

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<sup>442</sup> TNA: WO/157/288: ‘Annexe to II Corps Summary No. 31, Examination of Sergt. Major of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company, 94<sup>th</sup> I.R. 38<sup>th</sup> Division, Captured at V.30.a on the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Inst.’, II Corps Summary of Information, 2 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File. The circumstances of this POW’s capture were as follows: ‘Prisoner was ordered, as part of his training, to go forward during last night and ascertain the exact positions of the infantry, machine-guns and artillery in his regimental sector. He chose the period from midnight onwards as being the most suitable and left ROULERS about this time, proceeding direct to the frontline, intending to work his way back. He had only been in the line about five minutes before our attack started and was captured very shortly afterwards’. See TNA: WO/157/120: ‘Annexe to Second Army Summary Dated 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917, Information from Prisoners’, Second Army Intelligence File.

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their relation to the subsequent action taken by the Thüringian Regiment's support battalion can be inferred. Furthermore, other relevant German unit histories, whilst acknowledging surprise, fail to mention any prior notice of the night attack, so it is possible that the shifting of two support companies to the frontline was a local response to recent POW declarations.<sup>443</sup> An argus-eyed officer of *IR95* also detected enemy patrol activity on the immediate (German) right:

There was a light covering of snow on the landscape with a full moon lighting up the night sky, so one had to be careful. At around 11:00 p.m. [German time]<sup>444</sup> on the evening of 1 December, not long after the Regiment made itself comfortable in the [new] position, the commander of *7<sup>th</sup> Company* discovered approximately 30 to 40 English in front of the *Vorfeldzone*. These were believed to be ration carriers who had lost their way and were immediately shot down.<sup>445</sup>

It must, therefore, be generally assumed that the attackers were not discerned opposite either divisional sector until just before 1:00 a.m. (British time), and even then enemy intentions were only realised in *38<sup>th</sup> Division's* sector minutes before zero hour:

Shortly before 2:00 a.m. an English patrol [either from *2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade* or *2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI*] approached on the right of *2<sup>nd</sup> Company [IR94]* and was shot down. The *Vorfeldzone* then reported that much activity and moving about could be seen in the enemy lines. At first this movement was believed to be only a relief in progress. Shortly before 3:00 a.m., it was

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<sup>443</sup> TNA: WO/157/288: 'II Corps Summary of Information', 2 December 1917', II Corps Intelligence File and Alexander von Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Verlag von Klasing & Co., 1921), p. 236. For German interrogation methods and British PsOW see Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme 1916* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), pp. 36-45.

<sup>444</sup> Relevant German regimental accounts record continental time, i.e., one hour ahead of British time. See Appendix 16.

<sup>445</sup> Major A.D. Buttmann, *Kriegsgeschichte des Königlich Preussischen 6. Thüringischen Infanterie Regiment Nr. 95: 1914-1918* (Zeulenroda, Thüringen: Verlag Bernhard Sporn, 1935), p. 251. '32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138' (27 November) stated: 'Patrols and Lewis Guns will cover the forming up. These patrols must be pushed out every night previous to the assault so that the enemy may become accustomed to them'. The unfortunate British patrol encountered by *IR95* was probably carrying out this portion, a standard pre-operation procedure by late 1917, of the previously issued order. See TNA: WO/95/2370: '32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138', 27 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary

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realised by 9<sup>th</sup> Company that an English assault on the *Vorfeldzone* was imminent. Annihilation [artillery] fire was immediately called for.<sup>446</sup>

At 2:15 a.m. on 2 December, a strong twenty-man patrol was sighted in front of the *Vorfeldzone* [of IR95] and easily dispersed. Suddenly, in the moonlight, an unbroken line of the enemy was discovered approaching the *Feldherrnhügel*. Shortly before 3:00 a.m. the enemy advanced through the deep mud. Abruptly, artillery fire, approaching the level of drumfire, bombarded the [divisional] hinterland where all of the light and heavy guns were located.<sup>447</sup>

Outposts comprising the *Vorfeldzonelinie* of 25<sup>th</sup> Division failed to distinguish the imminent threat. A prisoner of 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, IR116 later informed his captors: “Our [British] attack was a surprise. Half his Co[mpan]y (including the Co[mpan]y. Commander) ran away and the rest were overwhelmed”.<sup>448</sup>

Identification of new formations (8<sup>th</sup> Division and 32<sup>nd</sup> Division) opposite contributed to anticipation of further efforts to seize more ground on the Passchendaele Ridge, so Sir Henry Rawlinson’s view of an expectant enemy was most likely based on intelligence reports conveying augmented German vigilance.<sup>449</sup> It can also be speculated

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<sup>446</sup> Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg*, pp. 236-37.

<sup>447</sup> Buttmann, *Kriegsgeschichte des Königlich Preussischen 6. Thüringischen Infanterie Regiment Nr. 95: 1914-1918*, p. 251. Brigadier-General Blacklock subsequently wrote: “[T]here was no congestion or confusion and in spite of the brightness of the moon [,] I am confident that the assembly was carried out without detection ... At Zero the whole attack was launched simultaneously. The moon was out and the attacking waves showed up very plainly”. See IWM 4723: ‘Preliminary Report on Operations December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> December’, 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>448</sup> TNA: WO/157/121: ‘Annexe to Second Army Summary Dated 5<sup>th</sup> December 1917: Information Obtained from Prisoners’, Second Army Summary of Information, 5 December 1917, Second Army Intelligence Files.

<sup>449</sup> Major-General Shute observed afterward: ‘It must also be remembered that an intercepted German message [from which the II Corps intelligence determination was reached] shows that an attack by us was expected by the enemy on the night December 1/2, and that although his frontline of posts had not been warned, his main line of defence had been reinforced, and his machine-guns were ready for our advance’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action Report, ‘Part V, Reasons for the Failure of the Operation’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 19.

that the *Vorfeldzone* garrison, no doubt chilled and weary by the early hours of 2 December, received no warning of imminent attack because, as stated above, the exact day and hour could only be surmised. The absence of the expected opening barrage and shortened distance to the foremost outposts, especially opposite 8<sup>th</sup> Division, also increased the vulnerability of those attempting to make the most of uncomfortable “rabbit hole” positions comprising the *Vorfeldzonelinie*.

### 3.2 A Moonlight Massacre

Elements of nine battalions, arrayed besides a jumping-off line of 2,870 yards, made final preparations and adjustments as zero hour approached. Pallid exhale vapors, dissipating as rapidly as they appeared, were momentarily visible in the bitterly cold air. The enemy, situated across a broken, cratered no man’s land permeated by moonlight, appeared relatively quiet and unsuspecting. Officers, glancing at previously synchronized luminescent wristwatch dials, gave the order to fix bayonets<sup>450</sup> minutes before the assault: a collective metallic clatter of blade hilts being fitted to rifle nose caps succeeded whispered commands along the attack frontage extending from west of Exert Farm on the right to NE of Tournant Farm on the left.

Zero hour: Sunday 2 December 1:55 a.m. The attackers, organised in waves and columns, silently rose from their forming-up positions. Adhering to narrow, frozen crater rims separating innumerable shell hole cavities, they passed through friendly outposts and embryonic barbed wire obstacles, rifles at the port, to enter a constricted no man’s land in

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<sup>450</sup> Bayonet blades were blackened prior to the assault. See TNA: WO/95/1727: ‘25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade Instructions No.3’, 27 November 1917, 25 Brigade War Diary.

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the pre-dawn semi-darkness. Extreme haste, whilst negotiating the pulverized, pockmarked landscape in the half-light, was necessary in order to close with dispersed *Vorfeldzonelinie* outposts as quickly as possible. Collective and individual focus was thus devoted to reaching the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* before the enemy defensive barrage started.

The prevailing silence did not last long: unwelcome glinting muzzle flashes<sup>451</sup> – a deadly multiple display of direct fire – being readily discerned as the distinctive mechanical din from at least a half dozen *Maschinen-Gewehr 08/15* erupted opposite the left of 25 Brigade immediately after Zero. “Two were seen firing from TEALL COTTAGE and three from the front trench of the NORTHERN REDOUBT, but there were certainly others firing direct fire from the left flank”. On the right and centre, “where the shadow of a passing cloud momentarily veiled the front”, the German machine-guns “did not open fire until Zero + 3 minutes [1:58 a.m.]. A few coloured lights were sent up at this time”. By Zero + 5 (2:00 a.m.) a withering rifle and machine-gun fusillade “had been opened up by the enemy along the whole front of attack and lights of various colours and designs were sent up in great numbers by him”.<sup>452</sup> The onrushing battalions of 97 Brigade received an identical shock. Captain A. Fraser MC, a nearby observer, subsequently recollected:

Those of us who stood on the high ground near Bellevue at zero hour on that memorable morning will always retain a

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<sup>451</sup> A muzzle-mounted flash suppressor or hider, like the conical-shaped attachment affixed to an MG 08/15, redirects discharged incandescent gases to both sides of a barrel thus preserving a machine-gunner’s nighttime vision. The belief that such devices were developed to mask a shooter’s position from the enemy remains a commonly held misconception.

<sup>452</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 165.

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very vivid impression of the fight. It was a fine night with everything quiet on the front. The hillside on which we stood was bathed in moonlight so that it was difficult to realise that within a few moments some five battalions would be advancing across that dark patch down the valley and that the stillness of the night air would be shattered by the rat-tat-tat of machine-guns and the whine of high explosives. At 1:55 a.m. we knew our men had started and we were glad that for the next two minutes everything was quiet.

Suddenly, at three minutes to two, came the sound of several enemy rifle shots followed immediately by the ripple of machine-guns all along the front; up went the SOS on both flanks of the attack. Still our artillery was silent! We knew that we could hope for no assistance from them until three minutes after the hour, and, meantime, the enemy was having a free hand for five minutes on a target that looked grotesquely big against the bright moon.<sup>453</sup>

Major-General Shute's after-action report noted: "By Zero + 7" (2:02 a.m.), "the enemy's machine-guns opened on all portions of the front with great intensity and held up the advance of our troops at nearly all points".<sup>454</sup> Major-General Heneker's worst fear was realised: the hoped for surprise had been lost in the dire minutes following zero hour. Captain Fraser lamented the fate of junior leaders charged with tactical command and control during the desperate enterprise: "Some of the finest officers that ever wore the King's uniform went to their deaths with brave faces, well knowing that their chances of success were frail".<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland*, pp. 109-10.

<sup>454</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action Report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', Section 9, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 10.

<sup>455</sup> Chalmers (ed) *A Saga of Scotland*, p.110.

### 3.3 25 Brigade

Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling accompanied the advancing ‘B’ and ‘D’ companies of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire through the forward outpost line into a no man’s land temporarily shrouded by darkness:

At zero hour 1:55 a.m. B & D companies moved forward to the attack in touch with 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Reg[iment] on my left and until 1:58 apparently remained unobserved by the enemy. The moon was at this time behind some clouds. At 1:58 the enemy put up a large number of red, green and golden lights<sup>456</sup> and opened a heavy but hurried and ill-aimed rifle and MG fire, which did not cause heavy casualties.<sup>457</sup>

The aroused defenders’ wildly misdirected bursts, aimed far too high despite increased visibility from discharged flares, failed to halt the momentum of the Berkshire onslaught. One platoon of ‘D’ Company pressed on down the gentle gradient opposite Exert Farm and Exert Copse, while the left platoon of ‘D’ and two platoons of ‘B’ traversed the slight rise toward Southern Redoubt. Surprised *Vorfeldzonelinie* outposts were immediately overrun, the recumbent occupants bayoneted. Sustaining the necessary impetus was one thing; maintaining proper direction was to prove more difficult: “At this time” [1:58 a.m.], Stirling wrote, “it appeared that the Battalion on my left was easing off to its left and in consequence the left of B Co[mpan]y led by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton bore off to maintain touch”.<sup>458</sup> The opening of the British barrage beyond Vension Trench and the

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<sup>456</sup> German Veray light signal instructions were previously translated in a II Corps intelligence report prepared by Major F.P. Nosworthy: ‘A captured order of the 204<sup>th</sup> Division (LEKKERBOTERBEEK northward) dated 24/11/17 gives the following: Upon request being received for a barrage, it will be put down close in front of our own (i.e. German) line of posts, but white lights, with pearls being put up, the barrage will, at once, be put down in front of the main line of resistance. Green lights bursting into 2 stars only mean ‘Lengthen Range’ and NOT ‘our own artillery falling short (Note: This signal appears to be in use along the whole of the [British] Second Army front’. See TNA: WO/157/287: ‘II Corps Summary of Information, 29 November 1917’, II Corps Intelligence File.

<sup>457</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: ‘Appendix B’, 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*

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redoubts at 2:03 a.m. succeeded the unfortunate divergence by the left platoon, attempting to preserve contact with 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire, of 'B' Company. The anticipated German defensive barrage was put down one minute later:

The enemy's artillery barrage came down on the PASSCHENDAELE – VINDICTIVE crossroads road one minute after our guns opened fire, namely at zero plus 9. On the left our troops were well clear of the line of the enemy's barrage, but unfortunately on the right the support platoons of the attacking companies were caught in the barrage and suffered heavy casualties.<sup>459</sup>

At 2:04 a.m. the enemy's barrage came down along the the VINDICTIVE CROSSROADS – PASSCHENDAELE road very heavily. It also caught the reserve and support platoons of B Co[mpan]y who suffered heavy casualties. Co[mpan]y HQ of this Co[mpan]y was also blown up at this point and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Giddings knocked over and dazed.<sup>460</sup>

Nevertheless, No. 5 Platoon of 'B' Company, deprived of reinforcements from the shattered reserve and support platoons and lacking ready assistance from Upton's deviating platoon, stormed Southern Redoubt along with a platoon from 'D' Company. "A large number of the enemy advanced out of the Southern Redoubt to meet the attack of this battalion. Severe hand to hand fighting ensued, but the Berkshires killed them all with the bayonet..." The remaining platoon of 'D' "dug themselves in on a line extending to the south-east edge" of the redoubt. On the right 'C' Company (CO Captain Flint), forming a defensive flank opposite the marshy depression in the vicinity of Exert

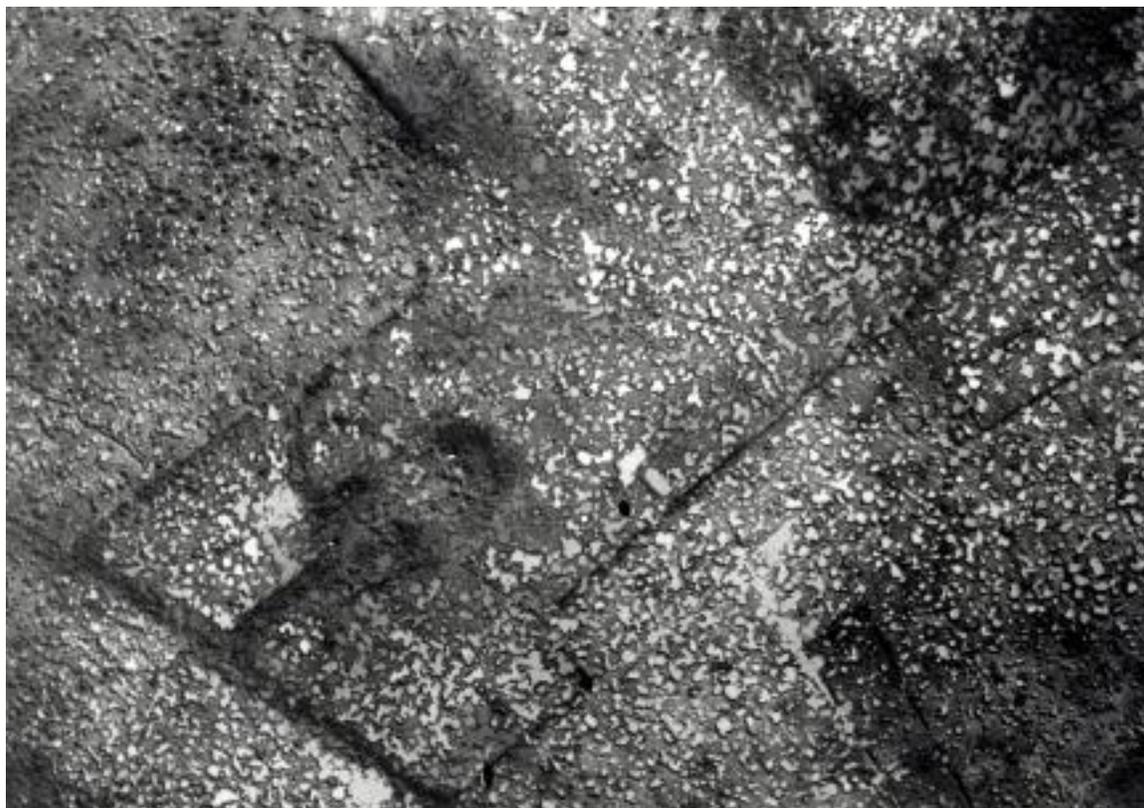
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<sup>459</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 'Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917', 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>460</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary. 21-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Frank Giddings MM subsequent death appears to have gone unobserved. He has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

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Farm,<sup>461</sup> “had succeeded in their task without much difficulty; though in getting into touch with ‘D’ company their left platoon under 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Smith had some brisk fighting and took 30 prisoners, including an officer, and a machine-gun”.<sup>462</sup>



**Plate 3.7 Exert Farm from the air (Source: MMP)**

8536 Sergeant A. Sturgess DCM, a reliable and celebrated NCO, led his No. 5 Platoon into the shallow excavations comprising Southern Redoubt.<sup>463</sup> The forlorn party,

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<sup>461</sup> Opposite Passchendaele, a swampy morass (*sumpf*) extended NNE and SE of Exert Farm (*Kolonnenhof*). See Ludwigsdorff, *Das Leibgarde Infanterie Regiment (1. Grossherzoglich Hessisches Nr. 115) im Weltkrieg 1914-1918*, Skizze 17.

<sup>462</sup> See TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 165 and Loraine Petre, *The Royal Berkshire Regiment Vol. 2*, p. 97. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant (former CQMS) F.J. Smith was subsequently awarded the MC for this action.

<sup>463</sup> Sergeant Albert Sturgess, a pre-war India service Regular, marksman and prominent Battalion boxer, was subsequently awarded a Bar to the DCM ‘for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in leading his platoon forward although wounded [arm and left side], capturing a [Southern] redoubt by a bayonet charge and himself killing many of the enemy. The success of this part of the attack in which the enemy suffered heavy casualties was due to him’. See Cull, *The Second Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment in World War One*, pp. 134-35.

joined by the left platoon of 'D' Company, engaged the defenders with bomb and bayonet along dark, narrow confines of rudimentary trenches. Drifting barrage smoke further obscured the dim panoramic view from the rectangular reverse slope earthwork – a low-lying Flemish hinterland of leafless spinneys, snow-coated fields, spiring Gothic church steeples and tiled rooftops north of elevated Moorslede, during the hours before dawn. Retention of such corresponding high ground would place Oostnieuwkerke village, the billeting hamlets of Vierkavenhoek, Zilverberg, Magermeirie, Kalve, Roodkruis, De Ruiter and dozens of outlying farms west of Roulers under direct observation from the Passchendaele Ridge. Resistance by *IR116* (commanded by *Oberstleutnant* von Westernhagen) and *IR117* (commanded by *Oberstleutnant* Klotz) of *25<sup>th</sup> Division*, responsible for *Abschnitt A* (northern sector of *Gruppe Ypern*)<sup>464</sup> since 26 November, was fierce; the Germans could not afford to lose the skyline. A sustained breach at the boundary between *IR116* and *IR117*<sup>465</sup> was expanded by 'B' Company's stray platoon under 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton, who, with 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Tremellan, successfully led his men to seize the portion of Venison Trench (an objective of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire) approximately 50 yards to the north of Southern Redoubt.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> The *25<sup>th</sup>* (Hessian Grand Ducal) *Division*, a pre-war formation attached to *XVIII Armeekorps*, entrained for Flanders from the St Quentin sector in mid-September. Its 1917 intelligence 'value estimate' stated: 'The XVIII Army Corps has been considered one of the best corps in the German Army. In September 1917 the morale of the *25<sup>th</sup> Division* appeared good. At this time, as the division had not taken part in any important actions since September 1916, it was difficult to form a judgement as to the combat value of this organisation. Its local operation on the salient of Moulin des Tous Vents (July 18, 1917) was carried out energetically'. See Intelligence Section of the General Staff American Expeditionary Forces, *Histories of Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions of the German Army Which Participated in the War 1914-1918* (London: London Stamp Exchange, 1989 reprint of 1920 edition), p. 353 and Appendix 2 for infantry orders of battle.

<sup>465</sup> See Appendix 16, Part B (para. 14) and Part C (paras. 10 and 11).

<sup>466</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary, Loraine Petre, *The Royal Berkshire Regiment Vol. 2*, p. 97 and Cull, *The Second Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment in World War One*, p. 87. The disposition of *25<sup>th</sup> Division's* regiments were roughly, from right to left: *IR117* Venison Trench to Southern Redoubt; *IR116* from Southern Redoubt (inclusive) to *Kolonnenhof* (Exert Farm); *IR115* from *Kolonnenhof* (exclusive) to the Ypres-Roulers railway. See Hartmann, *Das Infanterie*



**Plate 3.8 Panorama looking east from site of Southern Redoubt (Source: Rob Thompson)**

Six companies of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, on the immediate left of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire, rushed forward at Zero with fixed bayonets to storm Venison Trench and Northern Redoubt. The three Lincolnshire assault companies, in position at the battalion jumping-off line since 12:20 a.m., had not yet cleared their line of forward posts when, having been observed, four light machine-guns opened fire on exposed skirmish waves and trailing worm columns at 1:58 a.m.: “The advance continued, although all the officers of assaulting companies became casualties before our own outpost line was reached...”<sup>467</sup> Survivors pressed on as the astonished *Vorfeldzonelinie* garrison abandoned their shell hole positions and fled toward the main line of resistance at

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*Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) Nr. 94 im Weltkrieg, Skizze 32 and Ludwigsdorff, Das Leibgarde Infanterie Regiment (1. Grossherzoglich Hessisches Nr. 115) im Weltkrieg 1914-1918, Skizze 17.*

<sup>467</sup> TNA: WO/95/1730: ‘Report on Action of Battn from 2:30 p.m. 1.12.17 – M.N. 2/3 .12. 17’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary.

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Venison Trench. Momentum was lost when the advance inexplicably stopped just 30 yards short of the objective and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire dug in. The subsequent battalion after-action report related varied motivations for the halt:

On investigation some men state that they were under the impression they had gained the objective – others that they were forced to dig in by hostile M.G. fire. The impression that the advanced line had reached their objective was probably caused by the fact that the advance had overcome enemy shell hole posts driving back the enemy + these shell hole posts were mistaken for the enemy trench. All men were informed in training that in the event of all officers becoming casualties, they must know where to stop by capturing the first continuous enemy trench they came to + then digging in about 50 yards in front of it or as close up to our barrage as they could get.<sup>468</sup>

The Lincolnshire attack had already stalled when the British barrage started. Described in the aforementioned report as “efficient”, charting its progress proved difficult: “Owing to the advance being held up by M.G. fire from M.G.s on our side of the barrage line it is [was] not possible to determine whether the pace of the barrage was suitable”. Friendly fire also caused a certain amount of trouble: “One or two howitzers were repeatedly firing short in S + T zones as far back as VINDICTIVE CROSSROADS”.<sup>469</sup>

2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade faced an uncertain situation during the remaining few hours before Zero. The enemy held Teall Cottage in strength and Lieutenant-Colonel Brand had been seriously wounded. Lieutenant Nettleton (IO detached for liaison duty with 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI) returned to battalion HQ shortly before zero hour:

I went off at once to our own battalion HQ to report this [loss of Teall Cottage] bad news, only to find that they had some more of their own. Roger Brand, our CO, had been

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

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wounded and Anderson, the Adjutant, had just got back to HQ after seeing him carried off. Normally, when the CO becomes a casualty, the next senior officer of the battalion takes charge. But in this show, because of the difficulty of getting hold of any officer from the companies, it had been specifically laid down that the chain of command would go down the people normally at battalion HQ i.e., first to Anderson, then to me and then the Regimental Sergeant Major.

We were still pondering this news about Teall Cottage when the Brigade Major came in and gave us his advice. I was struck by the way he kept on insisting that it was only advice that he was giving. Although Anderson was only a Lieutenant and the Brigade Major [acting Captain W.F. Somervail] was, besides being a Major [sic]<sup>470</sup>, also, in effect, the GSO 1 of the Brigade and the direct representative of the Brigadier, he kept on saying, “Now, I am not giving you orders. You are in command of the battalion. I am only saying that, if I were in your position, I would try and echelon your left companies behind Teall Cottage etc., etc., but this is not an order”. But of course Anderson was very glad of his advice and immediately went out to try and put it into effect, while the Brigade Major went back to Brigade HQ to report what had happened. For myself, I sat on in the pillbox and prayed that Anderson would not be hit, because I definitely did not want to take over command of the battalion in these circumstances.<sup>471</sup>

The original intent, according to Major-General Heneker’s after-action report, was to run the forming-up tape to Teall Cottage. This no longer being possible, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade were “compelled to at once throw back a defensive flank” on a front of 150 yards “so as

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<sup>470</sup> Lieutenant A/Captain William Fulton Somervail MC (2<sup>nd</sup> Cameronians) functioned as Brigade-Major during the operation. See IWM: 02(41).221[British Expeditionary Force]/3-2, ‘Composition of the British Army Headquarters 1914-1918’.

<sup>471</sup> Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns*, pp. 116-17. Lieutenant Nettleton’s counterpart, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant H.L. Brigham (detached as ‘directing officer’ from 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI for liaison duty with 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade) was wounded one half-hour before Zero. A Sergeant Davies took his place. See Bond, *The King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War vol.3*, p. 910.

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to keep touch with the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division operating on our [8<sup>th</sup> Division] left, Teal Cottage [sic] being in the hands of the enemy”<sup>472</sup>.

Lieutenant Nettleton remained under cover at 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade’s pillbox HQ throughout the battalion adjutant’s absence; it was a very crowded affair:

The pillbox was about the size of a smallish kitchen, though of course with a very much lower ceiling; you couldn’t stand upright in it. This small space had to contain two battalion HQ (2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolns) and later a third, as the CO [Major T.H. Ivey]<sup>473</sup> of the [1<sup>st</sup> Royal] Irish Rifles, which were in reserve, came forward from his reserve position and remained with us. Only the officers of the three battalion HQ and some signallers could be accommodated inside the pillbox and even then it was congested. The rest of the personnel had to find what cover they could in the trench outside. The runners of the Royal Irish Rifles, who always were an undisciplined mob, got at the rum ration and made themselves uproariously drunk and quite useless.<sup>474</sup> When their CO wanted to send messages to his companies, he had to borrow runners from us.<sup>475</sup>

Anderson, Nettleton recalled, returned just before zero hour, “having done what he could to adjust our line, which wasn’t very much...”<sup>476</sup> He was, nevertheless, able to arrange for the left flank to be thrown back from “the point where the tapes ended on the left (i.e. about 250 yards from the MOSELMARKT – WHISK FARM road) to join hands with 32<sup>nd</sup> Division”. Both men passed the remaining minutes leading up to Zero glancing at

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<sup>472</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>473</sup> A/Major Thomas Henry Ivey. Sergeant Coldstream Guards August-November 1914; Despatches 9 December 1914; Gazetted 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant RIR October 1914; Lieutenant March 1915; Captain January 1917; joined 1<sup>st</sup> RIR April; 2/ic and A/Major June; Temp. CO 1-9 August and from 9 October.

<sup>474</sup> Two Riflemen (A. Hooton and W. Lee) were later sentenced to 56 days Field Punishment No. 1 after being found guilty of ‘drunkenness’ by a Fields general courts martial. See Appendix V: Courts Martial and Discipline, James W. Taylor, *The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), p. 195

<sup>475</sup> Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns*, p. 117.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

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their watches and waiting. “Promptly at 1:55 a.m. we heard the Boche machine-guns open up and knew that the attack had started”.<sup>477</sup>

The advance of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade (attacking NE from the gap at the top of the X that made up Vindictive Crossroads) was over almost before it started, as deadly machine-gun fire from enemy outposts, Northern Redoubt and Teall Cottage wreaked havoc on stumbling skirmish lines and worm columns.<sup>478</sup> Lieutenants Anderson and Nettleton soon realised what the fearful din signified:

And within a very few minutes after that we knew that it had failed. When our barrage came down at Zero plus 8, it was a magnificent one – I think the most tremendous I ever heard. But long before that, the show was over. The Boche machine-guns had eight minutes in which to play unhindered on our troops advancing in bright moonlight and had simply wiped them out. We had advanced about 100 yards and lost ten officers out of twelve in those few minutes and there was nothing to be done except pick up the pieces.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>477</sup> TNA: WO/95/1731: ‘Report of the part played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn. The Rifle Brigade in the Operations at Passchendaele’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary and Nettleton, *The Anger if the Guns*, pp. 117-18.

<sup>478</sup> Northern Redoubt and Teall Cottage were defended by the *IR94 (38<sup>th</sup> Division)*. The division’s *Vorfeldzonelinie* garrison was, unlike that of the neighbouring *25<sup>th</sup> Division*, alert and expectant. Interrogators of a captive taken near Void Farm noted: ‘Prisoner captured in advanced post states that our men were seen to advance, but retired when they opened fire with their rifles and machine-guns. Prisoner imagined it was a patrol and did not realise that they [British] were attacking until our barrage opened. He calculated that this fell about 400 metres behind his post. He ran back in accordance with orders to the main line where he was captured’. See Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) Nr. 94 im Weltkrieg, Skizze 32* (reproduced in Appendix 16 Part D) for regimental boundary delineation between *IR94* and *IR117* and TNA: WO/157/288: ‘Notes on Examination of Prisoners of 5<sup>th</sup> Coy., 95<sup>th</sup> I.R. (38<sup>th</sup> Div.) captured south of VOID FARM on the morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December, II Corps Summary of Information’, 2 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File.

<sup>479</sup> Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns*, p. 118. Officer casualties for 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade were as follows: Killed: Captain E.F. Ratliff MC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants W. Morrison and J. Brooker; Wounded: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants J.B. MacGeorge, D.P. Jones, L.M. King-Harman, D.F.W. Baden-Powell, H.F. Cranswick, W. Bridgeman. See TNA: WO/95/1731: 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary. Captain Edward Francis Ratliff MC (age unknown), 26-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant William Morrison and 26-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant James Brooker have no known grave and are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

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Desperate men sought shelter in any available shell hole or old German practice trench sections SW of the redoubt, while others flung themselves down and dug frantically to escape the murderous stream of bullets.<sup>480</sup> Additional defensive fire support was provided by a plunging indirect machine-gun barrage originating, approximately 500 yards beyond the *Hauptwiderstandslinie*, from the line Wrangle Farm – Wrath Farm. Consolidation of the meagre bit of ground gained, “about 100 yards in advance of their original line”, proceeded, as posts of 3 to 6 men each were formed in shell holes under the almost continuous hail of machine-gun fire.<sup>481</sup> Anderson later described the supporting artillery barrage as “efficient” with few shorts and “suitable” pace. “Visibility in the moonlight”, he also observed, “was up to 500 yards. The moon was behind us. It seems obvious that the enemy observed our forming up, but instead of interfering with it, pushed forward posts and machine-guns in front of our barrage line. Consequently, when our barrage commenced the machine-gun fire commenced rather than lessened”.<sup>482</sup> The relevant German regimental history appears to partially confirm Anderson’s speculation: “The English were very strong, attacking *IR94* with three battalions.<sup>483</sup> The men in the outpost line opened strong fire with rifles and machine-guns”.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Part of the left company of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade appears to have strayed across the front of the neighbouring 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI after inexplicably jumping-off seven minutes before Zero. See below.

<sup>481</sup> TNA: WO/95/1731: ‘Report of the part played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn. The Rifle Brigade in the Operations at Passchendaele’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary and Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 166

<sup>482</sup> TNA: WO/95/1731: ‘Report of the part played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn. The Rifle Brigade in the Operations at Passchendaele’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary.

<sup>483</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and elements of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI. See below.

<sup>484</sup> Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg*, p. 237.



**Plate 3.9 Northern Redoubt and environs in the summer of 1917 (Source: MMP)**

25 Brigade's assault had almost completely broken down in the minutes following Zero. "The enemy were holding TEAL [sic] COTTAGE, the NORTHERN and SOUTHERN REDOUBTS and the [VENISON] trench connecting them in considerable strength. Isolated groups of men had also been pushed well out in front. These were occupying shell hole positions".<sup>485</sup> Stalled elements of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade persevered with the laborious process of improving, by sustained digging and scraping, upon any available cover under heavy hostile machine-gun fire. Lieutenants Anderson and Nettleton did what they could in the aftermath of the shambles:

After the noise had died down, we went out to find out what we could. Men had grouped themselves in shell holes

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<sup>485</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 'Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917', 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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to get what shelter they could, but there was no organisation left and all we could do was to get the groups in touch with each other and pull some back and push others forward to make some sort of coherent line and evacuate as many wounded as we could find. Even this activity had to stop when dawn came, as one could not move about in daylight up at front.<sup>486</sup>

A barrage, as per Major-General Heneker's request, from Major-General Pinney's 33<sup>rd</sup> Division (responsible for left sub-sector of VIII Corps) was fired to cover the right flank of 8<sup>th</sup> Division. Brigadier-General A.W.F. Baird's 100 Brigade held the line as divisional artillery and machine-gun batteries opened up simultaneously with the main bombardment at Zero + 8.<sup>487</sup> Retaliation, it was later noted, amounted to a "few shells in the vicinity of Brigade HQ."<sup>488</sup> On the left, German batteries commenced their dreaded protective barrage at Zero + 9 by targeting the Vindictive Crossroads – Passchendaele Road. This fire was, as expected, afterwards shortened to Venison Trench and the redoubts. Meanwhile, two platoons of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire fought desperately to maintain a hold on Southern Redoubt.<sup>489</sup>

#### 3.4 97 Brigade

Five assault battalions of 97 Brigade, companies organised into two distinct frontages, advanced toward their final red line objective: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 15<sup>th</sup> LF (far right and left battalions) attacked on a "three company frontage with one company in support moving in rear of No. 2 Company". 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, 11<sup>th</sup> Border and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI (centre battalions)

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<sup>486</sup> Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns*, p. 118.

<sup>487</sup> Plans to make use of dummy decoy figures, if contemplated, were not included in orders issued on 1 December.. See Appendix 9.

<sup>488</sup> TNA: WO/95/2429: 100 Brigade War Diary.

<sup>489</sup> BL: 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

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attacked on a two-company frontage “with Nos. 3 and 4 companies in rear of Nos. 1 and 2 companies”. All companies had assembled earlier at the jumping-off line in varied (snake formation and line of sections) platoon frontages forming four waves. Anticipated frontages for each battalion on the final objective were, from right to left: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI (520 yards), 16<sup>th</sup> HLI (450 yards), 11<sup>th</sup> Border (400 yards), 17<sup>th</sup> HLI (500 yards) and 15<sup>th</sup> LF (700 yards). It was estimated that all battalions would be on their final red line objective by Zero + 32 (2:27 a.m.)<sup>490</sup>

Available intelligence concerning expected German tactics and probable counter-attack assembly areas in the sector Vat Cottages – Hill 52 was explained in concise terms prior to the attack:

Enemy Tactics. Enemy makes use of immediate counter-attack, which generally speaking comes from N and NE.

Assembly Places. Probably in low ground and woods on the E[ast] side of the ridge i.e. from NNE and E. He can see our advanced positions.

Enemy machine-guns, it was also noted, were “generally echeloned according to the field of fire in shell holes. The light MGs [*Maschinen-Gewehr 08/15*] are usually all forward.<sup>491</sup> All dry shell holes are potential MG emplacements. Some of the heavy MGs are possible [sic] fired from elephant dugouts” [splinter-proof shelters constructed with corrugated iron]. Barbed wire obstacles were almost unknown on this part of the front,

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<sup>490</sup> TNA: WO/95/2400: ‘97 Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary and IWM 4723: ‘Summary of the attack of the 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. with 2 Battalions of the 96<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. on December 2 [1917]’, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>491</sup> A prisoner of *IR96*, captured near Houthulst Forest on 25 November, informed his captors that ‘since they [*38<sup>th</sup> Division*] left the Monchy front, the number of M.G.’s per battalion has been raised from 12 to 18. 6 of these guns were with each platoon of the M.G. Coy. in the main line of resistance, and each infantry company had three of the light pattern guns [*08/15*], which were about 60/70 m[etres] further forward in shell holes’. See TNA: WO/157/120: ‘Annexe to Second Army Summary Dated 26<sup>th</sup> November 1917: Information Obtained from Prisoners’, Second Army Intelligence Files.

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but a formidable belt, beyond the final objective, was believed to exist “parallel to and west of the main street of WESTROOSEBEKE, running north and south and there is possibly a belt of wire running from NW to SE in front of WESTROOSEBEKE on high ground”. Another belt was definitely discerned “running from NW to SE across V.12. central (WESTROOSEBEKE)”. The intelligence report concluded with the optimistic statement that ‘Experience on this front show that there is nothing to be feared from the enemy so long as he is resolutely tackled’.<sup>492</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, aligned along the jumping-off tape since 1:20 a.m., promptly advanced at 1:55 a.m. Its final red line objective extended for 520 yards from NW of Northern Redoubt to just opposite the large, water-filled depression just west of the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke road.<sup>493</sup> From right to left, ‘A’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ companies moved forward in good order. These companies were, according to 97 Brigade orders, responsible for the “capture of all localities and strongpoints occupied by the enemy between our assembly positions and the final objective”. The “denial of Hill 52 to the enemy”, it was also stressed, was “essential to the success of the operations”. ‘B’ Company, following immediately behind ‘C’, was to be prepared for two possible operational contingencies: “Support any of the leading companies should it become necessary to do so to enable these companies to reach their final objectives” or “Give assistance to the left battalion [2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade] of the [25] Brigade on our right in the

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<sup>492</sup> TNA: WO/95/2400: ‘Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15. – V.30’ November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary. Westroosebeke, the report added, ‘contains about 40 cellars, a strongly built church and two breweries. There is good visibility from V.12.a.3.6 [NE of Westroosebeke] The soil is said to be mostly sandy and dry’.

<sup>493</sup> The road acted as a dam on the east side of this depression. See fn. 408 for part ‘a’ of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division intelligence report: ‘Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15 to V.30’ November 1917.

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event of its being held up by forming a defensive flank on the east”. ‘B’ Company, should neither of these eventualities occur, was to consolidate the captured area behind ‘C’ Company.<sup>494</sup>

Captain J.H. Howard (Adjutant 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI) was responsible for compiling an account of the operation for the battalion war diary. His efforts were, unlike other consulted examples found in the National Archives, remarkably forensic in methodology and scope. “The subsequent action of the battalion”, Howard explained, “is best described in narrative form by companies, the descriptions being those given by the surviving officers and non-commissioned officers. The essence of the attack”, he added, “was the element of surprise. The night was very bright and moonlight [sic] and there is no doubt that all movement could be seen at a short distance”.<sup>495</sup>

2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI ‘s advance was almost immediately followed by “very heavy machine-gun fire, owing to which the casualties, particularly among officers and NCOs, were very heavy”. Intense enfilade fire was also experienced from the direction of Venison Trench, Teall Cottage and Volt Farm. Wayward elements of battalions (2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI) on the flanks “lost direction and, crossing our [2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI] front, caused much confusion”.<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> TNA: WO/95/2400: ‘97 Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary. Lieutenant-Colonel Scully (CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF) subsequently wrote: ‘I am of the opinion that the tape laid by the 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI was run along our frontline so that at least half of the Battalion were formed up facing NE instead of N[orth]’. See IWM 4723: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33’, 5 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>495</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

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Captain Howard, basing his findings on interviews with surviving officers and NCOs, carefully reconstructed the four companies' ordeal for the 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI war diary. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant H.J. Knight (CO 'A' Company), all hope of obtaining surprise gone, led his four platoons forward in the face of fierce German resistance:

This ['A'] company was on the right of the battalion and left the tape in good order at Zero. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant H.L. Brigham was wounded half an hour before Zero. He was the right platoon commander and detailed for keeping touch with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Rifle Brigade on our right. Sergeant Davies [acting liaison officer with 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade] then took command of his platoon; before 'A' Company moved off they noticed the troops on our right were on the move 7 minutes before ZERO. The company at first, under the impression that these were hostile troops, nearly fired on them but discovered that that they were 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Rifle Brigade advancing in a NORTHERLY direction across our front.<sup>497</sup> The commander of 'A' Company (2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant H.J. Knight) endeavoured to redirect these troops but the officer he saw became a casualty almost immediately. This caused confusion amongst 'A' Company. The Rifle Brigade crossed the PASSCHENDAELE – WESTROOSEBEKE road at V.30.b.30.05 [vicinity of Teall Cottage]. The enemy opened fire less than a minute after ZERO; this fire appeared to come from TEALE COTT [sic], VENISON TRENCH and VOID FARM. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant C.P. Halliday MC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant J.V. Webb (who joined the battalion late on the night of November 30) and the Company Sergeant Major became casualties in the first five minutes. The company progressed in spite of this until our artillery barrage came down, causing the men to hold up. At this time it is believed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade lost heavily. No. 1 Platoon, which had been told off to capture TEALE COTTAGE, had lost its platoon commander and platoon sergeant and was reduced to 7 men. Sergeant Pannett from No. 3 Platoon was detailed to do this work; only the company commander and 1 NCO now remained to lead the company. The enemy artillery fire was very dispersed and not in the nature of a barrage. 'A' Co[mpan]y's commander found his men closing to the right and he tried to re-organise his men as best he could in spite

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<sup>497</sup> No reference to the early jumping-off and subsequent divergence appears in 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, 25 Brigade or 8<sup>th</sup> Division war diaries.

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of the fact that he had been severely shaken by a shell burst and was grazed above the eye by a bullet. The men at this point dug in groups with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Rifle Brigade...<sup>498</sup>

Remnants of 'A' Company laboured at converting their shared shell hole positions, situated east of the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke road, into outposts. Lieutenant Knight subsequently stated that his company's failure to reach the objective "was entirely due to his being mixed up with 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Rifle Brigade and the fact that he had lost all his officers and NCOs in the early stage of the advance."<sup>499</sup> Owing to the troops on his right moving forward before ZERO the element of surprise was frustrated".<sup>500</sup>

In the centre, 'C' Company (CO Captain P. Lambert) experienced devastating losses amongst its leadership after proceeding just fifty yards:

'C' Company left the tape in perfect order. After going some 50 yards they came under heavy machine-gun fire and all the officers and senior NCOs became casualties.<sup>501</sup> The fire appeared to come from directly from our front and flanks. In spite of this they pushed on. Sergeant Hayward was then in command of the company and reports that he went a distance of 500 yards (?)<sup>502</sup> At one point he crossed the PASSCHENDAELE – WESTROOSEBEKE road about V.30.b.0.08 and found some derelict field guns and shelters, the occupants of which were killed. He then found himself in front of a line of trees, which were held by the enemy in force.

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<sup>498</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

<sup>499</sup> 'A' Company officer casualties: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants H.J. Knight, H.L. Brigham, C.P. Halliday and J.V. Webb wounded.

<sup>500</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

<sup>501</sup> 'C' Company officer casualties: Captain Lambert, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants T.S. Goode and C.S. Allen wounded, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant G.W. Asquith missing. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Gordon William Asquith (age unknown) has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

<sup>502</sup> Captain Howard also observed: 'It is extremely difficult to give a the exact position to which this NCO reached and dug himself in; I am of the opinion that he crossed the PASSCHENDAELE – WESTROOSEBEKE road and dug in between VENISON TRENCH and TEALE [sic] COTT[AGE]'.

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Sergeant Hayward, the only remaining company leader, took stock of the situation and decided to remain under cover where he was with the seven men who had miraculously accompanied him thus far.<sup>503</sup>

On the left, 'D' Company (CO Captain H.R. Forde MC)<sup>504</sup> was to overrun Hill 52 before gaining its final objective opposite the water-filled depression west of the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke road. Heavy losses were also sustained amongst 'D' Company officers and NCOs. A Sergeant Horne was the only remaining company leader available for Captain Howard to interview:

'D' Company, No. 3 or left company ... recounted by Sergeant Horne: 'D' Company left the tape in perfect order and immediately came under heavy machine-gun fire. He [Sergeant Horne] lost twelve men before going twenty yards. He was in touch with the 16<sup>th</sup> High [land] L.I. on his left the right company of which advanced across his front and the two companies became mixed-up. He went forward with his few men until he reached two pillboxes. At this time he had three men of his platoon left, one being a Lewis Gunner, and he sent one man back for support but the man became a casualty. At this time he saw his company commander (Captain H.R. Forde MC) some distance off, when a Very Light went up and illuminated the surroundings. He was unable to reach him and never saw him again; this was some 250 yards in front of the tapeline.<sup>505</sup> After this he got in touch with Number Thirteen Platoon, commanded by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant J.N. Ellis, and they made an attempt to take the pillboxes but were unable to

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<sup>503</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary and Bond, *The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War vol.3*, p. 911.

<sup>504</sup> 22-year-old Captain Henry Rawson Forde MC: Only son of Sir Henry and Lady Forde of The Manor of St John, Waterford. Educated at Clifton College and Sandhurst.

<sup>505</sup> Captain Forde is buried in Tyne Cot Cemetery. His citation in *De Ruvigny's* states: 'Buried where he fell. A brother officer wrote: 'It's an awful blow to us all ... for he was looked upon by everyone as a true friend. He is a great loss to the battalion' and another: 'A brave and gallant officer has been taken by God, but he did his work, and he was a man among men when danger lurked about'. An officer of another regiment wrote: 'All his company officers had been killed, and he was rallying his men, when a German sniper hit him in the head and, poor lad, he was killed at once'. See Marquis De Ruvigny, *De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914-1918 vol IV* (London: Naval & Military Press reprint of 1922 edition), p. 58.

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find an entrance. Here 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Ellis and his Platoon Sergeant were killed.<sup>506</sup> With the assistance of some men of the 16<sup>th</sup> High[land] L.I., he worked round the pillboxes and, after going about 80 yards, he dug in.<sup>507</sup>

Consolidation of captured ground a further eighty yards beyond these concrete structures was carried out, under Sergeant Horne's supervision, by the mixed party of 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI.<sup>508</sup>

'B' Company (CO Captain J. Hassell), following in the wake of 'C', found it necessary to carry out the second operational contingency – "Support any of the leading companies should it become necessary to do so to enable these companies to reach their final objectives" – assigned by 97 Brigade. "D' Company sustained heavy casualties and Hill 52 had to be secured at all costs:

'B' Company, No. 4 or Support Company ... recounted by the Company Commander Captain J. Hassell: 'B' Company started off the tape in correct order. Immediately the enemy illuminated the ground and opened machine-gun fire which did not impede his [Captain Hassell] progress or cause many casualties to his company, as it appeared to go overhead. He reached Hill 52 with Number 5 Platoon, the other three platoons being in front in positions from which the enemy had been driven out. The sappers [219<sup>th</sup> Field Company RE] who accompanied him immediately got to work and taped and sited the strongpoint and he set Number 5 Platoon to dig.<sup>509</sup> Whilst this was in progress, casualties of other companies reported to him and he set them to dig in. This trench was sited close to an old enemy

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<sup>506</sup> 19-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant J.N. Ellis is buried in Tyne Cot Cemetery.

<sup>507</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

<sup>508</sup> 'D' Company officer casualties, in addition to Captain Forde and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Ellis, were 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant R.D. Abbiss DOW and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant J.S. Wilson (attached to 97 TMB) wounded. 30-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Reginald Donald Abbiss is buried in Mendinghem Military Cemetery.

<sup>509</sup> '[A] T-shaped strongpoint, with 4 fire bays and four traverses in each arm' was taped-out and dug with infantry assistance under the direction of Lieutenant Spottiswoode RE. 'Time spent on the job was 2 hours', after which the wounded Spottiswoode and his party departed for billets. See IWM 4723: 'Statement by OC [219<sup>th</sup> Field Company]', Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

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trench, where he temporarily set up his company headquarters.

Thus a tenuous position was established on Hill 52. Would the British be able to retain this vital high ground against the odds?<sup>510</sup>

Three regiments (*IR94*, *IR95*, *IR96*) of *38<sup>th</sup> Division*<sup>511</sup> were responsible for defending *Abschnitt B* of *Gruppe Staden* since 1 December.<sup>512</sup> On the left, *IR94* (commanded by *Oberstleutnant* von Taysen) was tasked with defending the sector opposite *2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade* and *2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI*. Its *Vorfeldzonelinie* garrison was, regardless of a general state of alertness following the capture of the three prisoners in the waning hours of 1 December or the infliction of heavy losses on *2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade* and ‘A’ and ‘C’ companies *2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI*, rapidly overwhelmed opposite the right and centre by elements of ‘D’ and ‘B’ companies.<sup>513</sup> *Höhenrücken – Passendale* (Hill 52) was subsequently lost, whilst isolated outposts continued to hold out against surrounding British forces. Reinforced companies of *IR94* prepared, during the remaining hours before dawn, to resist further enemy attacks against the *Hauptwiderstandslinie*, while

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<sup>510</sup> TNA: WO/95/2400: ‘97 Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary and WO/95/2402: *2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI* War Diary.

<sup>511</sup> The *38<sup>th</sup> (Thüringian) Division*, a pre-war formation attached to *XI Armeekorps*, sustained heavy losses during the opening phase of the Third Ypres campaign. Rest at Antwerp was followed by deployment south of the Scarpe in early September, after which it returned north to hold the line at Houthulst Forest from 19 to 25 November. Its 1917 intelligence ‘value estimate’ stated: ‘As a rule it gave a good account of itself in the numerous battles in which it took part...’ Its main objective on taking over *Abschnitt B* was ‘to prevent the English from obtaining a foothold on the entire PASSCHENDAELE Ridge’. The divisional commander (*General-Leutnant* Schultheiss) was ‘very emphatic on this point...’ See Intelligence Section of the General Staff. American Expeditionary Forces, *Histories of Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions*, p. 431, TNA: WO/157/288: ‘Annexe to II Corps Summary No. 34, Miscellaneous Information from a Prisoner of 94 I.R. (from Corps on Right), II Corps Summary of Information’, 5 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File and Appendix 2 for infantry orders of battle.

<sup>512</sup> The disposition of *38<sup>th</sup> Division*’s regiments were roughly, from right to left: *IR96*: Sector opposite Source Farm; *IR95*: Vicinity of Veal Cottages to *Osselstraat*; *IR94*: *Osselstraat* to Northern Redoubt (inclusive). See TNA: WO/157/288: ‘Situation Map Showing Enemy Dispositions on 3/12/17’, II Corps Intelligence File and Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) Nr. 94 im Weltkrieg, Skizze 32*.

<sup>513</sup> See Appendix 16, Part D (paras. 7 and 8).

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embattled *Vorfeldzonelinie* posts hoped for imminent relief by counter-attack troops. Local commanders recognised the danger; immediate action was necessary if the British were to be denied a permanent hold on Hill 52 and its environs.

Increased distance to the final red line objective required the two front companies of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI (acting CO Major W.D. Scott DSO MC)<sup>514</sup> to capture and consolidate a ‘dotted green’ or ‘350 yard’ line’ halfway to the final red line objective. The remaining two companies, following closely behind, were to “leap frog on the dotted GREEN line and advance to the final objective and will be responsible for the capture of all occupied localities between the dotted GREEN line and their final objective”.<sup>515</sup> Brigade orders were clear: Advancing roughly along two unusually close avenues (present-day *Osselstraat* and *Haringstraat*) the battalion would seize and consolidate Vox, Void, Veldt<sup>516</sup> and Volt farms respectively before halting on the red line south of Valuation Houses. The ground to be traversed was, besides embracing four nearly indiscernible farm sites, the usual expanse of shell holes with several dugouts and concrete shelters identified in the vicinity of Vox, Void and Volt farms. One continuous trench, however, extending eastward across the left front of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI from the objective area allotted to the neighbouring 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, was also known to exist in the *Vorfeldzonelinie* area south of the dotted green line.<sup>517</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> T/Major W.D. Scott was awarded the DSO for gallantry at Nieuport on 10-11 July 1917.

<sup>515</sup> TNA: WO/95/2400: ‘97 Brigade Operation Order No. 178’, 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary.

<sup>516</sup> Veldt Farm was situated astride the boundary between 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment.

<sup>517</sup> TNA: WO/95/2400: ‘Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15 – V.30’ November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary.

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“At Zero hour (1:55 a.m.)”, the 16<sup>th</sup> HLI diarist recorded, “the battalion advanced”. The weather, he also noted, was “bright moonlight, no wind, visibility good up to 300 yards, ground soft but quite practicable”. Men, organised into ‘worm’ columns and line of sections, passed over the jumping-off tape and negotiated the gentle slope toward the illuminated void: “The fickle moon crept behind dark clouds as they attacked. Forward they drove in the black o’ night, each man alone – robbed even of the comfort of human companionship in the face of eternity”. Hopes of achieving complete surprise were almost immediately dashed by “intense enemy machine-gun fire from directions of Mallet Copse, Vox Farm, Void Farm and Hill 52”. The attackers, nevertheless, pressed forward: “Blundering on, sobbing for breath, they strove towards the vicious red flashes of the machine-guns that stabbed the gloom. These guns were densely packed in Mallet Copse, Vox Farm, Void Farm and Hill 52, strongholds that – with the weather – denied the British Army its coveted objective of Westroosebeke to the end”. The low, mud-spattered pillbox and nearby trench sections at Vox Farm were “at once rushed and the garrison disposed of, 50 prisoners being sent to the rear”. Concentrated fire, unfortunately, had “seriously thinned” the battalion’s ranks and was not checked until the opening of the barrage at Zero + 8. The attackers, assisted by this timely suppressing shellfire, were able to gain, despite a decline in remaining strength by the wandering of stray groups of men into the sector of 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, a line running east and west, “with the right flank refused toward Hill 52”, through the SW corner of Void Farm by 2:40 a.m. On the immediate right, continued resistance by an outpost of the neighbouring German regiment isolated 16<sup>th</sup> HLI from 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI. On the left, contact with the 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment was also lost in the confusion. Two officers (Captain G.L.

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Davidson and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant W.R. Bennie)<sup>518</sup> were subsequently killed, “whilst endeavouring to locate this unit”, by sniper fire from the direction of Mallet Copse. Further efforts to rally and push on proved difficult in the period immediately after Zero. The CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF recalled: “There was practically no artillery fire [,] a few shells only falling behind our original line. I consider [sic] the attack was sticking, anyhow just N[orth] of VIRILE FARM I personally found many men by VOCATION FARM and ordered them forward. This was about zero plus 10 minutes and there was very little hostile fire. About three machine-guns were firing from about TEALL COTT, just north of [HILL] 52”.<sup>519</sup>



**Plate 3.10 A.M. Burnie’s ink drawing of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI advancing from the jumping-off line at Zero. This is the only known illustration depicting the night operation on the Passchendaele Ridge (Source: Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland*)**

<sup>518</sup> 27-year-old Captain George Leslie Davidson (4<sup>th</sup> Battalion attached 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion HLI) and 22-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant William Robertson Bennie (7<sup>th</sup> Battalion attached 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion HLI) have no known grave and are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

<sup>519</sup>TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 11, WO/95/2403: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary, IWM 4723: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33’, 5 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2), Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland*, p. 110 and Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg*, p. 237. Lieutenant Kerr, CO RE party detailed to construct a strongpoint at Void Farm (Chapter 2, p. 111), observed leaderless troops retiring from the front and right at about 2:30 a.m. Following this, he oversaw consolidation of Vox Farm by a mixed group of approximately 50 men from 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 11<sup>th</sup> Border. See Lambert Papers: ‘STATEMENT BY LIEUT. KERR R.E.’.



**Plate 3.11 Site of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment jumping-off position (Source: Author)**

The anticipated area concentration barrage had momentarily suppressed the fierce German machine-gun fire, but 16<sup>th</sup> HLI were nowhere near to breaching the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* defences. Forced to dig-in, with both flanks exposed, east and west of Void Farm, the battalion had only managed to reach the southern edge of the *Vorfeldzonelinie* in the forty-four minutes after Zero:

The remnants of the battalion then consolidated two positions on the line of our first objective.<sup>520</sup> One under Lieut[enant] J. Miller and Lieut[enant] J.W. Lumm with about 40 other o.r. from 'B' and 'D' companies was immediately in front of VOID FARM about V.23.d.9.4. facing N[orth]. The other under Captain J. Alexander, Lieut[enant] D.V. Charlton and Lieut[enant] R.B.

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<sup>520</sup> 'Consolidated' relative to objective (*Vorfeldzonelinie*) depth; the dotted green line had not been reached.

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Robertson with about 30 o.r. from 'A' and 'B' companies was about V.24.c.3.4 [east of Void Farm] facing NE.<sup>521</sup>

Shell holes and any other available cover were deepened and otherwise improved upon in the half-light while posted sentries fixed their gaze on front and flanks during the remaining hours before sunrise.

Colonel H.C. Wylly's history of the Border Regiment during the First World War records that on 2 December 1917, the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion participated in a "smart little action; moving up from Wurst Farm in the Westroosebeke area to the frontline" to carry out "a night attack on the German positions S[outh] of Westroosebeke in conjunction with other units of the 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade and two battalions of the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. The 'Lonsdales' took their objectives and held them all through the day until the enemy launched a counter-attack at 4:30 p.m., when the battalion had to fall back to the old line".<sup>522</sup> This brief account – unavoidable due to limits of space when recounting the deeds of all sixteen Regular, Territorial and New Army battalions in one volume – only provides the barest outline of a tragic, but now forgotten feat of arms enacted on a low, wind-swept Flanders ridge in the immediate aftermath of a great campaign.

With two companies in front and two immediately behind, the 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment (CO Major and acting Lieutenant-Colonel T.F. Tweed MC)<sup>523</sup> waited for Zero

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<sup>521</sup> TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

<sup>522</sup> Colonel H.C. Wylly, *The Border Regiment in the Great War* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1924), p. 173.

<sup>523</sup> Twenty-seven-year-old A/Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Frederic Tweed MC (1890-1940). Educated at Liverpool Institute and Liverpool University; underwriting member of Lloyd's; Liberal agent for Eccles at the outbreak of war; commissioned 15<sup>th</sup> LF (1<sup>st</sup> Salford Pals); transferred 16<sup>th</sup> LF (2<sup>nd</sup> Salford Pals) November 1914; Captain and OC 'B' or 1<sup>st</sup> Eccles Company 1915-16; Major and 2/ic 1916-17; MC January 1917; CO 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment from 25 August; relinquished commission and Hon. Lieutenant-Colonel March 1918; Secretary Manchester Liberal Federation 1918-26. Tweed went on to a distinguished

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along the 300-yard jumping-off tape. Silence was maintained as the battalion ascended the gentle incline toward the summit of Vat Cottage Ridge at 1:55 a.m. Confronting them was the anticipated collection of occupied shell hole outposts comprising the *Vorfeldzonelinie*, the left hand portion of linear trench facing 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and, beyond the forward edge of the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* and subsequent green line objective, the ramshackle agglomeration of dugouts shelters and trenches found, approximately 200 yards south of the battalion's final red line objective, in Mallet Copse.<sup>524</sup> Another short stretch of linear trench, protected by barbed wire and extending from Veldt Farm to Mallet Copse, had also been noted by II Corps intelligence in the days leading up to the attack.



**Plate 3.12 Lieutenant-Colonel T.F. Tweed (Source: Stedman, *Salford Pals*)**

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political career as co-founder of 'Liberal Summer Schools' and chief of staff and primary political advisor to David Lloyd George from 1926 until the former's untimely death by stroke. He also wrote three novels (*Rinehard: A Melodrama of the Nineteen-Thirties* or, alternatively in the USA, *Gabriel Over the White House*, *Blind Mouths* and *Destiny's Man*) the first of which was made into a motion picture by American press baron William Randolph Hearst's 'Cosmopolitan Productions' in 1933. Evidence has recently come to light that he may have fathered the only child (Jennifer Longford b. 1929) of the former Prime Minister and his long-time mistress and subsequent wife Frances Stevenson. See John Campbell, *If Love Were All: The Story of Frances Stevenson and David Lloyd George* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006) for an account of the five-year affair between Tweed and Stevenson.

<sup>524</sup> An aerial photograph, taken on 27 November, showed the 'area about old trench at V.23.d.00.45 and MALLET COPSE still dry. North of the [winding *Goudbergstraat*] road the ground is very wet except for the isolated shell holes which are dry probably because new. Pillbox can still be seen in southwest corner of MALLET WOOD. See 'Appendix to II Corps Summary No. 27, Preliminary Report on Photos Taken 27-11-17, II Corps Summary of Information', 28 November 1917, TNA WO/157/287, II Corps Intelligence File.

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The enemy remained quiet as the four companies of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment silently entered no man's land. Sporadic rifle bursts – immediately followed by a vicious fusillade and cascade of descending magnesium flares – put paid to any hopes for surprise. Both front companies, resolute in the face of fierce machine-gun fire, quickly swept over the *Vorfeldzonelinie* and, topping the ridge crest, occupied the green line and seized Veldt Farm. The two leap-frogging companies, passing through the secured intermediate objective, rushed downhill to enter Mallet Copse at its southern end. Bomb and bayonet made short work of any occupants discovered among the haphazard warren of mined dugouts, corrugated metal-roofed shrapnel shelters and narrow trench sections before the tiny copse was cleared and its north edge gained. Any further advance from there through the muddy northern valley toward the red line was stopped by machine-gun fire originating 200 yards northward from inundated Mallet Wood. Remnants of the leap-frogging companies, their position now rendered untenable under a rain of bullets fell back to “the southern edge of the copse with their left flank refused”.<sup>525</sup>

The 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, notwithstanding heavy casualties and resultant confusion, had been able to advance 500 yards and occupy dispersed positions of the green line intermediate objective to – 200 yards short of the red line – Mallet Copse.<sup>526</sup> This epic action by the ‘Lonsdale’ Battalion was, as with other battalions of 25 and 97 Brigades, underlined by many obscure human tragedies now lost to time. One on record

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<sup>525</sup> See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 9.

<sup>526</sup> Officer casualties for 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment were as follows: Killed: Captains I. Benson, A.F. Sandeman, P.M. Martin; 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants R.C. Richardson, W.B. MacDuff. Wounded: Captain McConnan, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants J.M. Jamie, Fell, Hotchkiss, Malley Martin, Duff, Abbey. 34-year-old Captain Issac Benson, 33-year-old Captain Albert Fitzroy Sandeman, 21-year-old Captain Peter Mcewan Martin, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Robert Cecil Richardson (age unknown) and 24-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant William Brown MacDuff have no known grave and are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

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concerns two (George and John) of three Watt brothers from the tiny Cumbria village of Skelton. George Watt, the youngest, had been employed as a ploughman before the war. His attempt to enlist in Penrith was thwarted due to being underage. Undeterred, young George traveled to Carlisle and successfully enlisted there. He was, by the time of the night operation near Passchendaele, an experienced veteran who had recovered from thigh wounds received on the infamous opening day of the Somme campaign. Waiting with George on the jumping-off tape below the summit of Vat Cottage Ridge was his older brother John. Both siblings, rifles held high at the port, promptly went forward at zero hour. John fell wounded not long afterward. George, witnessing his brother's distress, dragged him into a nearby shell hole before moving on to be wounded a second time. John Watt, unable to leave the cover of the crater, was later posted as 'missing' and never heard from again.<sup>527</sup>



**Plate 3.13 Watt Brothers: George right, John centre**  
(Source: Bardgett, *The Lonsdale Battalion*)

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<sup>527</sup> See Colin Bardgett, *The Lonsdale Battalion 1914-1918* (Melksham: Cromwell Press, 1993), pp. 43 and 129. 27-year-old 17322 Pte. John William Watt has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing. Pte. George Watt was evacuated after being wounded. He survived the war to return home and marry.

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17<sup>th</sup> HLI (CO Lieutenant-Colonel J. Inglis)<sup>528</sup> was also tasked with seizing two (green and red line) objectives as a result of the distance to be traversed. The Battalion's four companies were formed up, as with 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 11<sup>th</sup> Border, on a two company frontage with two companies following behind in order to leap-frog to the final 500-yard red line objective overlooking low ground in the vicinity of Mallet Wood and Double Copse:

The intention was to advance on this front at zero hour and drive the enemy from positions occupied by him on the [Vat Cottage] Ridge. There were [as with 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment] two objectives to be taken – a GREEN LINE, running approximately from VEAL COTTAGES on our battalion front, to a point right of No. 3 Company, No. 2 [16<sup>th</sup> HLI] Battalion, and a RED LINE running approximately from TOURNANT FARM to the [II] Corps boundary at a point opposite No. 1 Company, No. 5 [15<sup>th</sup> LF] Battalion. The 17<sup>th</sup> HLI were responsible for the capture of the first objective from a point V.23.d.06.32 (right of Mallet Copse) to V.23.c.19.09 (in front of and to the left of VEAL COTTAGES), and taking VAT COTTAGES. The Second objective or RED LINE was from V.23.c.04.91 to V.23.c.18.42. [northern slope of the Vat Cottage Ridge], the frontage on the final objective to be one of 500 yards.<sup>529</sup>

The postwar Battalion history observed: “There were two objectives to be taken, of which sections were detailed as the job of the 17<sup>th</sup> – a slice of which included two formidable ‘pillboxes’ known as the Vat and Veal Cottages”.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel J. Inglis. RMC Sandhurst; Commissioned HLI 1900; South Africa 1900-1902; Lieutenant 1906; Adjutant 1<sup>st</sup> HLI 1911; Captain 1912; Major 1916; CO 17<sup>th</sup> HLI July 1917.

<sup>529</sup> TNA: WO/95/2400: '97 Brigade Operation Order No. 178', 27 November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary and WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

<sup>530</sup> Arthur & Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry*, p. 68. An aerial photograph taken on 27 November provided additional intelligence about German defences in the vicinity of Vat and Veal cottages: '7 B.13. V.23.c.d.29.a.b. Light good. Shows VAT and VEAL COTTAGES, MALLET COPSE and a considerable area north and south of the [*Goudbergsraat?*] road. There appears to be small posts still in the old trench running north from V.23.d. Probable MG position at about V.23.d.12.10 and numerous shell hole positions just east of this which appear comparatively dry and occupied. Area about VAT COTTAGES dry. Tracks lead along road southwest of this area. The location of the post reported here is



**Plate 3.14 Lieutenant-Colonel J. Inglis**  
(Source: Arthur & Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry*)

Aligned before a start line (‘A’ and ‘B’ companies in front; ‘C’ and ‘D’ in rear) extending from east to west along the ascending southern slope of the Vat Cottage outcrop, with Vat and Veal cottages lying beyond, the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI crossed the jumping-off tape at Zero:

The battalion assembled on a frontage of 400 yards and at zero hour (1:55 a.m.) moved forward to attack. Companies deployed from a two platoon frontage in snake formation – this method having been adopted owing to the shell torn nature of the ground – and advanced in four waves.<sup>531</sup> ‘A’ and ‘B’ companies were to capture the first objective, mopping up all occupied posts on the way, including the two pillboxes, while ‘C’ and ‘D’ were to “leap-frog” through them, carry the next objective and consolidate.<sup>532</sup>

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apparently in two or three shell holes about V.29.a.65.80. See ‘Appendix to II Corps Summary No. 27, Preliminary Report on Photos Taken 27-11-17, II Corps Summary of Information’, 28 November 1917, TNA WO/157/287, II Corps Intelligence File.

<sup>531</sup> The distance between waves and companies was 20 yards and 40 yards respectively. See WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

<sup>532</sup> Arthur & Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry*, p. 68.

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The early stages of the attack were carried out without any serious opposition as the assaulting snake columns drove past or over scattered *Vorfeldzonelinie* outposts. Hoped for complacency on the part of the enemy during the 8 minutes prior to the barrage start time was, as elsewhere, instantly dispelled by almost ceaseless hostile fire: “Suddenly he opened heavy machine-gun fire upon the advancing companies, inflicting heavy casualties which, in the dark and over the difficult ground, had the effect of splitting up the sections and creating some confusion”.<sup>533</sup>

‘A’ and ‘B’ companies, whose task was to “advance as far as the ‘GREEN LINE’ capturing and mopping up all occupied points on the way”, encountered the intense machine-gun fire before reaching the crest of the ridge. This, coupled with severe losses from enfilade fire on both flanks, failed to deter survivors as they bypassed or overran German posts in the *Vorfeldzonelinie*. Determined efforts by dispersed elements of both companies were of little avail against merciless volleys from Vat Cottages. ‘C’ and ‘D’ companies, following close behind, did not provide any additional impetus. “Our men”, the battalion diarist later wrote, “gallantly pressed on against these odds; but the enemy machine-gun and rifle fire became so intense that their advanced positions were rendered humanly untenable”.<sup>534</sup>

Major-General Shute subsequently noted the result in his after-action report: “The 17<sup>th</sup> HLI ... had been checked by machine-gun fire from VAT COTTAGES at a very early stage of the advance. Various efforts had been made to work round the flanks of

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> TNA: WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary and Arthur & Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry*, p. 68.

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this strongpoint but these attempts had resulted in the loss of many officers and NCOs and the advance had been definitely held up”.<sup>535</sup> Vat and Veal cottages were now discovered to be “heavily garrisoned” and, despite intelligence to the contrary, protected by barbed wire obstacles: “[S]trongpoints were found to be heavily garrisoned and wired and he was also found to be established in a strong line of trench also effectively wired”. Survivors, forced to retire in places, went to ground in the nearest shell holes and began the painful process of consolidation under fierce, continuous fire. Supporting artillery and machine-gun barrages, commencing at Zero + 8, failed to provide any further assistance to the stalled battalion. Failure to breach the German main line of resistance at any point made it unlikely that even the green line intermediary objective would be reached before daybreak.<sup>536</sup>

Four companies, organised along the same lines as 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, of 15<sup>th</sup> LF (CO acting Lieutenant-Colonel H.K Utterson DSO)<sup>537</sup> jumped-off without incident at 1:55 a.m. to carry out the daunting task of forming a left flank guard: “Theirs was a difficult manoeuvre, a sort of echelon attack: the left company had to move only a short distance,

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<sup>535</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 11. 17<sup>th</sup> HLI sustained heavy officer casualties: Killed: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants J. Osborne, P.N. Cunningham, R. Hislop Reid, M. Cameron, J. Miller, J. Morland; Wounded: Captain J.O. Westwater, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants R.D. Brown, G. Forsyth, G.T. M’Intosh, R.D.W. Nicholson, R. Smith. 24-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant John Osborne, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Peter Nesbit Cunningham (age unknown), 29-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Robert Hislop Reid, 24-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant MacDonald Cameron and 22-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant John Miller have no known grave and are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing. 21-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant John Morland is buried in Poelcappelle British Cemetery.

<sup>536</sup> WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

<sup>537</sup> A/Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Kelso Utterson, Commissioned Dorset Regiment 1897; Lieutenant 1899; South Africa 1899-1902; Captain 1905; DSO and Major 1915; War Office 1916; Brigade Major January-September 1917; CO 15<sup>th</sup> LF 31 October. Special thanks to Peter Hodgkinson for additional biographical details.

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while the right traversed over 500 yards”.<sup>538</sup> Thus the entire battalion would, when in position on the red line objective, establish a secure flank for the remaining four assault battalions of 97 Brigade:

The Battalion’s frontage in the assembly area was four hundred and fifty yards, but as it had to pivot on its left and to link the original line with the position gained by the rest of the brigade, its holding on the [final] objective would measure seven hundred yards. The orders provided that ‘A’ (Lieutenant J.W. Brockman), ‘B’ (Captain R.F. Greenhill) and ‘C’ (Lieutenant D.H. Smith DCM) companies should advance to their allotted area in the objective, called the ‘red line’, and ‘D’ Company (Captain L.C. Mandleberg) should move in rear of ‘A’ Company and be prepared to support any of the leading companies if they should need help to enable them to attain the objective. If its services were not used in that capacity, ‘D’ was to consolidate in depth when the ‘red line’ was taken.<sup>539</sup>

The German defences opposite contained, in addition to shell hole outposts, pillboxes, dugouts and short trench sections, a previously identified circular strongpoint (part of the local *Hauptwiderstandslinie* defences) approximately 200 yards west of Vat Cottages.<sup>540</sup>

‘A’ Company, deviating right to keep touch with 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, came under intense machine-gun fire six minutes after Zero. All of its officers and the CSM were killed or wounded as they traversed the *Vorfeldzonelinie*. “The survivors struggled on, but suffered greatly and became very scattered, only about twenty NCOs and men remaining in any organised form”. ‘B’ Company, in the centre, encountered little opposition from the startled German garrison before reaching its objective, while ‘C’, “joined up the original

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<sup>538</sup> Captain C.H. Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Council of the Newcastle and Gateshead Incorporated Chamber of Commerce, 1923) p. 89.

<sup>539</sup> Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes Vol. 1*, p. 276.

<sup>540</sup> See surviving 97 Brigade intelligence ‘mud map’ (10 A), TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

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line at TOURNANT FARM on the left, to ‘B’ Co[mpan]y on the objective forming a defensive flank of about 250 yards”.<sup>541</sup>



**Plate 3.15 Wallemolenstraat from Tournant Farm looking north: Approximate site of jumping-off line boundary between 17<sup>th</sup> HLI and 15<sup>th</sup> LF (Source: Rob Thompson)**

Unsuppressed enfilade fire from the right, where 17<sup>th</sup> HLI were pinned down, had stopped ‘A’ Company in its tracks. Survivors on the far right attached themselves to 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, whilst the remainder, “finding their right flank unguarded”, dug small posts to form a defensive flank. One platoon of ‘D’ (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant J. Pollitt) was sent forward from positions behind ‘A’ to get the attack going and plug a dangerous gap next to ‘B’.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> TNA: WO/95/2397: 15<sup>th</sup> LF War Diary, IWM 4723: ‘Narrative of Operations 2/3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917, 15<sup>th</sup> (S) Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers’, 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2) and Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes Vol. 1*, p. 276.

<sup>542</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Scrivener (‘A’ Company), who had carefully taped-out the battalion’s jumping-off position before Zero, along with his batman, Pte. Poole, ‘showed the greatest gallantry; they attacked and captured a ‘pillbox’ containing a machine-gun’. Scrivener was killed as he reached the objective not long

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2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Hurst's platoon, almost decimated by enfilade fire from Vat Cottage, subsequently followed to deal with the widening gap. Thus 'A' Company, assisted by two platoons from 'D', gained its share of the final objective and "was busily engaged in consolidating it".<sup>543</sup> This captured portion of red line provided an extensive panoramic vista, including Double Copse, Middle Copse and the hamlet of Spriet, of enemy-occupied areas to the north. On the left, "C" Company's secured positions offered a considerable view of the low ground west and NW of Vat Cottage Ridge, where Lind Cottage, Hinton Farm, Cameron House and other fortified enclosures north of the Lekkerboterbeek remained, as part of the adjacent *Hauptwiderstandslinie* defenses, in German hands. Heavy indirect fire from machine-gun batteries attached to Major-General Franks' 35<sup>th</sup> Division (responsible for the left sector of II Corps) expended thousands of rounds into this inundated area in support of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's attack. "No undue retaliation was experienced, and the resultant disquietude of the enemy on the front enabled the 4/North Staffordshire to capture two prisoners".<sup>544</sup>

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afterwards. Poole, his officer down, stalked and killed a nearby enemy machine-gunner. He also hauled wounded to the rear following the first courageous act. Pte. H.R. Poole was subsequently awarded the MM for his heroism. 20-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant John Sidney Scrivener has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing. See Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 277 and Stedman, *Salford Pals*, p. 156

<sup>543</sup> 'D' Company's two remaining platoons (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Scholes) 'dug themselves in about 50 yards south of V.29.a.33' after their commander was wounded ... 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Hurst 'having only three men left [,] retired to the rear half of the company and as he feared that 'A' Company's flank was in the air [,] he sent a post forward to connect with them and remained where he was in support'. See IWM 4223: 'Narrative of Operations 2/3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917, 15<sup>th</sup> (S) Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers', 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Files (Box 80/10/2), Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 277.

<sup>544</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel H.M. Davson, *The History of the 35<sup>th</sup> Division in the Great War* (London: Sifton & Praed, 1926), p. 176. The capture and retention of a particular 'point about V.22.d.2.4' by 15<sup>th</sup> LF, II Corps intelligence surmised, would probably force the enemy to evacuate all the ground south of the Lekkerboterbeek'. See TNA: WO/95/2370: 'Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15 – V.30' November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Diary.

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*IR95* (commanded by *Oberstleutnant* von Selle) faced four British battalions (16<sup>th</sup> HLI, 11<sup>th</sup> Border, 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, 15<sup>th</sup> LF) as they stormed the centre sector of 38<sup>th</sup> Division's line.<sup>545</sup> Tenacious resistance promptly displaced initial surprise and shock.<sup>546</sup> German batteries, replying to signals from the hard-pressed infantry, put down a defensive barrage 3 or 4 minutes after the British bombardment opened up on all strongpoints "on and in front of a line 350 yards" in front of the jumping-off line: "It was not heavy and was on the line of the PADDEBEEK". At Zero + 14 British batteries "formed a barrage in front of the first objective and then moved forward at the rate of 100 yards in three minutes to the final [red line] objective". Heavy shelling of 97 Brigade's former frontline positions did not begin until Zero + 25. The first British SOS rocket, bursting at its acme into three lingering spheres of red-green-red, was observed around 3:30 a.m.<sup>547</sup> Major-General Shute later summed up the troubling state of affairs, still unknown at his HQ, as follows:

The situation in which each of the five battalions found themselves from about zero plus 8 onwards was an exceedingly difficult one. The enemy's machine-guns had gained complete fire superiority. The various local advances made by our troops after this period cost us heavily in our best officers and NCOs, who necessarily had to expose themselves in leading and organizing attacks on the different strongpoints holding up their advance.<sup>548</sup>

Daylight would shortly reveal the extent of the British breakthrough to both sides. Time was running out for 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Could 97 Brigade secure its entire red line objective before sunrise in the face of a solidifying German defence?

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<sup>545</sup> *IR96*, occupying low ground on the immediate German right opposite Source Farm, was not attacked, its front being beyond designated British objectives. See Appendix 16, Part F (paras. 6 and 7).

<sup>546</sup> See Appendix 16, Part E (paras. 8 to 11).

<sup>547</sup> TNA: WO/95/643: 'II Corps Summary of Operations for Week Ending 6 December 1917', II Corps War Diary and WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages, 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>548</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 11.

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**Plates 3.16 & 3.17 Panoramas from Vat Cottage Ridge. Top: North toward Mullet Farm and Westroosebeke. Bottom: View of low-lying region to the NW (Source: Author)**

## Dawn & Dénouement

*For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.*<sup>549</sup>

### 4.1 Loss of Southern Redoubt and Hill 52

Previously established signal communications infrastructures kept HQ staffs informed on the progress, so far as could be ascertained, of the night attack. Reports sent by a variety of sources (flanking units, corps headquarters, divisional observation officers, FOOs) supplied commanders with up to the minute observations and details of the battle now in progress. VIII Corps received the earliest telegraph message, recorded by signals personnel on the standard ‘C2121’ pink message form, from 8<sup>th</sup> Division at 2:35 a.m.:

Following from 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. aaa At 2 a.m. enemy coloured lights seen [,] rifle and M.G. fire opened aaa 2.2 a.m. many lights and heavy musketry aaa Our barrage to time aaa Enemy’s [barrage] opened 2.7 a.m. approx[imate] aaa 8<sup>th</sup> Corps repeated flank divisions.

A second message, arriving the same time as the first, had been dispatched by the gunners: “8<sup>th</sup> Divisional artillery report that at 2.0 a.m. – Considerable rifle and MG fire heard. 2.5 a.m. – Very heavy rifle fire and MG fire heard [,] Several lights up. 2.7 a.m. – Enemy barrage came down”.<sup>550</sup> These communiquees were immediately passed on to

<sup>549</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist* (1888).

<sup>550</sup> BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

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Brigadier-General Aspinall. Over three hours would expire before the BGGs VIII Corps received any further information.



**Plate 4.1 Lieutenant-General Sir Claud W. Jacob**  
(Source: IWM H82158)

Reports also poured in on the left in Lieutenant-General Sir Claud Jacob's II Corps sector. A complete transcript of telephone and telegraph messages, received and sent by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ while the assault was in progress, sheds light on a divisional commander's inability, despite formation-wide application of standard operating procedures that focused on subordination of the attack to a pre-arranged artillery plan and improved tactical handling of infantry, to exercise command. "It conveys very well", as John Lee observed after examination of a similar document, "the chaotic environment generated by modern battle, the problem of contradictory and erroneous messages and the desperate quest for up-to-date information on how the battle was developing at the

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front”.<sup>551</sup> Given these circumstances, two hours would pass before Major-General Shute had a reasonably clear picture of the situation.<sup>552</sup> The first post-zero message, communicated over the telephone by an anonymous artillery Major at 2:02 a.m., received by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ related the moment surprise was lost: “At 2 a.m. all quiet. No artillery fire: no machine-gun fire: two rifle shots: two yellow lights sent up”. A second telephone message, from the CO Divisional signals observing near Shute’s Canal Bank HQ, followed at 2:03 a.m.: “Two orange lights at Zero plus 3. At Zero plus 4 ½ first green light. More green lights followed at Zero plus 5 ½. Apparent flashes of a few Boche guns at Zero plus 7. Our own guns started off almost all together at Zero plus 8”. The first telegraph report from 97 Brigade arrived at 2:22 a.m.: “HUNT started 1:55 a.m.”<sup>553</sup> Rifle and machine-gun fire heavy before Zero plus 8. No Boche artillery fire before Zero plus 8”. More messages would follow before the situation was understood:

Various reports<sup>554</sup> reached divisional headquarters between  
between Zero and 3:55 a.m., the general tenor of which was

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<sup>551</sup> See John Lee, ‘Command and Control in Battle: British Divisions on the Menin Road Ridge, 20 September 1917’, Gary Sheffield & Dan Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army’s Experience 1914-18* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), p. 137

<sup>552</sup> ‘Once the battle had commenced there was little enough the individual general could do to influence its course and conduct. The friction of war and the fragility of most available means of communication made the overall situation complex and difficult and it was only by inculcating these standard procedures and battle drills that the British generals could commit their troops to battle with confidence’. Ibid. p. 139.

<sup>553</sup> ‘HUNT’ was the designated code name for the night operation. Application of some sort of simple substitution code with alternative operational activity (‘HUNT’) and formation/unit (YAWL: II Corps, ELDER: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, PRISIM: 97 Brigade, PRINT: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, etc.) references prevented awareness of intent and unit identifications from being obtained by German ‘Moritz II’ telephone listening sets and wireless intercept stations. For the development and use of listening apparatus and wireless interception technology by the British and German armies see Michael Occlshaw, *Armour Against Fate: British Military Intelligence in the First World War* (London: Columbus Books, 1989), pp. 113-14, 119-22, John Ferris, *The British Army and Signals Intelligence During the First World War* (Stroud: Allen Sutton & Army Records Society, 1992), pp. 13-16 and James Beach, ‘British Intelligence and the German Army, 1914-1918’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis. London: University College, 2004), pp. 80-86.

<sup>554</sup> For example, 14 Brigade observers, situated on Bellevue Spur, reported in a telephone message timed 3:20 a.m.: ‘Z[ero] plus 17 – All enemy lights going up further back’; ‘Zero plus 18 – Enemy barrage increased and carried to our back area’; ‘Zero plus 22 – Light shelling of BELLEVUE Road and Ridge and GOUDBERG Valley’; ‘Zero plus 26 – Enemy barrage thickened’; ‘Zero plus 28 – ‘Enemy shelling MOSSELMARKT – MEETCHEELE and BELLEVUE Ridge’; ‘Zero plus 29 – Enemy searchlights playing from WESTROOSEBEKE’.

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(a) That heavy machine-gun fire had been opened by the enemy at Zero plus 7. (b) That the enemy's artillery barrage had opened at Zero plus 12, but was not severe and was mostly behind our own frontline on the general line VINE COTTAGE – VALOUR FARM. At 3:30 a.m., an SOS was reported from the direction of Hill 52.<sup>555</sup>

News concerning the assault's actual progress remained scanty until 3:55 a.m. The situation by that time, Shute and his staff would shortly discover, had gone from bad to worse.<sup>556</sup>

On 25 Brigade's front, two platoons (one each from 'B' and 'D' companies) of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire carried on the fierce struggle to maintain their tenuous hold in Southern Redoubt. Hand grenades, flying to and fro in the darkness, detonated with sharp reports as small parties of bombers and riflemen, trampling on the dead and dying as they moved along trough-like depressions that made up the oblong bastion, engaged each other in close quarter combat.<sup>557</sup> "The enemy", Lieutenant-Colonel C.R.H. Stirling (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire) wrote afterward, "lost a great many casualties to bayonet and bomb, but we, unfortunately, also lost many men including the platoon [engaged in the redoubt] commander".<sup>558</sup> Sustained losses, coupled with lack of support from 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton's divergent platoon, resulted in remnants of both companies gradually giving way, under a deluge of hurled stick bombs, to increased pressure from elements of *IR116*. A final position was eventually established "close to the SW front of the redoubt where they

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<sup>555</sup> See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', p. 9 and 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>556</sup> A 3:55 a.m. report related that 17<sup>th</sup> HLI 'had not yet captured' the first objective. See IWM 4273: 'Summary of the Attack of the 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. and 2 Battalions of the 96<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. on December 2 [1917]', Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>557</sup> See Appendix 16, Part B (para. 15).

<sup>558</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary.

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dug in”.<sup>559</sup> The withdrawal “exposed the left of ‘D’ company; but our troops there succeeded in maintaining themselves nonetheless and repelled minor attacks by which the enemy attempted to dislodge them”.<sup>560</sup> Meanwhile, to the left of Southern Redoubt, Upton’s platoon had “captured a portion of the [Venison] Trench connecting the Northern and Southern redoubts killing Germans and capturing three MGs”. This part of the objective, originally assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire, was held and consolidated despite the relinquishing of nearby gains inside Southern Redoubt.<sup>561</sup>

British inroads at the boundary between *IR116* and *IR117* brought forth the anticipated German response, as reserves in the immediate rear deployed with heavy loss under a sudden British artillery bombardment starting at Zero + 8.<sup>562</sup> Sketchy reports, dispatched under the confused conditions of a surprise night attack, also gave local *Kampftruppenkommandeurs (KTK)* cause for concern. Positions of tactical importance had been, as far as it was known, captured by an enemy who had demonstrated, since Sir Herbert Plumer’s first great push on 20 September, exceptional ability when seizing and holding objectives in the aftermath of limited objective set-piece attacks. The likely outcome, based on previous costly experience, was far from satisfactory: German counter-attack troops, advancing through a morass of shell holes under a devastating artillery protective barrage, could expect to encounter steady machine-gun and rifle fire from newly entrenched British infantry. Moving uphill over broken, boggy ground in the

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid.

<sup>560</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid and Lieutenant Colonel J.H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, *The Eighth Division: 1914-1918* (London: Naval & Military Press reprint of 1926 edition), p. 166.

<sup>562</sup> See Appendix 16, Part B (paras. 15 and 16) and Part C (paras. 12 and 13).

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dark made the task even more difficult. Indeed, as *Hauptmann* Kurt Offenbacher, regimental historian of *IR117*, later acknowledged: “Only two groups eventually reached the breach. Further resistance was hopeless; defending the remaining ground was all that could be hoped for”.<sup>563</sup>

News of the surprise night attack had last reached Brigadier-General Aspinall (undergoing his first test as BGGs VIII Corps) at 2:07 a.m. The intervening hours that followed must have seemed like an eternity to those awaiting the result at Corps HQ. Novelist Compton Mackenzie recalled a similar interminable waiting period at Sir Ian Hamilton’s MEF HQ on the night (6-7 August 1915) of the Suvla Bay landings when he discovered a pensive Aspinall “after giving moustaches and beards to all the ladies in the weekly illustrated papers was now drawing wooden lady after wooden lady of his own invention on sheets of foolscap”.<sup>564</sup> A fairly inconclusive telegraph message, concerning the observed SOS signal near Goudberg and the slackening of enemy fire opposite 25 Brigade, from 8<sup>th</sup> Division arrived at VIII Corps HQ at 4:22 a.m. Another message, telegraphed by the gunners, was received eighteen minutes later: “Report from 8<sup>th</sup> Divisional Artillery – Message from BELLEVUE timed 3.5 a.m. – aaa “Attack progressing favourably”. At 5:30 a.m. 8<sup>th</sup> Division reported: “Situation report aaa No definite news but attack believed to have made some progress aaa Liaison officer reports wounded state Southern Redoubt was captured and that hostile barrage fall at Zero + 9 on VINDICTIVE X Roads – PASSCHENDAELE Road afterwards shortening to Southern Redoubt”. A fourth report was received from 8<sup>th</sup> Division at 6:50 a.m.: “Situation Report

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<sup>563</sup> Hauptmann Kurt Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin (3. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1931), p. 195.

<sup>564</sup> Compton Mackenzie, *Gallipoli Memories* (London: Cassell & Company, 1929), pp. 370-71.

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aaa Enemy artillery more active than usual [,] particularly on tracks aaa No definite information from left [32<sup>nd</sup>] Division on operations aaa State enemy barrage came down 9 minutes after zero and [97 Brigade] attack believed to have made progress”. Sunrise was one hour and seventeen minutes away when II Corps telegraphed what was known about 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s situation: “Assembly for attack carried out satisfactorily with few casualties aaa Assault launched at 1:55 a.m. aaa Hostile M.G. fire opened 2.1 a.m. and artillery barrage about 2.7 a.m. aaa Attack held up in several places by M.G. fire but now apparently proceeding satisfactorily aaa Information still indefinite”.<sup>565</sup>

The first report concerning actual progress by the infantry reached 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ at 3:55 a.m.<sup>566</sup> The message, “timed 3:33 a.m. from 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade”, imparted, “that the right of No. 4 Battalion (17<sup>th</sup> HLI) was held up by machine-gun fire and that the enemy was offering considerable resistance”. At 4:00 a.m. a liaison officer with 14 Brigade reported a worrying German counter-attack on the left flank: “Otherwise all going well”. This was immediately followed by a query from Major-General Shute’s HQ to the Divisional BGRA (Brigadier-General J.A. Tyler): “Above message read. Have you had that? They [batteries] have been asked by 97 Bde. to stop firing on the SOS lines on the left as counter-attack had been beaten off”. Over a dozen more telephone and

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<sup>565</sup> BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

<sup>566</sup> Visual signalling efforts, Major Eveleigh (CO 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Signal School) subsequently observed, ‘worked very successfully both with RFA and battalions backward, but from companies to battalions apparently not attempted and it is believed that in cases the Lucas Lamps were left behind by the company signallers, although they were the only portable means to communicate except runners. The latter organised on a ‘relay system with relay posts and linesmen’s posts coinciding as far as possible’ proved ‘extremely reliable if somewhat slow form of communication’. Few messages were dispatched by pigeon, but ‘those that were arrived in good time, except in the case of some units which tried to fly them during the hours of darkness’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report: ‘Appendix ‘I’: Communications’, December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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telegraph messages concerning the progress of the attack from various (FOO, RE, interviewed wounded, etc.) were exchanged during the next forty-six minutes. News about the situation at Hill 52 was confirmed at 4:59 a.m., when 97 Brigade telephoned to report the situation as related by a previously quoted eyewitness:

Wounded RE officer [Lieutenant Spottiswoode] left HILL 52 between 2:30 a.m. and 3 a.m. after having planned a strongpoint there. He marked out trench for the strongpoint and left the [2<sup>nd</sup>] K.O.Y.L.I. at work on this trench and others [.] [They?] had gone past towards their objective and as far as he could tell [.] thought they would get on it. He also came across some of the 16<sup>th</sup> HLI.

This heartening disclosure, based on the observations of an injured sapper almost three hours after Zero, would later prove to be sadly out of date.<sup>567</sup>

Severe enfilade machine-gun fire hampered efforts by 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI to consolidate Hill 52. A continuous hail of bullets rained down from Venison Trench, opposite which the neighbouring 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade had gone to ground following a bloody repulse just 100 yards beyond the jumping-off tape, on to 'D' and 'B' companies and attached sappers of 219<sup>th</sup> Field Company RE. Captain J. Hassell (OC 'B' Company), in command of mixed remnants on the key promontory, did his best to ensure the position was made secure against counter-attack from his newly-established HQ trench: "2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Corcoran here joined him with the remains of his platoon, reporting that he had got to the objective, two pillboxes (V.24.c.5.0 ½) and had been driven back by superior numbers". Hassell, fearing an imminent German riposte, placed all available elements from the other three companies under Corcoran and "ordered him to again advance and take the two

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<sup>567</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. See fn. 509.

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pillboxes. In the meantime, consolidation was taking place [on the hill] at V.30.a.5.7. The Royal Engineer officer was wounded during the advance, but work was carried on by his men”.<sup>568</sup>

2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Corcoran’s advance had not progressed very far before it encountered the first local counter-attack at 3:30 a.m.<sup>569</sup> Files and blobs of *Feldgrau* clad troops, wearing the distinctive ‘coal scuttle’ steel helmet, were distinguished moving across the multitude of shell holes in the crepuscular half-light before dawn. This was too much for the exhausted and almost leaderless British infantry. Picks and shovels were downed as groups of overwrought men made their way to the rear. Captain Hassell did what he could to rally them, but the rot had set in:

At this time a counter-attack on a large scale appeared to develop to his front with the result that the troops of the [2<sup>nd</sup>] Yorkshire Light Infantry and [16<sup>th</sup>] Highland Light Infantry and [11<sup>th</sup>] Border Regiment passed through his line of consolidation, carrying his own men with them. He was unable to rest the retirement until the ‘jumping-off’ tape line was reached. He here re-organised the men and discovered they consisted of every battalion of the [97] Brigade except the 17<sup>th</sup> High[land] L.I. He attempted to get them to advance again but, failing in this, he distributed the men along a line and consolidated ... This line was held until daybreak.

Sergeant Horne (‘D’ Company) and his small party, while still labouring to consolidate advanced positions 80 yards beyond the two resisting pillboxes, had been forced back

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<sup>568</sup> Ibid: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, 11 December 1917, p. 10 and TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

<sup>569</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Corcoran (age unknown) was killed sometime afterward. He is buried in Duhallow ADS cemetery.

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with several casualties. “He withdrew his party to a trench in rear where he found three officers and twenty other ranks of the [16<sup>th</sup>] High. L.I. ...”<sup>570</sup>

In the meantime, at 5:25 a.m. 97 Brigade reported that 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment had “occupied Mallet Copse and formed a defensive flank towards VEAL COTTAGES where the advance of 17<sup>th</sup> HLI had been checked by heavy machine-gun fire”, while 15<sup>th</sup> LF had “secured their objective”. Stokes mortars, it was also related, had been dispatched under the personal command of Lieutenant-Colonel J. Inglis “to deal with VEAL COTTAGES and to assist in the advance of 17<sup>th</sup> HLI”. The situation at that time, as far as it was known at 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ, was as follows:

The Right Battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI) was in position on Hill 52 and consolidating.

No. 3 Battalion (11<sup>th</sup> Border Regt.) and No. 5 Battalion (15<sup>th</sup> Lanc. Fusiliers) had secured their objectives.

The advance of No. 4 Battalion (17<sup>th</sup> HLI), however, seemed to be definitely checked by machine-gun fire from VEAL COTTAGES.

The situation of No. 2 Battalion (16<sup>th</sup> HLI) was unknown.

Major-General Shute, recently apprised of the situation and still certain of the positive reports about Hill 52, now fixed his focus elsewhere. He quickly recognised that a dangerous gap (formed by the failure of the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI to get forward) had developed between the 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 15<sup>th</sup> LF. A telegraph message, forwarded to 97 Brigade at 5:30 a.m., attempted to get the stalled attack of the centre left battalion going again: “Instruct 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regt. and 15<sup>th</sup> LF to join hands on [final] objective of 17<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary. The attached sappers of 219<sup>th</sup> Field Company RE, their work complete, had already departed by the time of the German riposte. See fn. 509.

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HLI else garrison at VEAL COTTAGES will escape. Remaining companies of 17<sup>th</sup> HLI should also work around VEAL COTTAGES”.<sup>571</sup>

A profusion of back and forth reports and queries continued to keep 32<sup>nd</sup> Division signals office busy in the hours after the dispatch of the 5:30 a.m. message to 97 Brigade. At 7:10 a.m., seventeen minutes before sunrise, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ discussed possible artillery targets and the general situation with 97 Brigade:

[Div. HQ] Are you being bothered from VALUATION HOUSES or MALLET WOOD? The Divisional Commander wants to know if Genl. BLACKLOCK would like an artillery concentration on either or both.

[97 Bde] Genl. BLACKLOCK would like to wait until he gets more news before he decides that question. 3 companies of 15<sup>th</sup> Lancs. Fus. are on their objective. 17<sup>th</sup> HLI held up at VEAL COTTAGES. Borders 100 yards other side of MALLET COPSE. No. 1 [2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI] had got TEALL COTTAGE about Hill 52. Nothing known about No. 2 [16<sup>th</sup> HLI] Battalion. Up to 4:30 [a.m.] no message from them. You know they were 300 yards from their starting point.

A telegraph message from II Corps intelligence (“Mr MONTGOMERY”) arrived while this telephone conversation was in progress: “4 prisoners 95 I.R. 5<sup>th</sup> Coy. captured in enemy frontline. Spot unknown but prisoner past to the east of VELDT FARM on the way to the trenches. Order of battle east to west 94, 95, 96 I.Rs. States attack was a surprise. Orders to hold frontline”. One more message passed through the divisional signal office before daybreak: “Wire timed 7:15 a.m. from CRA. Situation normal”.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, pp. 9-10 and ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>572</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Major-General Shute's vaunted night attack scheme appeared, if received reports were correct, to have achieved some success. His 32<sup>nd</sup> Division had, it seemed, gained most of its final red line objective. No doubt the planned pincer movement, to be carried out by 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 15<sup>th</sup> LF, would cut-off and overwhelm the strongpoints holding up 17<sup>th</sup> HLI. Nothing yet had been heard from 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI were, it was still believed, firmly established on Hill 52 at first light.

### 4.2 Dawn

Sunday 2 December 7:27 a.m.: Sunrise heralded a fine day with strong 20 to 30 mph westerly and NW winds. Both RE 8 two-seater contact aircraft, scheduled to be airborne over the attack area by 7:30 a.m., remained grounded at the aerodromes of No. 7 and No. 21 corps squadrons due to the rough – “a strong gusty wind” – local atmospheric conditions.<sup>573</sup> A fighter pilot of No. 65 Squadron, struggling through a “perfectly shrieking wind” whilst on offensive patrol later that morning, encountered no enemy aircraft, “hardly any ‘Archies’ no MG – no signs of a push”.<sup>574</sup> Visibility remained fair under a relatively clear sky. The weather continued to be “very cold throughout the day. A little snow fell in the early morning”. An artillery officer, stationed westward near the Steenbeek, noticed hard frost in the emerging forenoon light: “All the water in the crump holes was frozen over and a bitter north wind was blowing”.<sup>575</sup> To the east, remnants of

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<sup>573</sup> TNA: WO/95/15: ‘Weather Diary, December 1917’, GHQ War Diary and BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

<sup>574</sup> Christopher M. Burgess (ed), *The Diary and Letters of a World War I Fighter Pilot: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Guy Mainwaring Knocker's accounts of his experiences in 1917-1918 while serving in the RFC/RAF* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008), p. 97.

<sup>575</sup> BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front,

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eight battalions remained alert to anticipated German counter-attacks while consolidating a ragged front. Heavy casualties among officers and NCOs deprived these units of leadership when it was most needed. The general view from new positions, relative to depth of advance, after dawn varied: a dreary, pockmarked expanse opposite Exert Farm; due east to the near edge of sloping dead ground from a captured portion of Venison Trench; north and NW into low-lying ground opposite Poelcappelle from the western extremity of Vat Cottage Ridge or, by comparison, more limited vistas – the next shell hole, bomb stop, nearby trench, pillbox, gun pit or spinney – in sectors where the surprise night attack failed to make significant headway. Irregular rifle and machine-gun fire, along with desultory rifle grenade and shell bursts, echoed across the raw shambolic wilderness. Seemingly random individual figures and remote groups or columns, taking belated advantage of the rapidly fading darkness, dashed from shell hole to shell hole or plodded slowly along some distant skyline. Such activity, when within range, brought forth an immediate response from snipers or artillery. Other figures, torn, riddled and lying in heaps or half in and out of the numerous craters, added to the already desolate scene. Overall, a nauseating stench of rotting, sodden battle detritus, blood and poisoned earth combined with a sickly odour of cordite and high explosive pervaded the frigid atmosphere.

### 4.3 25 Brigade

Four more situation reports (two telegraph and two telephone) were received at VIII Corps HQ between 6:45 and 7:45 a.m.: “6:45 a.m. from I.O. 8<sup>th</sup> Division (Thro’ ‘I’ 8<sup>th</sup>

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November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers and Lieutenant-Colonel H.M. Davson, *Memoirs of the Great War* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1964), p. 113.

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Corps). 4 prisoners 94<sup>th</sup> I.R. captured by left [32<sup>nd</sup>] Division aaa Relieved 357 [IR] last night aaa 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion in line reinforced by 3 coys. 1<sup>st</sup> Bn”; “6:55 a.m. from Second Army. Morning Report aaa 8<sup>th</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> ANZAC corps report situation unchanged aaa Our troops attacked north of PASSCHENDAELE this morning aaa Attack believed to be proceeding satisfactorily”; “7:40 a.m. from 21<sup>st</sup> Squadron RFC (telephone). Too rough to get up at present. Will go out as soon as it is possible”; “7:45 a.m. from 8<sup>th</sup> Division (telephone). No more information than that already sent in. Have told [25] Brigade to send in report on situation”. News, reasonably accurate as it turned out, of 25 Brigade’s plight finally arrived at 8:00 and 8:20 a.m.: “Following from 25<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. aaa Verbal message timed 6:20 a.m. One coy. left battalion held up in front of Vension Trench aaa Left of centre battalion believed to have been held up”; “6:20 a.m. 8<sup>th</sup> Division (Telephone). Situation aaa We have probably got the Southern Redoubt and a little of the trench north of it. Line probably runs through practice trenches to our original line. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division off Hill 52 and 8<sup>th</sup> Division believes out of TEALL COTTAGES [sic]. This is all presumption”. A telegraph from 8<sup>th</sup> Division, also received at 8:20 a.m., cast some doubt on the accuracy, as far as the contents concerned 25 Brigade, of the two previous updates: “Report timed 7:10 a.m. states aaa Enemy artillery fire very much increased during last half hour aaa Have asked for counter-battery aaa Impression aaa Left and centre move obscure and nothing received from them aaa Centre possibly successful aaa Left probably not”.<sup>576</sup>

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<sup>576</sup> BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

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At dawn troops on the right of Southern Redoubt (one platoon of ‘D’ Company 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire had dug in on the SE edge of the earthwork) “found themselves without officers and with their left flank in the air” (**Map 11**). Groups of German infantry could be discerned entering the abandoned redoubt round their left flank, “and after inflicting casualties on the enemy”, the hard-pressed Berkshire platoon withdrew “to gain touch with the troops [‘B’ Company] SW of the redoubt...” *IR116* had regained its lost bastion. Its postwar regimental historian subsequently observed: “Hard work was done and the line again in our possession at approximately 10:00 a.m. Enemy losses, dead and wounded, were great with twenty prisoners being left in our hands, but many good *Kamerads* on our side were missed”.<sup>577</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton’s platoon, still occupying a section of Venison Trench NW of Southern Redoubt, also engaged this counter-attack from the left. Galling fire from a strongpoint on their immediate left was “suppressed chiefly with rifle grenades”. The threat to both flanks, reduced state of his platoon and continued isolation worried Upton. A hurriedly scribbled message, dispatched by runner to Battalion HQ, spelled out their perilous position.<sup>578</sup>

At 8:00 a.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire), taking advantage of the slackening enemy bombardment on the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke Road, made his way to Lieutenant-Colonel N.M.S. Irwin’s (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire) Mosselmarkt HQ:

On my way I found a wounded orderly from ‘B’  
Co[mpan]y and got from him a message, timed 3:45 a.m.,

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<sup>577</sup> Hiss, *Infanterie-Regiment Kaiser Wilhelm (2.Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 116*, p. 158.

<sup>578</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary and WO/95/1929: ‘Appendix B’, 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary.

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saying that 'B' Coy. was in position and all was well. This was the first report I had received from an officer. On reaching MOSSELMARKT, OC 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolns told me that his Battalion and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade had not reached their objective. I therefore took advantage of the quietness [sic] then prevailing to go forward to try and ascertain the situation on my own front and got forward through an old outpost line to the [Venison] trench joining the two redoubts where I saw some of our stretcher-bearers at work. On approaching the trench, however, I found it occupied by the enemy.

Stirling, returning to his HQ around 10:00 a.m., was handed a message, which gave him “the impression that the enemy was working round my right”.<sup>579</sup> His response, considering what was known about the situation at the time, was immediate: “I, therefore, sent my support ['A'] coy, which had been much reduced by casualties from the heavy shellfire to work forward to cover my right at the same time warning the Lincolns and 1<sup>st</sup> R.I. Rifles of what I thought was going on”. At this point three incidents occurred: The OC 'A' Company, Battalion HQ would discover sometime later, was wounded while leading his men to the right; Stirling received the message from 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton “informing him of his isolated position & strength and that he was much worried from both flanks”; Captain Flint (CO 'C' Company) for whom Stirling had sent for, arrived at Battalion HQ to report that the right flank was “fairly established and in touch with 33<sup>rd</sup> Division”. The last two updates now made it clear that 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire's support company had been ordered to the wrong part of the line.<sup>580</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Irwin had not received any reports about his Battalion's progress since the hour before dawn:

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<sup>579</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

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Owing to officer casualties<sup>581</sup> the first report received by me was in reply to a message I had sent forward. This was received around 6:20 a.m. and said that our advance had gone through the outpost line and had dug in 30 yards from enemy main trench. At 8:00 a.m. I sent up an officer to reconnoitre who confirmed above report & stated that advanced line was successfully dug in with left post near road (on left of Battalion front) in touch with RIFLE BRIGADE [,] but the connection with [2<sup>nd</sup>] Berkshire on our right was uncertain.

Irwin, therefore, remained unaware that 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton's beleaguered platoon was in front of his right occupying part of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire's assigned objective in Venison Trench. At 10:00 a.m. he was informed "that all officers of assaulting companies were casualties", so he dispatched a junior officer from the reserve company "to take command and re-organise". A sniper later accounted for this unfortunate subaltern as he attempted to carry out his duties.<sup>582</sup>

On the left, surviving elements from 'A', 'B' and 'C' companies of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade clung to outposts consisting of three to six men each just 100 yards from their start line. The enemy's "attitude", the battalion adjutant (Lieutenant Anderson) noted, "was aggressive. Several attempts were made to raid our posts but these were driven off. There was also a considerable amount of bombing and rifle bombing from the enemy's

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<sup>581</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire officer casualties: Lieutenant R.H. Parker KIA; 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant B.W. Griffin DOW; 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants Eliot, Sowerby, Joyce, Groom, Green, Graves, Grant and Perkins wounded. 22-year-old Lieutenant Rupert Hardy Parker and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Basil Walker Griffin (age unknown) have no known grave and are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing. See Major-General C.R. Simpson, *The History of the Lincolnshire Regiment 1914-1918* (London: Medici Society, 1931), p. 284.

<sup>582</sup> TNA: WO/95/1730: 'Report on Action of Battn from 2:30 p.m. 1.12.17 – M.N. 2/3 .12. 17', 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary.

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forward posts”.<sup>583</sup> Lieutenant Nettleton, having done all that he could to organise some sort of coherent line, returned to the crowded HQ at Meetcheele before daybreak:

Back at Battalion HQ, however, we were out of sight of the enemy by eight o'clock. I was sent out to look for some more accommodation to relieve the congestion in and around our pillbox. I found another pillbox about two hundred yards down the road but it was choked with dead Germans. They must have been caught by the Canadians and bombed as they were trying to escape. We had to pull out more than a dozen corpses before we could get into it. However, when we got it cleared, it gave us room to sit down and have breakfast and, as there was nothing anyone could do outside, we passed the day in comparative peace. Only comparative though – there was shelling going on all the time and the Boche seemed to have got our pillbox taped. One shell hit the back wall of the pillbox and burst along the trench outside, causing several casualties. One man caught most of the blast and had one side of his body ripped to pieces. While the stretcher-bearers were trying to bandage him up, he was screaming and groaning, but not because of his terrible wounds. He had got a splinter in the foot away from the side that had been blasted and it appeared to have broken his toe and it was that he was groaning about. I suppose the side of his body that had been torn to bits was so numb that he did not realise what had happened. But it sounded odd to hear him crying, “Oh, my toe, oh my toe” when that was such a minor part of his injuries. Luckily we were able to evacuate him without having to wait for nightfall, but I don't think he can have survived.<sup>584</sup>

This horribly injured man, a victim of a waning, but still deadly German bombardment, was one of the many wounded who were fortunate enough to be removed from the battlefield during an almost routine, albeit short-lived, period of joint co-operation between enemies.

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<sup>583</sup> TNA: WO/95/1731: ‘Report of the part played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn. The Rifle Brigade in the Operations at Passchendaele’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary.

<sup>584</sup> John Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns: An Infantry Officer on the Western Front* (London: William Kimber, 1979), p. 118-19.

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Published German regimental accounts often speak of the mutually recognised *Sanitätspause* (cease-fire to allow the collecting of the dead and wounded.) with their British opponents. A German officer wrote of an earlier arrangement the previous November near Passchendaele: “Only between 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m., the so-called ‘medical pause,’ could I get around the sector without difficulty. This was the time when both sides observed the unwritten rule that there would be no firing to permit the recovery of the wounded”.<sup>585</sup> Identical activity commenced on 25 Brigade’s front one half hour after dawn: “At about 8 a.m. stretcher parties of both sides were at work and the shelling, which had, up to that time, been heavy; slackened somewhat”.<sup>586</sup> Red Cross flags and armbands, white handkerchiefs attached to sticks and other overt displays were sufficient to communicate the intentions of medical personnel and stretcher parties to both sides. Even the garrison of Teall Cottage, just beyond the left flank where similar mutual succour of casualties occurred opposite 97 Brigade, held their fire:

The team working that machine-gun in Teall Cottage allowed wounded men to be brought in so long as stretcher-bearers did not get too near the post. At the same time they could see the encouraging spectacle of their own countrymen going through our lines as prisoners. The latter were in sad condition; their morale was gone: but the machine-gunners in Teall Cottage were in rare form!<sup>587</sup>

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<sup>585</sup> Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007), p. 292.

<sup>586</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>587</sup> Captain C.H. Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Council of the Newcastle and Gateshead Incorporated Chamber of Commerce, 1923) p. 89. *IR94*’s regimental history notes: ‘English medical personnel arrived around 9:00 a.m. [German time]. Efforts to recover their dead and wounded were observed at many places before our line. 4<sup>th</sup> Company removed the remaining English dead and wounded from the *Vorfeldzonelinie* The sector of the neighbouring regiment was cleared of the remaining English with the assistance of 4<sup>th</sup> Company during the afternoon’. See Alexander von Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Verlag von Klasing & Co., 1921), pp. 237-38.

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Wounded were carried on litters to the nearest RAP, where they were treated and sent down the line as rapidly as possible under sporadic shellfire. One regimental medical officer (Captain A. Cowe of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire) was killed while carrying out his duties.<sup>588</sup>

Brigadier-General Coffin was pessimistic about continuing the attack on the centre and left of 25 Brigade's front. This grim forecast, passed on to 8<sup>th</sup> Division HQ for consideration, was based on direct observation from Mosselmarkt and subsequent consultations with Lieutenant-Colonel Irwin and Lieutenant Anderson (acting CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade). Northern Redoubt, the GOC 25 Brigade observed, could only be attacked in conjunction with an attack on Teall Cottage. This "required fresh troops as those now engaged have had considerable losses particularly in officers". Forming-up would "have to be at night", as the jumping-off positions were in full view of the enemy. A daylight attack, he also observed, appeared to be "difficult and hazardous".<sup>589</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling, now aware his reserve company had been dispatched to the wrong place, became concerned about the *Sanitätspause* still in progress: "At this time [10:00 a.m.] I sent out orders to all [company] commanders to stop the enemy's stretcher-bearers from moving in the open, as they appeared to be taking advantage of their freedom to approach our line".<sup>590</sup> *IR117's* regimental history provides evidence that his suspicions were correct:

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<sup>588</sup> See Simpson, *The History of the Lincolnshire Regiment 1914-1918*, p. 89. 28-year-old Captain Archibald Cowe RAMC has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

<sup>589</sup> BL: 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

<sup>590</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary.

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The morning came, and with it, unbelievable behaviour by the English. Troops of *Sanitäts Komp. 45* assisted with bandaging and cared for our own and the enemy wounded. English stretcher-bearers also provided aid. Our *Sanitäts* helpers discovered there were approximately 150 English in the vicinity of the breach, and altogether about 600 between and behind their own position. There was no reaction, despite considerable local superiority, when *Gef. Speiz* (9<sup>th</sup> Company) led eight prisoners away.<sup>591</sup>

The situation could not continue. Brigadier-General Coffin noted the swift retribution that followed: “At one time the enemy, under cover of a Red Cross flag, sent a large body out to try and reconnoitre our positions. This effort was treated as it deserved to be”.<sup>592</sup>

For the Germans, the situation at the breach had gone from seemingly “hopeless” to hopeful, as three companies of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire, unaware of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton’s hard-pressed platoon in front, remained in position just 30 yards from Venison Trench. Fierce enemy resistance, consequent confusion and heavy losses amongst officers and NCOs contributed to collective weariness and inactivity – “unbelievable behaviour by the English” – despite their almost overwhelming local superiority. *IR117’s Kampftruppenkommandeur* immediately recognised the opportunity to exploit British lassitude: “*Hauptmann* von Arnim now realised he only had 80 to 90 rifles, 10 machine-guns, with limited supplies of ammunition, available. The enemy, however, appeared to lack will to continue the struggle. He left *Vzfw. Woeste* (2<sup>nd</sup> Company) in charge as he raced to the rear to organise a systematic counter-attack”.<sup>593</sup> *Woeste* then observed

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<sup>591</sup>Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin* (3.Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117, p. 196.

<sup>592</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>593</sup>Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin* (3.Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117, p. 196. See Appendix 16, Part C (para. 15).

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IR116's effort to recapture Southern Redoubt. "He seized this moment to order an all-out attack" at 12:00 p.m. (German time). "Taking prisoners as the English hurriedly withdrew, the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* was reached and contact made" with previously isolated elements of 9<sup>th</sup> Company.<sup>594</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling, now certain his right flank was secure, gave orders to withdraw 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire's misdirected support company and sent off Captain Flint "to find out the situation on the left".<sup>595</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Irwin, in an attempt to clarify the situation on his right, "went round to the OC [2<sup>nd</sup>] Berkshires", who, having received 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton's written message, related that "he had a post reported in enemy trench in advance of my right one near road about W.25.c.2.3. This meant a gap of about 150 yards. This [,] however [,] was covered by the original [Lincolnshire] outpost in rear". Stirling's account of this meeting, which took place at approximately 11:30 a.m., noted: "OC 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolns arrived at my HQ and informed me that he had definitely established that his B[attalion] was dug in close up to the German trench between the two redoubts. He [Irwin] awaited [sic] until Captain Flint returned about 12:30 p.m. with the report that the Lieutenant [Upton] was in command of elements of B, C & D coys. dug in near the southern and south-western edges of Southern redoubt". Stirling then informed Irwin that he planned to withdraw Upton's isolated Venison Trench outpost after dark in order to "fill up the gap between our two battalions". Runners were dispatched with

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<sup>594</sup> Ibid.

<sup>595</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary. Concern about the security of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire's right flank re-emerged in a message to 8<sup>th</sup> Division HQ from Brigadier-General Coffin: 'Following from 25<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. Timed 11:38 a.m. aaa Enemy trying to work round right flank of 2<sup>nd</sup> R. Berks (right Battn) aaa Have asked for SOS [barrage] on zones U and V'. See BL: 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

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orders for the eventual retirement not long afterward. Half past twelve also heralded an intensified bombardment by German batteries. Hostile shells pounded 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire's pillbox HQ (situated along the Passchendaele – Wetroosebeke Road just north of Passchendaele village) for the next three hours and forty minutes; no more information was received from the frontline. "I was", Stirling wrote later, "also unable to send out any further orders or reconnaissance farther".<sup>596</sup>

Meanwhile, wireless intercept stations dispatched their findings with surprising alacrity to Corps' 'I' sections, which, in turn, passed on the information to VIII and II corps HQ. Some idea of the German predicament was thus discerned, although the immediate value of such intelligence was, to a certain extent, limited.<sup>597</sup> Three recent intercepts crossed Captain Eric Chaplin's (ADC to Lieutenant-General Hunter-Weston) desk at VIII Corps HQ between 8:30 and 11:00 a.m.; the enemy, their contents inferred, appeared to be undergoing a serious ordeal: "8:30 a.m. Second Army 'I' (Through 8<sup>th</sup> Corps I). Group 200 two messages from GC to NZ aaa First message reads aaa *Sofort reserve Kompagnie dem b verfurgung stellen* aaa German time of message 8:10 a.m. aaa Second message reads aaa *STAB 94 und dritte Kompagnie im marsch zum b* rest of message jammed out aaa German time of message 7:00 a.m."; "10:30 a.m. WIO Bar (Thro' 8<sup>th</sup> Corps I). Group 200 sends *IN VORDERE LINIE MUNITION ERFORDERLICH*"; "11:00 a.m. WIO BAR (Thro' 8<sup>th</sup> Corps I) Group 200 sends Coy.

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<sup>596</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary and WO/95/1730: 'Report on Action of Battn from 2:30 p.m. 1.12.17 – M.N. 2/3 .12. 17', 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary. Two pigeon messages, relating the 12:30 p.m. heightening of the German bombardment, were sent off by the artillery liaison officer attached to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire HQ. The pigeon loft recorded the dispatched bird's arrival at 3:40 p.m. See original message forms found in TNA: WO/95/1677: 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>597</sup> The primary drawback was due to the 'fact that the Germans normally used wireless only for communication of immediate, and therefore, perishable messages from Army headquarters downwards'. See Beach, 'British Intelligence and the German Army, 1914-1918', p. 87.

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Commander 12<sup>th</sup> Coy. reports 5 wounded 9<sup>th</sup> Coy. not yet returned up to the present 7 wounded aaa Group 205 sends 2<sup>nd</sup> Coy. Commander wounded Bn. Commander wounded, present frontline Company Commander killed. Group 205 sends troop has advanced as far as line GH K F – 41”.<sup>598</sup>

More conventional communication channels (from neighbouring corps and divisional HQs, attached divisional HQs, corps sub-sections, observers, etc.) supplied VIII Corps with additional telegram and telephone messages between 9:00 a.m. and noon. The general situation, despite the grounding of aerial contact patrols, was becoming steadily clearer to Lieutenant-General Hunter-Weston’s staff: “9:00 a.m. From 21<sup>st</sup> Sqd. RFC (telephone). Two machines doing [artillery] flash reconnaissance. Still too rough for contact patrol”; “9:10 a.m. from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps. Corps observers report a lot of movement is taking place around VALUATION HOUSES V.24.a.1.6 as if to meet an attack on Hill 50”; “9:30 a.m. from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps ‘I’ (Thro’ 8<sup>th</sup> Corps I) 4 prisoners 94<sup>th</sup> I.R. captured near VOX FARM [,] 3 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Coy. and 1 of the 12<sup>th</sup> Coy. state 12<sup>th</sup> Coy. 94<sup>th</sup> I.R. relieved 237<sup>th</sup> Regt. [199<sup>th</sup> Division] in frontline on 29<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> [November] aaa They mention 133<sup>rd</sup> I.R. as being in ROULERS. This is not confirmed”; “10:30 a.m. from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps ‘I’ (Thro’ 8<sup>th</sup> Corps I) Wind too puffy for contact patrols but situation appears to be that we hold [Southern] redoubt in W.25.c and about 100 yards of [Venison] trench running N.W. aaa Our [8<sup>th</sup> Division] line apparently runs through practice trenches in V.30.b to original jumping-off line near Teall Cottages”; “10:40 a.m. from 8<sup>th</sup> Division. Following from 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade aaa Line now runs all objectives on right to

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<sup>598</sup> See BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

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W.25.a.15.30. 150 yards approximately S.E. of Northern Redoubt thence Teall Cot. exclusive”.<sup>599</sup> At 11:00 a.m. 8<sup>th</sup> Division notified VIII Corps of Brigadier-General Coffin’s reservations about continuing the operation on the left and centre of 25 Brigade. Major-General Heneker added that he concurred with his subordinate’s views. Another telegraph message (received at 11:15 a.m.) from II Corps recounted more unsatisfactory news from the left:

Situation appears that we [32<sup>nd</sup> Division] hold line from Teall Cott. to VOID FARM exclusive [,] southern edge of MALLET COPSE – VEAL COTTAGES exclusive – V.23.c.0.3 – V.22.d.8.0. [objective assigned to 15<sup>th</sup> LF] – to old frontline at V.28.b.5.4. aaa We captured Hill 52 but heavy enfilade fire from VENISON TRENCH and a counter-attack from NE drove us back aaa Measures are being taken to recapture Hill 52.

No advance by nearby *Eingreifdivisionen* had been detected since mid-morning: “Noon from [Second] Army Report Centre. No troop movement of parties larger than 10 seen in WESTROOSEBEKE area and 2 miles east of it. This message was dropped from an aeroplane, timed 10 a.m.”.<sup>600</sup> The German defenders, it could be reasonably surmised, were still relying on local reserves to contain the British attack.

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<sup>599</sup> Ibid.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid. This aircraft had, before jettisoning the message over Second Army Report Centre, probably been on offensive patrol or flash-spotting duty, as specially designated RE 8 contact machines from both (No. 7 and 21) corps squadrons were still grounded by strong winds.



**Plate 4.2 Lieutenant-General Sir Alymer Hunter-Weston  
with GOC 33<sup>rd</sup> Division Major-General R.J. Pinney  
(Source: IWM Q6543)**

#### **4.4 97 Brigade**

Thirty-five minutes (7:10 to 7:45 a.m.) passed before Major-General Shute learned about the loss of Hill 52. His immediate concern was focused on the artillery's ability to engage Valuation Houses, "where considerable movement of the enemy was reported", and the troublesome centre of resistance at Mallet Wood: "7:20 a.m. Verbal. To Div. Arty. [Div. HQ] What are the heavies doing now? [Reply] They are doing harassing fire as usual. [Div. HQ] What are the field artillery doing now? [Reply] They are not firing at all. [Div. HQ] The field artillery are to put a good heavy concentration on to VALUATION HOUSES and MALLET WOOD"; "7:35 a.m. Verbal. To CRA. At 7:30 a.m. artillery ordered to have a heavy concentration on VALUATION HOUSES and MALLET WOOD". Mallet Wood, the CRA responded one minute later, "is within [our] SOS lines". Shute, not wanting to risk shelling his own men, then directed that the hornet's

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nest at Mallet Wood should be ignored while all field gun batteries were directed on to Valuation Houses.<sup>601</sup>

Brigadier-General Blacklock telephoned with unpalatable news at 7:45 a.m.: “GOC 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade telephones that they have been driven out of TEALL COTTAGE and VEAL [COTTAGES] and HILL 52. The attack appears to be considerably disorganised and they are trying to rectify this”. Major-General Shute was unequivocal in his reply: “Absolutely necessary that TEALL COTTAGE and VEAL and HILL 52 should be regained.<sup>602</sup> Do this with your reserve Battalion assisted, if safety permits, by fire from your special battery<sup>603</sup> and Stokes mortars. Any more considerable barrage is impossible owing to your uncertainty as to the position of your troops”. The first phase of 97 Brigade’s attack had, except where the advance was held up at Teall Cottage and Vat cottages, reached or moved beyond the ‘200 yard’ or yellow line, which delineated the northern boundary of the *Vorfeldzonelinie*. This apparent half success could, Shute hoped, be followed up and the dire situation turned around by on-the-spot re-organisation of the five assault battalions and commitment of 16<sup>th</sup> NF (Blacklock’s sole reserve or ‘counter-attack counter-attack battalion’) from positions situated on the right of the Brigade front by Virile Farm.

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<sup>601</sup> See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, p. 10 and ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. At 7:45 a.m. II Corps Main Dressing Station also reported the arrival of 1 officer and 105 ORs wounded up to 7:00 a.m.; no German prisoners had been brought there up to that time.

<sup>602</sup> Veal Cottages was, of course, not even temporarily seized on 2 December.

<sup>603</sup> ‘Special battery’ as per O.O. No. 138 (27 November 1917): ‘The C.R.A. will detail an R.F.A battery commander to be attached to headquarters 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. This officer’s battery will, when required, be at the direct disposal of the G.O.C. 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Division Operation Order No. 138’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Survivors of 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, intermixed with stray elements of other battalions following the general retirement, remained in position along their original jump off line until after sunrise. At dawn, ‘A’ Company’s outposts, situated east of the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke Road, were kept under heavy, sustained machine-gun fire, which would continue throughout the day, from Venison Trench, while Sergeant Hayward (*de facto* commander of ‘C’ Company) “could see no one near him and only having seven men with him” withdrew his isolated outpost to the left rear and dug in. Captain Hassell, the last unwounded company officer, could only find twelve men from the battalion.<sup>604</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Lamotte gathered in eleven more men who he immediately placed, along with a Sergeant and six men from Battalion HQ, under Hassell’s command. Re-organisation commenced at 8:00 a.m., as the tireless Hassell “collected all the men of the Yorkshire Light Infantry in the area”. He eventually succeeded in arranging his reduced command into “three posts of ten in each under one Sergeant”. Two of the three posts included a Lewis Gun and formed the advance line of posts as far as Teall Cottage.<sup>605</sup>

“Pitifully thinned” elements of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI managed to retain a small salient east and west of the tactically important Void Farm throughout the remainder of the night.<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>604</sup> Officer casualties sustained by Captain Hassell’s ‘B’ Company, in addition to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Corcoran, were 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant A.W. Stark wounded and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant E. Cain missing. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Edward Cain (age unknown) has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

<sup>605</sup> Captain Hassell later observed: ‘At the time it was thought that only the twenty-three men found at dawn were survivors, but from later knowledge it is quite clear that the other men of the battalion got mixed-up with and assisted other units of the Brigade to hold the line retired to. No report was received from any detached party, notwithstanding that the sending of reports had received special training and emphasis during training out of the line’. TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

<sup>606</sup> Lieutenant Kerr 219<sup>th</sup> Field Company RE (see fn. 519), unable to ‘get in touch with anyone who could tell me the situation’, left Vox for Void Farm sometime after 2:30 a.m. Proceeding due north he encountered 3 ‘Borders’ and a ‘Captain Maddison’ (sic Captains Sandeman or Martin? See fn. 526) who was killed before he could be queried. The nonplused sapper subaltern, finding the situation at Void Farm ‘a bit muddled’, returned to discover Vox Farm in good state of defence, the men, who ‘wanted a bit of swearing’, eventually digging ‘right down 6’ in the trench’ before dawn. Kerr also claimed to have set out for 16<sup>th</sup> HLI HQ ‘about 1 hour after Zero’, but made no mention of arrival until sometime after 6:00 a.m. when he ‘reported to the Major [Scott] there, telling him exactly what I had done and asking him if he

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Exposed flanks on left and right halted any further movement beyond the dotted green line. Captain Alexander (CO 'C' Company), concerned about the open right flank, led what remained of 'A' and 'B' companies toward Teall Cottage where they dug in.<sup>607</sup> German reconnaissance aircraft were, as on 10 November, observed, "flying low over our positions, but there was little enemy artillery activity". Five officers and approximately seventy men were left, out of a pre-battle complement of twenty officers and 469 ORs, to defend newly won gains at the sharp end. Word of their positions and plight remained unknown at Division and Brigade HQs.<sup>608</sup>



**Plate 4.3 Captain J.A. Alexander**  
(Source: UGA Roll of Honour <<http://www.gla.ac.uk/honour/>>)

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wanted anything further'. He subsequently reported to 97 Brigade HQ (Kronprinz Farm) at 12:15 p.m. The Brigade Major, he added, 'did not know at the time we had VOX FARM'. See IWM 4723: 'STATEMENT BY LIEUT. KERR R.E.' Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>607</sup> This gallant officer subsequently vanished, 16<sup>th</sup> HLI's diarist noting: 'During this operation Captain Alexander was found to be missing. It is believed that he was caught by a shell while visiting the shell hole posts'. 37-year-old Captain James Alexander has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

<sup>608</sup> See TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary, WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary and Thomas Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland: History of the 16<sup>th</sup> The Highland Light Infantry-City of Glasgow Regiment* (Glasgow: John M'Callum & Co., 1930), pp. 110-11.

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Four depleted companies of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, two occupying the dotted green line intermediary objective and two (approximately 3 officers and 100 ORs) still clinging to the southern fringe of Mallet Copse, maintained their positions until just before sunrise, when unrelenting enfilade machine-gun fire and hostile infantry probes, the latter also supported by rifle and rifle grenade fusillades, from Mallet Wood forced back what was left of the leap-frogging companies. Worn survivors and walking wounded, retiring from the splintered, debris-strewn desolation of the copse, staggered back as far as the dotted green line, where they joined companies of the Battalion's first wave.<sup>609</sup>

Intense machine-gun fire from the wired and heavily garrisoned strongpoints at Vat and Veal cottages continued to hold up the advance of 17<sup>th</sup> HLI after dawn. Attempts to outflank these two centres of resistance only resulted in more casualties. "The Battalion hung on all night in its isolated positions, and orders were received that the attack would be resumed in the morning, but this order was afterwards cancelled". Dawn brought diminished shelling, "but enemy machine-gunners and snipers kept up a harassing fire from their well-established posts against our men in their exposed and isolated positions".<sup>610</sup>

On the left, three companies ('A', 'B' 'C'), supported by two platoons from the reserve ('D') company, of 15<sup>th</sup> LF maintained a left flank guard along the final red line

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<sup>609</sup> TNA: WO/95/2403: 11<sup>th</sup> Border War Diary and IWM 4723: Preliminary Report on Operations, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>610</sup> TNA: WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary and J.W. Arthur & I.S. Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry (Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Battalion): Record of War Service 1914-1918* (Glasgow: David J. Clark, 1920) p. 68.

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objective for 97 Brigade. “Things had not gone so well on the right. The 17<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry had been held up by German machine-gun fire and there was a risk of a dangerous gap occurring between the 15<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers and the 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment”. Major-General Shute’s 5:30 a.m. order for a pincer movement behind Vat and Veal cottages “proved to be impossible owing to continued machine-gun fire; and by 11:15 a.m., the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion had to bend its right flank back somewhat, so as to establish touch with the Highland Light Infantry and thus prevent enemy penetration”.<sup>611</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel A.J. Scully MC (CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF),<sup>612</sup> housed with his staff in a filthy, congested pillbox on the right of 97 Brigade front near Virile Farm, anxiously awaited word about the night operation.<sup>613</sup> His battalion, detached from 96 Brigade as reserve or ‘counter-attack counter-attack battalion’ remained stationary until 3:00 a.m., when, not having heard anything, “sections closed in on their Coys. ready to advance if called upon”. A message received from Lieutenant Ross (11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment) at 3:15 a.m. reported “he was just E[ast] of Mallet Copse”. At 5:30 a.m. it was reported “that the

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<sup>611</sup> TNA: WO/95/2397: 15<sup>th</sup> LF War Diary and Major-General J.C. Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes Vol. 1* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949). p. 277. Lieutenant-Colonel Utterson (CO 15<sup>th</sup> LF) attempted to retrieve the situation with his remaining reserves: ‘About 8-0 a.m. I went forward to ‘C’ [left] Company and finding there was a gap between ‘B’ [centre] and ‘D’ [support] companies [,] brought up one of ‘C’ company’s reserve platoons to reinforce ‘B’ Company and ordered OC ‘B’ Company to prolong his line to the right and to get in touch with the battalion [17<sup>th</sup> HLI] on his right and failing that with ‘D’ Company [,] with the object of preventing a counter-attack from Veal and Vat Cottages. I sent word to OC ‘D’ Company to detach two platoons to assist the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI in taking VEAL COTTAGES. By the time the message reached him he had only two platoons left and the attack on VEAL COTTAGES appeared to have failed. He accordingly did not attack’. See IWM 4723: ‘Narrative of Operations 2/3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917, 15<sup>th</sup> (S) Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers’, 4 December 1917. Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>612</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur John Scully (Manchester Regiment). Appointed CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF March 1917.

<sup>613</sup> Major Eveleigh (CO 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Signal School) subsequently remarked: ‘A Power Buzzer and Amplifier Station was established at VIRILE FARM in the frontline, but the power being forward [with the assaulting infantry] to work back to it did not reach their objective and so this means was not used’. The amplifier, however, worked throughout the day, overheard every single telephone conversation and message that was sent to KRONPRINZ [FARM] or forward of it’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report: ‘Appendix ‘I’: Communications’, December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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11<sup>th</sup> Border Regt. were [sic] holding the line just S[outh] of MALLET COPSE". The general situation, still unclear before dawn, led to the dispatch of two ("one SE and one to the SW of Mallet Copse") patrols to gain touch with the forward battalions. "By morning it was known that the 11<sup>th</sup> Bn. Border Regt. was digging in [south of Mallet Copse] some 400 or 500 [yards] in front, but they were not in touch with the Bns. on their flanks". An existing gap, approximately 100 yards on their left, appeared to be occupied by elements of 17<sup>th</sup> HLI. On the right, 17<sup>th</sup> HLI "were holding a line of shell holes approx. VOX FM – VOID FM to SE corner of MALLET COPSE where they were in touch with 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regt." Scully's two left companies were ordered to stand by and "be ready to support this line" if necessary.<sup>614</sup>

Crews operating the 144 Vickers machine-guns (organised into close defence, barrage and area concentration batteries) were in place and ready, despite "darkness, state of ground and hostile shelling", by 5:00 p.m. on 1 December. At Zero + 8 minutes all guns fired on their previously assigned barrage lines. Opportunities for indirect concentration fire occurred and were acted upon: "At about 5:15 a.m. information was received that parties of the enemy were moving from the direction of WESTROOSEBEKE toward VALUATION HOUSES. K and L batteries were ordered by telephone to concentrate on the area about VALUATION HOUSES: the batteries opened fire at the rate of 100 rounds per minute at interval of three minutes". Hostile shelling was "fairly heavy, especially on 'A', 'B', 'C' batteries about the MEETCHEELE

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<sup>614</sup> TNA: WO/95/2398: 16<sup>th</sup> NF War Diary, IWM 4723: '32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33', 5 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2) and Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers*, p. 88.

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[BELLEVUE] SPUR. 'C' Battery at one time had six guns knocked out, but subsequently got four of them into action again, which was a very creditable performance".<sup>615</sup>

Major-General Shute later remarked to his postwar audience of senior officers: "Don't believe in commanders being able to see unless they also do their work in safety ... Better to drive from the box than sit on the necks of the leaders".<sup>616</sup> No doubt disappointed and concerned over the loss of Hill 52 and the holdup at Vat and Veal cottages, he attempted to influence events from a distance, as telegraph and telephone messages were exchanged in rapid succession within the confines of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's Canal Bank HQ dugout:

From CRA. 200 or 300 Boche seen moving from depot at Spriet toward VALUATION HOUSES (V.17.d.1.9). Batteries are firing on them. The heavies have been told.

To 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Verbal. Observers report party of enemy about 300 strong are moving from V.17.d.1.9. towards VALUATION HOUSES We are getting heavies on them and we have a concentration on VALUATION HOUSES now.

Brigadier-General Blacklock's HQ subsequently telephoned (7:56 a.m.) with an ad hoc plan to get the attack going again:

97 Brigade: Situation is that 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade have been biffed out of TEALL COTTAGE and HILL 52. Situation of No. 2 Battalion (16<sup>th</sup> HLI) is uncertain. At 9:20 a.m. they are going to attack with reserve battalion and Nos. 1 and 2 battalions (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI) and try to push forward.

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<sup>615</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action Report, 'Appendix 'H': Action of Machine-guns During Operations near Passchendaele, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December', 16 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>616</sup> JSCSC: Major-General A.H. Marindin Papers: 'Senior Officers' School: Lecture Delivered by Major-General Sir C.D. Shute, KCG, KCMG November 1920'.

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Div. HQ: The Divisional Commander wishes a strong counter-battery shoot to start at 9:15 a.m.

97 Brigade: General Blacklock is arranging what he can about a barrage [,] but owing to uncertainty of positions occupied by them, a general barrage is unlikely.<sup>617</sup>

Widespread disorganisation, along with the dearth of necessary junior leadership at a critical juncture, were just two of the obstacles 97 Brigade had to contend with before sorting out its battalions for another effort. Nothing had been heard from 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and, more importantly, absence of a general artillery barrage would leave the infantry unprotected and exposed in broad daylight. Previous experience demonstrated that such attacks, when hurriedly organised and executed, almost certainly failed in the face of a forewarned and alert enemy. Nevertheless, the same “uncertainty” regarding 97 Brigade’s new positions prevailed across no man’s land, so German batteries, unsure of their own infantry’s whereabouts, had to resort to steady interdiction fire of the British rear area. This undoubted advantage, however, was likely to be moot if the attackers, lacking appropriate artillery assistance, were unable to reform and capture strongpoints like Vat and Veal cottages.

32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ received additional eyewitness accounts concerning the attacks’ limited progress and reports on the current state of overland communications at 8:00 a.m.:

From Capt. Knox [situated at the CMDS to interview incoming wounded]. Wounded 17<sup>th</sup> HLI man states his company (left) was held up at 3:30 a.m. and did not get to VAT COTTAGES. Right company also held up. No enemy

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<sup>617</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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artillery barrage worth speaking of [,] but MGs from direction of VAT COTTAGES. 16<sup>th</sup> HLI have taken 1<sup>st</sup> objective and were going well and consolidating. 16<sup>th</sup> NF got most of the barrage but they say barrage was not heavy. From CRE [Lieutenant-Colonel Pollard]. Following telephone message from OC 206<sup>th</sup> 206<sup>th</sup> Field Coy. timed 7:30 a.m. begins. No. 6 track is in good condition up to VIRILE FARM with 4 exceptions between VINE COTTAGE and VIRILE FARM [,] which are being repaired at 6:20 a.m. Casualties up to 6:30 a.m. – NIL. No. 6 track only little shelled since Zero. Situation at 6:50 a.m., fairly quiet, though heavy shelling was seen near VAPOUR FARM at 6 a.m.

From CRE. Following telephone message received from OC 218<sup>th</sup> Field Company RE at 7:25 a.m. Condition of KRONPRINZ TRACK at 6:15 a.m. 2/12/17. In good order up to 200 yards beyond MURRAY SWITCH D.4.a.3.1 at 6:15 a.m. Far end of the track just south of VAPOUR FARM was being heavily shelled. Maintenance party ordered to proceed to VAPOUR FARM 6:20 a.m. Casualties 6 a.m. – NIL. Situation fairly quiet.

8<sup>th</sup> Division was informed about the uncertain state of affairs at 8:10 a.m.: “We believe, but are not quite sure, been biffed out of HILL 52 and TEALL COTTAGES”. 97 Brigade fielded a verbal query for more news at the same time: [Div. HQ] “Do you know sufficiently well where your No. 1 and No. 2 battalions (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI) are for us to safely put a barrage on the final objective for your attack at 9:20 a.m.?” [97 Bde] “Put it just clear of the final objective except possibly in the case of VOID FARM, we may be there”.<sup>618</sup> [Div. HQ] “The Divisional Commander thinks Stokes Mortar barrage would be a good thing”. 97 Brigade confirmed this was being arranged for and added that no news had come in from the left flank.<sup>619</sup>

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<sup>618</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> HLI had indeed reached Void Farm before dawn.

<sup>619</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Major-General Shute made a lengthy telephone call to II Corps HQ at 8:30 a.m. Circumstances and events, placed in the best possible light, preceded a basic outline of rushed plans to resume the attack:

We are not so successful as we hoped. We had a good deal of fighting – hand to hand. The Bosch artillery barrage has never been bad. That is proved by the fact that the troops working on the tracks had no casualties. We got up to our 8 minutes without any artillery barrage and inconsiderable machine-gun fire. After that the machine-gun fire seems to have got worse. We [15<sup>th</sup> LF] are well up on the left and seem to have got on our objective. The next Battalion [17<sup>th</sup> HLI] got hung up about its intermediate objective. No. 3 Battalion [11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment] got right up to its objective. No. 2 Battalion [16<sup>th</sup> HLI] only got about halfway we gather, and I am not very sure they are even about that. The right Battalion [2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI] got HILL 52 [,] but early this morning got pushed of it. I also hear that the [2<sup>nd</sup>] Rifle Brigade have not got on (this from the 8<sup>th</sup> Divn.) but no one is quite sure. We have ordered a further attack to be made all along the line at 9:20 a.m. and we have asked the counter-battery people to bring down their fire at 9:15 a.m. We are getting our own artillery fire also on the old objective line. The [enemy] artillery fire has not been bad all through. I think it has been a fight for a series of machine-gun emplacements. I propose tonight to relieve the right sector by two battalions of the 14<sup>th</sup> Bde. [,] which will attack through them tonight. Genl. Blacklock will then hold the left half of the divisional front with his brigade, pushing on again to his final objective where he is not on it – the 2 Bns of 96 Brigade [15<sup>th</sup> LF and 16<sup>th</sup> NF] will be relieved and sent back to CANAL BANK. Nothing of this is certain. Our lines are holding to Bde. HQ, but forward of that it is very difficult.<sup>620</sup>

Five minutes later (8:35 a.m.) 97 Brigade was verbally informed that the new barrage would be brought down “150 yards outside the original final objective” of 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI. Counter-battery fire, it was also related, had been scheduled to commence five minutes before Zero. “The infantry will start at 9:20 and the artillery at 9:15 [a.m.]”

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid.

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Brigadier-General Blacklock replied that he was “quite satisfied” with these arrangements.<sup>621</sup>

Six telegraph messages came in or were sent off during the eleven minutes between 8:39 and 8:50 a.m.: The first, “From 8<sup>th</sup> Divn. Following from 25<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. Verbal message timed 6:20 a.m. One Coy. left Bn. [2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade] held up in front of VENISON TRENCH. Left of centre Bn. [2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire] believed to have been held up”; the second, “To 97<sup>th</sup> Bde. RA reports 7:45 a.m. 200 hundred to 300 infantry were seen by an artillery officer at HUBNER FARM to be moving from the depot at V.17.d.1.9. [Spriet] towards VALUATION HOUSES. An 18-pdr battery at once fired on them and the HA were informed”. The third shared intelligence, gathered from the four prisoners captured near Vox Farm, with II Corps HQ. The fourth, received from the divisional artillery at 8:40 a.m., confirmed that the Germans were on Hill 52: “FOO No. 2 Group timed 8:50 a.m. reports enemy in possession of Hill 52. Enemy seen moving on the crest towards VALUATION HOUSES, VOLT FARM and VOID FARM. These were fired on by our 18-pdr with direct observation and scattered”. The fifth, again from 8<sup>th</sup> Division, reported an increase in German shelling with counter-battery fire being asked for. General impressions of 25 Brigade’s situation: “Right probably successful. Left and centre more obscure and nothing received from them. Centre possibly successful. Left probably not”. The sixth, a general situation report, was telegraphed to II Corps and the neighbouring 35<sup>th</sup> Division at 8:50 a.m.:

Situation 8:30 a.m. as far as known. No. 1 Bn. [2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI] took TEALL COTTAGE and HILL 52 but has been driven back again. No. 2 Bn. [16<sup>th</sup> HLI] uncertain but probably on

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<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

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line short of VOID FARM. No. 3 Bn. [11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment] on objective. No. 4 Bn. [17<sup>th</sup> HLI] held up in front of VEAL COTTAGES. Resistance mainly machine-gun fire. Artillery fire not very heavy. Attack to retake HILL 52 and final objective of No. 1 and No. 2 Bn. will be launched at 9:20 a.m. No. 3 and No. 5 [15<sup>th</sup> LF] battalions [will] work round VEAL COTTAGES.

Major-General Shute had done all that was possible to get 97 Brigade moving again.<sup>622</sup>

The attackers, exhausted and disorganised after previous exertions, required immediate re-organisation and ruthless persuasion to push on and gain the objectives: “Don’t admit your men are tired. When the enemy is beat all must go on until they drop”.<sup>623</sup> Provided all this could be done, and acting on the assumption that 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 15<sup>th</sup> LF were in a fit state and situated to successfully outflank Vat and Veal cottages, 97 Brigade should be able to follow up and regain Teall Cottage and Hill 52. If not, a contingency plan, whereby two fresh battalions of Brigadier-General Lumsden’s 14 Brigade would attack, in conjunction with the left of 97 Brigade, through the latter brigade’s right front after dusk thus providing another opportunity to take advantage of the relative darkness of a moonlit night.

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<sup>622</sup> A commander acting as rapidly as possible under prevailing circumstances, Major-General Shute related in the aforementioned postwar lecture (see fn. 122) could surmount his own remoteness from the sharp end along with the inherent chaos of the distant battle: ‘Any fool can solve a military problem in several days or hours. It will then be too late. [It] must be decided at once. Then, if only nearly right, if carried through with determination overcoming all obstacles, all will be well. ‘Look before you leap but if you’re going to leap don’t look too long’... Here is where a bad commander fails. All right as long as all goes ‘according to plan’. But if his attack or a neighbouring attack fails or succeeds more than was anticipated, or if he is confronted with some other unexpected situation, he does not know what to do. He does nothing. The golden chance is fleeting. He is done. Every possible quality of a commander is contained in this: ‘Act according to circumstances’. See JSCSC: Major-General A.H. Marindin Papers: ‘Senior Officers’ School: Lecture Delivered by Major-General Sir C.D. Shute, KCG, KCMG November 1920’.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid. This uncompromising perspective was demonstrated five months earlier near Nieuport on 10 July when Major-General Shute had to be restrained, following the recapture of lost trenches in the immediate aftermath of a devastating German riposte, by the GOC XV Corps from pushing on with a hasty follow-up night attack to seize Lombartzyde. Further operations to capture the seaside village were contemplated – but not sanctioned – for early August, as the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division ‘to whom the events of July 10 – and notably, the first loss of trenches ever admitted by the division – were not palatable’. See CAC: RVLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 11 July 1917 and Chalmers (ed) *A Saga of Scotland*, pp. 104-05.



**Plate 4.4 Brigadier-General F.W. Lumsden VC**  
(Source: *Illustrated London News*)

Brigadier-General Lumsden and 14 Brigade were placed on alert and received copious dictated instructions during a telephone call from Major-General Shute at 9:10 a.m.:

You know what the situation is. As far as I can gather the right of the 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade have been biffed back to their frontline; on the left they are somewhere near their objective. They are going to re-attack at 9:20 a.m. They may or may not in the course of the day improve their position. I will read you a draft order, which will be going out:

Para. 1. The following moves will take place tonight 2/3<sup>rd</sup> December:

1. Two battalions of 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade now at BELLEVUE and WURST will form up by 10 p.m. in rear of the sector held by the 2 right Battns of the 97<sup>th</sup> Bde viz., from TEALL COTTAGE – V.29.b.60.55. These two battalions will attack at 10:30 p.m. through the 2 right battalions of 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and will capture and consolidate a fresh objective from V.24.d.6.2. to the crossroads V.24.a.75.15. to V.23.d.85.95.

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2. 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI will remain in their then positions until this objective is gained and will then concentrate in our old frontline.

3. From 10 p.m. the 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI will pass to the command of GOC 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade until they are concentrated in our frontline as mentioned in para. 2.

4. As soon as the 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI are back in our old frontline, they will, under the orders of the 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade, relieve the 15<sup>th</sup> Lancs. Fus. and 16<sup>th</sup> North'd. Fus., which two battalions will move back to a camp in the neighbourhood of IRISH FARM.

5. The battalions of the 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade now at WURST & BELLEVUE will be replaced at these places by the remaining two battalions of the 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade.

6. At 10 p.m. tonight the GOC 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade, with headquarters at KANSAS (Adv. HQ at VIRILE FARM) will be in command of the right sector from TEALL COTTAGE to V.29.b.6.55. GOC 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade, with headquarters at KRONPRINZ [FARM] will be in command of the left sector.

I want you to think over that and let me know your ideas. You have got to relieve and it is better to attack straight through them than to relieve and attack again. What it is necessary to know is whether you consider the task too difficult for you to carry on.<sup>624</sup>

Brigadier-General Blacklock telephoned Division HQ ten minutes later (9:20 a.m.); 97 Brigade would be unable to recommence the attack due to rampant disorganisation and serious loss of officers: "Message from 97 Brigade to the effect that they could not assemble their two right battalions for the attack and they want the barrage to cease."<sup>625</sup>

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<sup>624</sup> These verbal orders, subsequently communicated to II Corps HQ at 9:28 a.m., were in keeping with '32<sup>nd</sup> Division Instructions No. 11, Special Instructions to GOC Brigade in Divisional Support [14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade] and GOC Brigade in Divisional Reserve [96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade] of 30 November. See Appendix 8 a & b.

<sup>625</sup> The 32<sup>nd</sup> Division DMGO's after-action report noted: 'At 9 a.m. orders were received from GOC 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade to fire on barrage lines from 9-20 a.m. to 9-45 a.m. in order to support a fresh attack. This order was cancelled at 9:15 a.m.' See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action Report, 'Appendix 'H': Action of

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Their Nos. 1 & 2 (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI) are too disorganised to assemble for the attack, therefore the barrage has been stopped for ten minutes”. Shute’s growing impatience and obvious displeasure are evident in the subsequent verbal exchange with the GOC 97 Brigade:

Shute: Will you be ready in ten minutes?

Blacklock: At present it cannot be said when they will be ready to attack.

Shute: Will you be able to fix an hour for the attack? Do you know where they are?

Blacklock: Line runs from VOX FARM S.W. corner of VOID FARM to S.W. corner of MALLET COPSE.<sup>626</sup>

Shute: Then you haven’t got anywhere near VEAL and VOX?<sup>627</sup> Well you have got to get on today on your right and I will probably want you to hand over command of the right sector to the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. You will move your Brigade into the left sector and let the 15<sup>th</sup> Lancs. Fus. and 16<sup>th</sup> North’d Fus. march away tonight. You will have your Brigade to hold the left sector and to get on to your objective. All these valuable hours of darkness between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. have been wasted by your Battalion Commanders not getting their battalions on.<sup>628</sup>

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Machine-guns During Operations near Passchendaele, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December’, 16 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>626</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment’s retirement from Mallet Copse was still unknown at this time.

<sup>627</sup> Reproduced from original transcript. Vox Farm, as related by Brigadier-General Blacklock in the previous exchange, had been secured. Major-General Shute may have meant Vat instead of Vox or his recorded reference to the latter was the result of a clerical error during transcription or subsequent ‘Telephone and Telegraph Messages’ appendix compilation.

<sup>628</sup> Major-General Shute’s account of this episode (related in his after-action report of 11 December) differs from surviving telephone and telegraph transcripts: ‘On receipt of this information’ i.e., the cancellation of the 9:20 a.m. attack, ‘the Divisional Commander informed the GOC 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade that he must fix an hour in the afternoon to resume his attack and pointed out it was of special importance to capture HILL 52 and the high ground about VOID FARM’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 17.

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A chastened Blacklock then asked if it was possible to resume operations in the afternoon; Shute replied that he could.<sup>629</sup> The GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's hastily improvised contingency plan, to be put in motion if 97 Brigade failed to press on during the afternoon, was somewhat intricate and ambitious given prevailing circumstances: Two battalions of the support brigade were, after nightfall, to pass through two stalled, disorganised assault battalions, reeling from heavy casualties, on the right of the attacking brigade and seize a newly designated objective line. The relieved battalions would, following the capture of their former objectives by the support battalions, then shift from the old frontline – one to the left and one in immediate reserve about Virile Farm – in order to relieve two battalions previously loaned by the reserve brigade, which, in turn, were to march back to reserve positions west of the Zonnebeke – Langemarck road. All of this, it should also be noted, was to occur under the bright light of a waning gibbous moon while in close contact with agitated and watchful foe.

The observed threat from German troops, still massing in the vicinity of Valuation Houses, opposite the right centre of 97 Brigade worried 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ during a brief span of minutes between 9:25 and 9:28 a.m.; the gunners, as related in subsequent telephone and telegraph reports, appeared to engage this menace with desired effect: Division HQ to II Corps: “Much movement around VALUATION HOUSES. Are the heavies on to it?” [II Corps] “Corps have told the gunners”; To CRA: “Corps observers report great deal of movement around VALUATION HOUSES at 9:10 a.m.”; From

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<sup>629</sup> Ibid: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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CRA: “FOO No. 4 Group reports that he scattered Germans moving from depot towards VALUATION HOUSES. FOOS Nos 3 & 4 groups have engaged enemy moving from direction of VALUATION HOUSES to V.24.a.4.2.”; From CRA: “Officer of No. 4 Group at HUBNER FARM has seen parties of men moving along the road from VALUATION HOUSES to VOLT FARM, behind which they appear to be collecting. Two 18-pdr batteries have engaged them with direct observation”.<sup>630</sup>

At 9:45 a.m. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ telegraphed II Corps, 8<sup>th</sup> Division and 35<sup>th</sup> Division about the delay of 97 Brigade’s renewed attack: “Attack on HILL 52 postponed from 9:20 a.m. to a later hour”. Captain Knox telephoned fifteen minutes later (10:00 a.m.) with additional eyewitness accounts from the wounded: “It is reported that the 16<sup>th</sup> HLI have had to retire and they were last seen in the old Bosche frontline consolidating. They had gained their first objective [dotted green line], but were too weak to hold it.<sup>631</sup> An officer says the Bosche never waited for them. Whenever they got near they took up their guns and ran.<sup>632</sup> I cannot get any information about the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI”.<sup>633</sup>

97 Brigade telegraphed probable losses sustained by their right centre battalion shortly after the last report from Captain Knox: “11/Borders report timed 8:35 a.m. Casualties estimated at 10 [officers] and 150 [ORs]”. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ then received a

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

<sup>631</sup> This information, provided by a wounded informant, appears, so far as can be ascertained, to have been spurious, as remnants of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI were still established about the dotted green line east and west of Void Farm at this time. The Battalion war diary also fails to record any sort of morning withdrawal to the original German frontline.

<sup>632</sup> The perceived German retirement was, according to *OHL*’s recently introduced ‘elastic arrangement’, the desired response of a hard-pressed *Vorfeldzonelinie* garrison. See Chapter 1, pp. 38-39.

<sup>633</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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lengthy situation report, communicated over the telephone by one of Brigadier-General Blacklock's staff officers, at 10:05 a.m.

Situation on the right of 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade – Attack commenced quite satisfactorily. They had a very bad time before our artillery barrage opened and they had a good many casualties chiefly by machine-guns in VENISON TRENCH, which enfiladed the left company of the centre [sic] [2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade] battalion and our right [2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI] battalion. Our right held on to HILL 52 for a good time and apparently the left of the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade held on fairly well everywhere, but when the Germans counter-attacked, they were not strong enough, owing to casualties by machine-gun fire, to hold their ground. They both fell back and the line at present, taking it from the 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade – W.25.a.3.1. – line runs due west to south of TEALL COTTAGE where they are in touch with the 16<sup>th</sup> North'd Fus. The 16<sup>th</sup> North'd Fus. have one company pretty badly knocked about and three companies moderately knocked about. 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI can only muster 2 officers and 20 OR and are somewhere south of the first Q in VOCATION FARM. The situation on the left of 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI is being ascertained. Battalion commanders have been sent to find out the situation. They are sending out patrols to try and get the line established in VOCATION and VOID farms. They are just in MALLET COPSE with left refused, and on the left some of the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI are due east of VEAL COTTAGE. It is thought that No. 5 [15<sup>th</sup> LF] battalion are on their objective still, and that they have pushed out patrols and joined hands north of VEAL COTTAGE with the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI. The right of the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI has pushed forward level with VEAL COTTAGE, but fell back southwestwards and are not now level with VEAL COTTAGE.<sup>634</sup>

Division HQ, unclear about certain aspects not related in this update, pressed for more details: “It is not understood where 17<sup>th</sup> HLI are. Have we got VAT COTTAGES? Can we put artillery on VEAL COTTAGES? Can you get Stokes Mortars on to them?” 97 Brigade replied that attempts had been made to register mortar assets on both objectives.

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<sup>634</sup> Ibid. Brigadier-General Blacklock ordered battalion commanders to ‘clear up the situation’ at 8:00 a.m. Daylight made the task of going forward almost impossible. See IWM 4732: ‘Summary of the Attack of the 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. with 2 Battalions of the 96<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. on December 2 [1917]’, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 10/80/2).

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Further queries followed: “Can you tell me how far the 15<sup>th</sup> LF have got? You think they have got the southern edge of DOUBLE COPSE. They are not in MALLET COPSE”.<sup>635</sup> The last part of this exchange clearly confirmed to Division HQ that 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, unable to secure Mallet Copse in its entirety, was still holding on just inside the shell-shattered spinney.

Brigadier-General Blacklock, leaving the security of his pillbox HQ at Kronprinz Farm, had previously gone forward to discover the whereabouts of the current frontline. During this absence, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ, in an attempt to subdue enemy resistance at Veal Cottages and Mallet Copse, telephoned a new artillery support scheme to 97 Brigade at 10:30 a.m.: “We are going to help you with artillery on to MALLET COPSE and possibly on to VEAL COTTAGES if you are not too close. We must wait until Genl. Blacklock comes back and tells us where you are exactly. We will put artillery concentrations (How[itzer]s) on to anything you like. If you are being stopped by sniping from machine-guns then you must get on and blow them out”.<sup>636</sup>

Major-General Shute updated II Corps about the general situation of 97 Brigade by telephone at 10:35 a.m.: “I can tell you roughly our line. From TEALL COTTAGE (exclusive) VOX FARM (inclusive) southern edge of MALLET COPSE [and] VEALL COTTAGES (exclusive) then up to the edge of DOUBLE COPSE. A tremendous lot of MG fire from VENISON trench enfiladed the KOYLI on HILL 52”. Another verbal

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<sup>635</sup> Ibid.

<sup>636</sup> Ibid.

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exchange with 14 Brigade, where the proposed contingency plan along with 97 Brigade's current status was discussed, took place ten minutes later:

14 Brigade: As far as he [Brigadier-General Blacklock] knows, the position of 97<sup>th</sup> is – His two right battalions [2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI] are back on their original frontline. No. 3 Battalion [11<sup>th</sup> Border] is 200 yards south of MALLET COPSE. No. 4 Battalion [17<sup>th</sup> HLI] is 200 yards south of VEAL COTTAGES. No. 5 Battalion [15<sup>th</sup> LF] is on its final objective he thinks. You assume that your proposed attack will be carried out with his attack.

Div. HQ: The Divisional commander says “YES” if Gen[era]l. Blacklock can do it, but his plans are very uncertain until the position of the 97<sup>th</sup> is cleared up. There is another possibility. It may turn out more advisable for you to attack on the front of Nos. 2 [16<sup>th</sup> HLI] & 3 Bns instead of Nos. 1 [2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI] & 2 and go right through to the final objective.<sup>637</sup> To carry out the attack it is essential for the 97<sup>th</sup> to attack on your left. That is the original proposal if you were to attack on the front of the other two battalions. It may not be so essential now, but you would want your right covered.

14 Brigade: We are waiting for Gen[era]l. Blacklock to come back to find out what his dispositions are.

Div. HQ: Do you consider it more advisable to relieve and then attack or form up behind the troops who are there and go through them?

14 Brigade: The point is that they will be better organised tomorrow night. What he [Brigadier-General Lumsden] would like to do is to relieve the line tonight and attack tomorrow night. He would rather takeover the line one night and attack another, but in the event of having to do both on one night, he would rather attack through them.<sup>638</sup>

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<sup>637</sup> This ‘more advisable’ second option would, if pressed on through 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, place both assault battalions of 14 Brigade to the NW of German occupied Hill 52. Major-General Shute, as we shall see, thus appears to have entertained hopes that Hill 52 would be regained before this stage of the renewed assault commenced.

<sup>638</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Lumsden had made his operational preferences clear to Division HQ; the final decision for a resumed attack on the night of 2 or 3 December remained pending, as 97 Brigade attempted to sort out its battalions before commencement of the contemplated afternoon attack.

Lieutenant-Colonel Pollard (CRE) telegraphed more news about the condition of duckboard tracks at 10:42 a.m.: “Following message by orderly from 219<sup>th</sup> Field Coy. timed 9:40 a.m. today begins. MOUSETRAP TRACK in good order. All breaks forward of WALLEMOLEN repaired by 3 a.m. No breaks to rear of WALLEMOLEN at 8:30 a.m.” One of Major-General Shute’s staff officers articulated the desire to press on with the attack after dark to Brigadier-General ‘Sammy’ Wilson (BGGs II Corps) at 10:58 a.m.: “My General feels he must do something tonight because the enemy is so disorganised that he thinks tonight is the time to do it. The [Second] Army think it is very important to get hold of HILL 52 tonight. My General thinks so also. VENISON TRENCH ought to be hammered [by artillery] today: we got beyond HILL 52 today but then got badly done in by machine-guns from there”. A ninth report, based on prisoner interviews, from Captain Knox (11:00 a.m.)<sup>639</sup> was succeeded by a telegraphed situation report<sup>640</sup> from VIII Corps at 11:02 a.m.<sup>641</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> ‘There are two wounded Germans here [CMDS]. (1) belongs to 3 Coy. 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. 94<sup>th</sup> I.R. 38<sup>th</sup> Division. He has been two days in the line and fourteen days in Flanders: he came to here from before ARRAS. *The attack this morning was unexpected* [my emphasis]. He has not heard of any attack against us. He is 21 years of age and seems quite willing to answer any questions. (2) 5 Coy. 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. 95<sup>th</sup> I.R. 38<sup>th</sup> Division’.

<sup>640</sup> Originally telegraphed by ‘2<sup>nd</sup> Corps ‘I’ (Thro’ 8<sup>th</sup> Corps I)’ at 10:30 a.m. See above.

<sup>641</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Sometime before 11:00 a.m., a mud-spattered Brigadier-General Blacklock returned to Kronprinz Farm from his reconnaissance of 97 Brigade's muddled frontline. A Brigade staff officer (Captain H. Wailes) answered a telephone call from 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ shortly afterward at 11:05 a.m. The latter wanted to know if the doughty Brigadier had been made aware of the new barrage arrangements:

Div. HQ: Did you give Gen[era]l. Blacklock the Divisional Commander's message?

Captain Wailes: With regard to How[itzer]s he [Brigadier-General Blacklock] said he did not want them, but would do it with Stokes. He thinks he is in VOID FARM and VELDT FARM, V.23.d.7.6.<sup>642</sup> and at southern edge of MALLET COPSE.<sup>643</sup> We had not got VAT COTTAGES or VEAL COTTAGES. He would like to see Scott [CO 16<sup>th</sup> HLI] before he decides. He feels sure he cannot use How[itzer]s. He had a lot of casualties to trench mortar personnel and finds it difficult to collect them. The Bosche is holding VAT COTTAGES.

Div. HQ: You mean you are to the south of VAT COTTAGES? You had a message timed 8:40 from 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI saying 12 officers and 300 OR casualties.<sup>644</sup>

Major-General Shute later observed that the frontline, based on information received at the time, appeared to run from "about 200 yards south of TEALL COTTAGES to VOX FARM inclusive thence to VOID and VELDT farms thence to southern edge of MALLET COPSE where it turned south and ran almost to our old frontline where it

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<sup>642</sup> Veldt Farm and vicinity, situated on the boundary between 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, was still in enemy hands.

<sup>643</sup> Brigadier-General Blacklock was, despite his recent reconnaissance, still unaware of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment's pre-dawn withdrawal from the southern edge of Mallet Copse.

<sup>644</sup> The puzzling non sequitur found in the last exchange is reproduced from the original telegraph and telephone transcripts. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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turned west and ran to the south of VAT COTTAGES then turning north again to about point [opposite Double Copse] V.22.d.8.2”<sup>645</sup>.

Another telegraph (received at 11:15 a.m.) from Lieutenant-Colonel Pollard informed Division HQ that the “GENOA – STROOMBEEK” beech slab corduroy road had been kept open all morning by the 14<sup>th</sup> Worcester (63<sup>rd</sup> RND pioneer battalion). At 11:20 a.m. the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division DMGO was ordered to “put down from 12 noon to 12:30 p.m.” a machine-gun barrage “to catch any enemy who might be assembling for a counter-attack” Three more messages, concerning 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s imminent relief after nightfall, current disposition of 25 Brigade’s frontline and Brigadier-General Coffin’s dim forecast for the continuance of operations, followed between 11:20 and 11:25 a.m.<sup>646</sup>

A note, collated and dispatched by the ADMS, listing casualties (20 officers and 288 ORs) received at the ADS up to 10:25 a.m., was delivered to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ at 11:40 a.m. Another situation report, relating the German attempt to work around the right of 25 Brigade, was received from 8<sup>th</sup> Division 25 minutes later at 12:05 p.m. Meanwhile, 14 Brigade’s pending deployment remained an uncertainty; Brigadier-General Lumsden’s HQ received the following verbal message (12:05 p.m.) from Division HQ: “The probability is that you won’t relieve or attack tonight, but you will have to be ready. At any rate, your officers will have to go up and reconnoitre tonight”. 97 Brigade telephoned with a general situation report at 12:15 p.m. This information, recorded at the receiving

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<sup>645</sup> Ibid: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, 11 December 1917, p.17.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid and ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917.

end during real-time transcription, raised expectations that the attack would be continued: “You think you can get on to your line. You are going to use Stokes guns. As regards the situation at VOID FARM you are on one outskirt and the Boche the other. You are going to include VOID FARM in your line. You are in rather a difficulty about No. 2 Battalion (16<sup>th</sup> HLI). They have no officers left except one subaltern”. Shute, convinced that 97 Brigade was capable of one more effort, replied: “I think I am going to leave you in tonight, so would you rather attack in the afternoon or at night?” [97 Brigade] “General Blacklock said he would rather do it at night”. [Shute] “Very well then. Arrange to do it at night. Would it be any good to you to see me either at your headquarters or for you to come and meet me at General Lumsden’s Headquarters?” Brigadier-General Blacklock replied that he preferred 14 Brigade HQ for a meeting venue. “Very well then”, Shute concluded, “I will come up there now. I can get to KANSAS at about 1:15 p.m.”.<sup>647</sup> Word of this meeting was communicated to 14 Brigade five minutes later at 12:20 p.m.<sup>648</sup>

#### 4.5 Dénouement

Both 8<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> divisional staffs had formulated, regardless of high winds that still grounded designated contact aircraft, a fairly accurate picture of the general situation by half-past twelve. Brigadier-General Coffin, taking into account heavy losses amongst regimental officers and NCOs, made it clear that continued operations against Venison Trench and its redoubts were, in his considered opinion, dependant on fresh troops and the capture of Teall Cottage. Nevertheless, any success by day or night was, he concluded, highly improbable. Major-General Heneker backed Coffin’s on-the-spot

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid.

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judgement in a report to VIII Corps HQ at 11:00 a.m. His semi-fatalism, apparent since the operation's inception, was also shared by trusted subordinates like Coffin, who saw no point, given earlier predictions and evident deplorable consequences, in pressing on. Major-General Shute did not share this viewpoint. The controversial operational approach had been his brainchild from the start. Confidence of impending success (unabashedly declared to Sir Henry Rawlinson among others)<sup>649</sup> and consequent uncomfortable recognition that such boasts may have been ill-founded, reveal, in subsequent actions and words, an overriding personal stake in a successful outcome even after hoped for surprise was lost.

25 Brigade struggled to retain its small territorial gains throughout the afternoon (**Map 12**). German forays, under cover of bombs and rifle grenades, against the left flank “were all repulsed without difficulty” and touch maintained with 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI. Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling, still confined to his HQ by the hostile bombardment, remained out of touch with companies of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton and his detached party, isolated in their short stretch of Venison Trench, received word by runner of their impending withdrawal after dark. Along the centre and left, advanced companies of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade remained in place under relentless shellfire while losses steadily mounted. Lieutenant Anderson recalled: “Except for a few hours during the morning, it was practically impossible, owing to the accurate sniping, to get from post to post”.<sup>650</sup>

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<sup>649</sup> See CAC: RWLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 19 November 1917 and IWM: P363: Strickland Diary, 21 November 1917.

<sup>650</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, TNA: WO/95/1929: ‘Appendix B’, 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup>

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8<sup>th</sup> Division's IO reported on the current haul of prisoners (3 officers, 16 NCOs, 32 men) and the recently determined German order of battle ("N to S, 96, 95, 94, 117, 116, 115") to VIII Corps at 1:00 p.m. "Evidence as to the enemy's intention", he added, "varies too much to form an opinion". Second Army Report Centre telegraphed a general situation report concerning what was known of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's frontline at 1:50 p.m. Two more messages, passing on intelligence culled from the captured *Feldwebel* of IR94<sup>651</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade's estimated (approximately 200 men) losses, came across Captain Chaplin's desk at 1:50 and 2:30 p.m. The situation remained, VIII Corps HQ receiving no additional reports until 4:30 p.m., obscure after this.<sup>652</sup>

Major-General Shute, having made his way due east through St Jean and Wieltje along designated corps/divisional roads and tracks, arrived amidst the ubiquitous supply dumps and steady, two-way traffic of Kansas Cross at 1:15 p.m. Joining Brigadier-General Blacklock and Brigadier-General Lumsden in the latter's pillbox HQ, he wasted no time in issuing instructions "as to the action to be taken" by 97 and 14 brigades: The former brigade was "to establish itself on the line TEALL COTTAGES inclusive – HILL 52 inclusive – VOID FARM and MALLET COPSE inclusive – V.23.c.2.4. after darkness and to push on thence, if possible, to the line of its final [red line] objective".<sup>653</sup> The latter brigade was now detailed "to attack through the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade on the night of December 3/4 and to [sic] capture any portions of the final objective which the 97

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Royal Berkshire War Diary and TNA: WO/95/1731: 'Report of the part played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn. The Rifle Brigade in the Operations at Passchendaele', 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary.

<sup>651</sup> See Chapter 3, pp. 178-79.

<sup>652</sup> BL: 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

<sup>653</sup> See Appendix 10 for 97 Brigade O.O. 181 issued later that afternoon at 3:50 p.m.

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Infantry Brigade might have failed to secure on the previous night”. Shute, in his subsequent after-action report, noted that “no definite orders as to the scope of these operations could be given to the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade until the result of the operations to be undertaken by the 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade was known, but GOC 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade was directed to send officers up to reconnoitre the line and be prepared to carry out an operation on the line indicated as soon as the situation of the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade was known”.<sup>654</sup> Following this, the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, all matters being settled for the time being, departed for the return journey to Canal Bank.<sup>655</sup>

One written note and two telephone messages were received at 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ during Major-General Shute’s visit to Kansas Cross. The note, eighth in a series sent off by Captain Knox from the CMDS, further demonstrates the often dilatory and inaccurate nature, given passage of time and understandably limited combatant perspective, of information gleaned from interviews of the recently accessible wounded: “A CSM 16<sup>th</sup> HLI states that they had reached their first objective early this morning, but were heavily counter-attacked and had to fall back. A man of the Borders says the Borders were being counter-attacked from all sides at 9 a.m. this morning, but were holding all they had gained. He said they had reached their final objective...” The contents of two wireless intercepts, telephoned by II Corps at 1:56 p.m., further emphasised the growing peril of counter-attack: “German wireless message received orders forward zone to be taken at once and the line to be straightened out. Second message calls for more ammunition”.

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<sup>654</sup> 14 Brigade telephoned 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ earlier (12:58 p.m.) with the following query: ‘In view of what is coming off, are we to provide 50 men from the [1<sup>st</sup>] Dorsets as carrying party asked for by ADMS?’ The 50 in question were subsequently detached from 96 Brigade.

<sup>655</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 21.

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The danger was further stressed by the same source at 2:18 and 2:33 p.m.: “Corps observers report several parties of about 100 all told at VALUATION HOUSES going toward line at 1:40 p.m. The Corps have told the artillery” and “XIX Corps report there is a large concentration at V.24.a.0.5. [vicinity of Valuation Houses]”.<sup>656</sup>

Major-General Shute, back at his HQ by 2:40 p.m., was immediately brought up to date about the contents of a telegraph (received at 2:00 p.m.) from 97 Brigade:

Situation appears to be as follows: We hold the line from S[outh] of TEALL COTTAGES along old frontline to VOCATION and VOX [farms] both inclusive along western edge of VOID [FARM] to 50 yards S[outh] of MALLET COPSE, thence south of VAT COTTAGES through fork roads to enclosure at V.22.d.5.2. inclusive, then SSW along objective to TOURNANT FARM. Possession of TEALL COTTAGE doubtful.

A second situation report, related by telephone, was communicated by 97 Brigade at 2:35 p.m.: “97<sup>th</sup> Brigade reports – In occupation of VOX, VOCATION and VOID farms: continuous line running south of MALLET COPSE to the left in touch all the way. Also in possession of VEAL COTTAGES”. The overall situation, as it now appeared to the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, was that 97 Brigade had managed to secure and hold (with the exception of Hill 52 and Vat Cottages) on to objectives as far as the dotted green line.<sup>657</sup>

II Corps HQ received another lengthy telephone message (relating the results of the Kansas Cross conference) from Major-General Shute minutes after the latter digested the contents of 97 Brigade’s report:

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<sup>656</sup> Ibid: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917.

<sup>657</sup> Ibid.

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I don't think Gen[era]l Blacklock will be able to attack till 3 or 4 in the morning because he has to collect his fellows. Tomorrow night [forthcoming attack by 14 Brigade] we may be a bit earlier. He cannot be earlier than 3 or 4. He won't attack before ½ past 2. I rather want him to attack before they attack him. If they do relieve they had better finish it by 2 p.m. We hope to get on the line of VEAL, VOID and down on to HILL 52. The thing is there is such a lot of machine-guns. It is almost impossible to get a sufficient amount of artillery fire to knock-out the machine-guns. There has been very little fire (artillery). Its been the machine-guns that are the trouble. Tomorrow night we shall finish the show with the 14<sup>th</sup> Bde.

Shute (following a short verbal situation update to his CRA)<sup>658</sup> next telephoned Brigadier-General Blacklock with a query about who actually held Veal Cottages at 2:57 p.m.: [Shute] “We have this message [received at 2:35 p.m.] from the 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Is that right?” [Blacklock] “It is not VEAL COTTAGES but it is TEALL COTTAGE. 40 prisoners taken there”. Teall Cottage, contrary to this claim, still remained in German hands. The origin of the report concerning its capture, difficult to trace after passage of time, certainly conveyed a false impression of mounting success at 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ.<sup>659</sup> Shute, no doubt pleased by what appeared to be an improvement of the general situation, telephoned II Corps HQ again (2:59 p.m.) to relate the news: “We are in occupation of VOID FARM and have a continuous line from there running westwards south of MALLET COPSE. We are in touch all the way. Have just taken TEALL COTTAGE and 40 prisoners”.<sup>660</sup>

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<sup>658</sup> ‘We are said to be in possession of VEAL COTTAGES and VOID FARM. It is not confirmed yet’.

<sup>659</sup> It is possible that the report confirming the seizure of Teall Cottage was directly related to the right flanking movement by remnants of ‘A’ and ‘B’ companies (under the command of Captain J. Alexander) 16<sup>th</sup> HLI. A third company (as per Major-General Shute’s 7:45 a.m. verbal order to 97 Brigade) was also sent forward by 16<sup>th</sup> NF (reserve or ‘counter-attack counterattack battalion’) to support vain efforts to seize the troublesome strongpoint.

<sup>660</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. Further confirmation of 97

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Diligent Captain Knox had, in the meantime, dispatched a ninth note (received by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ at 2:50 p.m.) relating more battlefield impressions of the wounded:

An officer of the 16<sup>th</sup> HLI states that as far as he knew, the situation was as follows: At 9 a.m. KOYLI south side of HILL 52. 16<sup>th</sup> HLI at first objective. Borders on final objective. He thinks direction kept was bad: the KOYLI went too far to the right and one Coy. of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI was reported at TEALL COTTAGE. Estimates casualties in his Battalion at 200. He states the Bosche put up no fight, whenever the got near him he ran. A man of the Borders states that at 9 a.m. Borders on final objective and were digging. They had beat-off several counter-attacks.

The growing mass of German counter-attack troops, congregating between Valuation Houses and Mallet Copse, became a serious source of concern to Major-General Shute and his staff following receipt of a telegraph report sent by divisional artillery observers at 3:20 p.m. Parties of enemy infantry could be discerned “doubling down from VALUATION HOUSES to VOLT FARM and thence into valley to east of VOLT FARM”.<sup>661</sup> Three 18-pdr batteries had already begun to engage the area of this dangerous build-up, when the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division ordered (3:20 p.m.) a machine-gun barrage and area concentration with heavy guns to commence at 3:50 p.m.<sup>662</sup>

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Brigade's reported frontline was telegraphed by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ to II Corps, 8<sup>th</sup> Division, 35<sup>th</sup> Division, 14 Brigade and 96 Brigade respectively at 3:45 p.m.

<sup>661</sup> News of this mounting threat was subsequently telegraphed to 97 Brigade, 8<sup>th</sup> Division, 14 Brigade and II Corps respectively at 3:45 p.m.

<sup>662</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', p. 13 and 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. Machine-gun companies tasked with indirect fire support had (acting on information received at 2:30 p.m.) previously strafed the German build-up: '[I]nformation was received that enemy were concentrating in the vicinity of VALUATION HOUSES. E, F, G and H batteries were ordered to engage this target, the batteries opening fire at 3-5 p.m. at the rate of 100 rounds per minute for five minutes and afterwards for 1 minute at intervals of 3 minutes'. See Ibid: After-action Report, 'Appendix 'H': Action of Machine-guns During Operations near Passchendaele, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December', 16 December 1917.

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4:10 p.m.: Darkness (sunset was at 3:46 p.m.) already started to cloak the battlefield when Major-General Shute received further welcome news, later determined to be false, from 97 Brigade HQ: “Col[onel] Scully [CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF] reports that he has got HILL 52 with one company”.<sup>663</sup> The GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, his right now apparently made secure by the recent capture of Teall Cottage and Hill 52, replied that this feat was “good work” and close support for Scully “should be arranged”. He later observed: “The situation then at 4:10 p.m., as far as known at Divisional HQ, seemed to be rapidly improving. Although the situation of the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI in front of VAT COTTAGES remained unsatisfactory, it was considered that with HILL 52, VOID FARM and MALLET COPSE<sup>664</sup> in our possession, the ultimate capture of VEAL and VAT cottages would be accomplished”.<sup>665</sup>

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<sup>663</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> NF’s war diary and after-action report, along with the published postwar battalion history, fail to mention the recapture of Hill 52. Major-General Shute’s earlier verbal order (timed 7:45 a.m.) to 97 Brigade (‘Absolutely necessary that TEALL COTTAGE and VEAL and HILL 52 should be regained. Do this with your reserve Battalion assisted, if safety permits, by fire from your special battery and Stokes mortars’) was followed by orders for a second attack on the key promontory. Three companies remained in the vicinity of Lieutenant-Colonel Scully’s Battalion HQ at Virile Farm at this time. One company (either ‘A’ or ‘B’) had previously been sent off to recapture Teall Cottage, so only one of three remaining companies was available to carry out the task. Scully confirmed after dusk that this company had been dispatched to Hill 52. Captain Howard (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI diarist) subsequently related the outcome: ‘At about 10:30 a.m. on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, he [Captain Hassell] received instructions to recapture HILL 52 with the assistance of one company of the 16<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers. This company failed to materialise, but he advanced his line by the process of dribbling some 200 yards’. Shute later observed: ‘We were never in possession of HILL 52 after we had been driven off it by the enemy’s big counter-attack at 3:30 a.m.’. See TNA: WO/95/2398: 16<sup>th</sup> NF War Diary, WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part IV, Narrative Dealing with the Retirement of the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade’, p. 16 and ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary, IWM 4723: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1.1499/3/33’, 5 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2) and Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers*, p. 89.

<sup>664</sup> The southern edge of Mallet Copse was, as related above, already lost by this time, the survivors of both companies of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment having retired from there to the dotted green line just before daybreak.

<sup>665</sup> See TNA: WO/157/288: ‘Calendar for December 1917: Times Calculated for Second Army Front and Greenwich Mean Time’, II Corps Intelligence File, WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, p. 13-14 and ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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The now obvious German build-up for a local counter-attack (*Gegenangriff*) still relied on units organic to both the 25<sup>th</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> divisions; assistance (*Gegenstoss*) from nearby *Eingreifdivisionen* had, so far, been unnecessary. Large bodies of infantry, directed by *Kampftruppenkommandeur*'s of *IR116* and *IR117*, deployed in the area east of Southern Redoubt for an all-out assault against 25 Brigade. Reported activity in the vicinity of Valuation Houses was the result of an order issued by *IR95*'s regimental commander that morning:

*Oberstleutnant* von Selle (HQ in Westroosebeke) realised the critical situation at the *Feldherrnhügel*.<sup>666</sup> At 8:30 a.m. [German time] he ordered *Leutnant* d.R. Martini – the most senior officer present – to attack from the left wing near the *Nordhof* [Void Farm], in order to push back the enemy breakthrough. The order was extremely difficult to execute because the enemy could spot any movement in the daylight. The task [approach] was only accomplished by having men crawl forward a few at a time. Martini, although delayed until the afternoon, was able to achieve this deployment. The enemy, unwilling to surrender his gains, proceeded to strengthen the newly captured positions.<sup>667</sup>

Embattled survivors of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, defending the salient east and west of Void Farm, began to feel the pressure as early as 2:00 p.m. (German time) when Martini, “with *Leutnant*

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<sup>666</sup> *Feldherrnhügel*, or ‘General’s Hill’, situated on the southern outskirts of Westroosebeke, was known to the British as ‘Hill 50’. According to the history of Bavarian *RIR12*, responsible for the sector SW of Westroosebeke during the previous October, the ‘*Feldherrnhügel*’ got its high-sounding name during the first months of the Flanders campaign. From here, the top-brass had acquired a commanding view over the battlefield when our most advanced units were 6 to 8 kilometres further forward. From here, imaginative War Correspondents had sent their lively reports to the waiting world. But the *Feldherrnhügel* has had its day. An insignificant regimental staff inhabiting it amidst the tumult of battle and the War Correspondents have disappeared. The breakthrough on the Italian front near Tolmein and Karfreit [Caporetto] and the crossing of the Tagliamento: these were more worthy stories. Wonderful countryside, victory after victory, immeasurable amounts of war booty, supplies and prisoners. Even the military communiqués had almost nothing but the most meagre reports of the violent events amidst the desolation and ravaged battlefields of Flanders... Only in the Flanders Positions were a few dugouts to be found, one on the *Feldherrnhügel*, which had to be continually pumped out in order to render it usable’. See Major a.D. Ernst Demmler, *et al*, *Das R. B. Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment 12* (Munich: Verlag Max Schid, 1934) pp. 238 and 240 and accompanying pocket map in Werner Beumleburg, *Flandern 1917* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1928).

<sup>667</sup> Major A.D. Buttman, *Kriegsgeschichte des Königlich Preussischen 6. Thüringischen Infanterie Regiment Nr. 95: 1914-1918* (Zeulenroda, Thüringen: Verlag Bernhard Sporn, 1935), p. 253.

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d.R. Klopple and 12<sup>th</sup> Company, counter-attacked the enemy” as a preliminary to the main operation scheduled to commence at 4:15 p.m. British time. “Step by step, with heavy hand grenade fighting, they slowly but surely, as planned”, secured the left flank of IR95 NW of Hill 52.<sup>668</sup> Captain Hassell’s advanced posts bore the brunt of this concerted preliminary effort. Captain Howard (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI’s diarist) noted in his after-action report: “At 3:30 p.m. on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the enemy counter-attacked and drove his [Hassell] advanced posts back to their original position, approximately the assembly tape”.<sup>669</sup>



**Plate 4.5 Map overlay: Vicinity of Virile, Vocation and Vox farms from the air**  
(Source MMP)

German troops braced themselves under a fierce barrage (starting at 3:50 p.m.) of artillery and indirect machine-gun fire as the minutes leading up to the localized

<sup>668</sup> Ibid.

<sup>669</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

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*Gegenangriff* ticked by. Some were dismayed at the prospect of leaving existing cover to advance in the fading light.<sup>670</sup> Their commanders, unwilling to sanction the loss of further territory, had once again demonstrated a steely determination to retain the northern portion of the Passchendaele Ridge at all costs. *IR95*'s postwar historian baldly articulated contemporary perceptions of this contested high ground's crucial importance: "The enemy could redeem past failures if he captured the *Höhenrücken* of the *Feldherrnhügel*. Yes. If it wasn't for the damned Germans – the Huns; they forgot that we fight for the safety of our home and country".<sup>671</sup> Brigadier-General Coffin, discerning the clamour of a new German preparatory barrage, later wrote: "At 4:10 p.m, the enemy's shellfire became intense and the SOS signal was sent up by the [32<sup>nd</sup>] Division on our left at 4:15 p.m.". <sup>672</sup>

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<sup>670</sup> TNA: WO/157/120: 'Annexe to Second Army Summary Dated 19<sup>th</sup> Dec[embe]r 1917: Translation of the closing pages of a diary taken from a dead German (probably a warrant officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Coy. 95<sup>th</sup> Inf. Regt., 38<sup>th</sup> Division) who was shot in V.29.b. in the early morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> inst.', Second Army Intelligence Files. For the intelligence value of captured documents, letters and diaries see Beach, 'British Intelligence and the German Army, 1914-1918', pp. 36-40.

<sup>671</sup> Buttman, *Kriegsgeschichte des Koniglich Preussischen 6. Thüringischen Infanterie Regiment Nr. 95: 1914-1918*, p. 253.

<sup>672</sup> TNA: WO/95/1727: 'Report on Operations', 7 December 1917, 25 Brigade War Diary. Brigadier-General Blacklock subsequently remarked that this 'was the only really severe shelling encountered by the attacking troops'. See IWM 4723: 'Preliminary Report on Operations, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

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**Plate 4.6 Panorama looking south from site of Mullet Farm toward Vat Cottage Ridge (Source: Rob Thompson)**

## Counterblow & Aftermath

*It is an easy thing for one whose foot is on the outside of calamity to give advice and to rebuke the sufferer.*<sup>673</sup>

### 5.1 Counterblow

Massed German batteries commenced a roaring counter-attack preparatory deluge of projectiles on to British positions NE and NW of Passchendaele at 4:10 p.m. on 2 December. Drifting banks of acrid, cordite-tinged smoke from the steady bombardment obscured the blighted region of unending shell craters, choked watercourses, shivered coppices and dispersed concrete pillboxes. Almost leaderless companies, platoons and sections, exhausted, wet-through and cowering under the ceaseless rain of hostile shells, steadied themselves for the expected counter-attack. One high-velocity missile detonated inside the pillbox HQ of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI with a particularly horrifying effect: “A shell passed through the slot, killed several men seated in a row on a form in its path, and finally exploded in an emplacement, rendering all the occupants in a greater or lesser degree casualties”.<sup>674</sup> Nine, including two officers (2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant T. Ferris and FOO 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant V.J. Horton) and 7 ORs were killed and six wounded.<sup>675</sup> Major Scott (acting CO), Lieutenant J. McLellan MC and another TMB officer were among the injured. “It is amazing the HQ was not entirely wiped out”.<sup>676</sup>

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<sup>673</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (Un sourced quotation variant).

<sup>674</sup> Thomas Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland: History of the 16<sup>th</sup> The Highland Light Infantry-City of Glasgow Regiment* (Glasgow: John M’Callum & Co., 1930), p. 111.

<sup>675</sup> 29-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant James Ferris (16<sup>th</sup> HLI attached 97 TMB) has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant V.J. Horton (age unknown) of ‘D’ Battery, 161 Brigade RFA is buried in Duhallow Cemetery.

<sup>676</sup> Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland*, p. 111.

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This truly devastating barrage, fired with effect by hundreds of field and heavy guns ringing the Passchendaele Salient, had little impact on the ability of gunners supporting 25 Brigade to respond in kind. The current situation had occurred dozens of times since Sir Herbert Plumer's first push on 20 September: Strictly limited objectives, captured and consolidated by the infantry, remained suitably protected by batteries deployed and ready to engage any counter-stroke. Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire) ordered an SOS signal to be discharged immediately after the one sent up by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division at 4:15 p.m. The evolving counter-attack, he later discovered, appeared to be primarily directed against the vicinity of Southern Redoubt, where 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton's platoon still held on to a section of Venison Trench 50 yards north of the lost earthwork. In the centre, Lieutenant-Colonel Irwin (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment) recalled "an intense barrage was put down. SOS went up on 32<sup>nd</sup> Div[ision] front and on Berkshire front, but no infantry action developed on my front". Hundreds of high explosive shells, fired at once in response to Stirling's flare, blanketed pre-determined SOS lines along with an accompanying indirect machine-gun barrage before the German infantry could fan-out into any sort of assault formation. Survivors went to ground or fled to the rear. Brigadier-General Coffin subsequently observed: "Although no action followed on the part of the enemy's infantry, it is believed that they were forming up in considerable strength opposite our front and that they were scattered by our artillery fire. The wide front over which the lights were sent up led me to believe that the enemy was about to carry out an attack on a large scale". 25<sup>th</sup> Division's local *Gegenangriff*, as far as 8<sup>th</sup> Division was concerned, appeared to be over before it could unfold: "By 5 o'clock the enemy's barrage was dying down and unusual quietness prevailed".<sup>677</sup>

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<sup>677</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary, WO/95/1730:

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On 97 Brigade's front, reduced elements of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, clinging to green line positions inside the *Hauptwiderstandslinie* south of Mallet Copse, and 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, defending a small salient east and west of Void Farm, bore the brunt of the developing German counter-attack. 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI had been driven off Hill 52 and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI stopped dead in front of Vat Cottages on their right and left respectively. The equally hard-pressed IR95 was, having lost all of its outpost zone and a considerable portion of the main line of resistance, ordered to "straighten out the line" by forcing the beset 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment back as far as the *Vorfeldzonelinie's* forward edge.<sup>678</sup> *Leutnant* Martini, his left flank made secure by the 2:00 p.m. preliminary operation, sent his men forward from the vicinity of Volt Farm: "The [main] counter-attack began in broad daylight at 5:15 p.m. [German time] when 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> companies with two *Truppes* of 9<sup>th</sup> Company attacked the enemy. At the same time, annihilation fire was called for and placed on the right positions".<sup>679</sup>

16<sup>th</sup> HLI, its forward posts overrun by advancing German troops, put up a stout resistance: "About 4 p.m. the enemy infantry were observed to be concentrating on N

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'Report on Action of Battn from 2:30 p.m. 1.12.17 – M.N. 2/3 .12. 17', 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary, WO/95/1727: 'Report on Operations', 7 December 1917, 25 Brigade War Diary and Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, *The Eighth Division: 1914-1918* (London: Naval & Military Press reprint of 1926 edition), p. 166. Reference to the attempted riposte in consulted German regimental histories is sparse. Mention is made of *Hauptmann* von Arnim's (*Kampftruppenkommandeur* of IR117) return to the rear to 'organise a systematic counter-attack' prior to the recapture of Southern Redoubt on the morning of 2 December. The narrative then claims, 'Heavy fighting started again at 5:00 p.m.' [German time], but provides no further details of a localized counter-attack. See *Hauptmann* Kurt Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin (3.Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1931), p. 196.

<sup>678</sup> Counter-attack orders (dispatched by wireless) to regain the line as far as the *Vorfeldzonelinie* had been intercepted during the afternoon, the information being passed on by II Corps at 1:56 p.m. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J'', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>679</sup> Major A.D. Buttman, *Kriegsgeschichte des Königlich Preussischen 6. Thüringischen Infanterie Regiment Nr. 95: 1914-1918* (Zeulenroda, Thüringen: Verlag Bernhard Sporn, 1935), p. 254.

side of Mallet Copse and about V.24 central. Our SOS was fired by Lieut[enant] Charlton, and our barrage was probably put down. The enemy infantry attacked our positions about 4:30 p.m., but were driven off by Lewis Guns and rifle fire with the assistance of one Vickers gun, which had been brought up".<sup>680</sup> On the left, *Leutnant* Martini's counter-attack forced back 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment to its original jumping-off line.<sup>681</sup> Major-General Shute, while clearly dubious about calculated German strength, readily confirmed the punishing ordeal that preceded the Lonsdales' general retirement in his subsequent after-action report:

The enemy's counter-attack was made through MALLETT COPSE against 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regt. who estimate the probable strength of the enemy who attacked at 300. This number is probably exaggerated, but the enemy had undoubtedly been collecting in some numbers in the vicinity of MALLETT COPSE all day. The 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment had done well in the early morning fighting ... The losses of this Battalion were considerable, especially in officers and NCOs and by 4:10 p.m. 15 of the officers and most of the NCOs had been hit and the men were practically without leaders. At 4:10 p.m. the enemy put a barrage well in rear of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regt. and counter-attacked under cover of rifle and rifle grenade fire. Our men fell back in front of this attack to our old frontline.<sup>682</sup>

16<sup>th</sup> HLI, its flanks exposed by the earlier repulse of 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI on the right and the withdrawal of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment on the left, stubbornly clung to positions around Void Farm. Situated about the forward edge of the *Hauptwiderstandslinie*, further efforts

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<sup>680</sup> TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

<sup>681</sup> See Appendix 16, Part E (para. 13). Enemy movement was also discerned opposite the left centre. Brigadier-General Blacklock's subsequent after-action report noted: 'At 4:15 p.m. 2 companies of the enemy [,] ??? about 200 men [,] advanced on Veal Cottage and thence to Vat Cottage'. See IWM 4723: 'Summary of the Attack of the 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde with 2 Battalions of the 96<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. on December 2 [1917]', Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>682</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part IV, Narrative Dealing with the Retirement of the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. Major-General Shute's doubt about enemy numbers was probably based on the CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF's subsequent after-action report'. See fn. 840 part b.

to eliminate this troublesome ‘*Engländernest*’ met with fierce rifle, rifle bomb and machine-gun fire.<sup>683</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Scully (CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF) was informed of Lieutenant Charlton’s SOS signal at 4:15 p.m. About 200 stragglers, many of them wounded, were then observed “returning in numbers” toward Virile Farm. Scully immediately sent his two remaining companies forward with instructions “to take with them every man of any regiment. He set the example; he brought out every available man of headquarters and led the way. It was an advance into the unknown, for no information had been received all day...”<sup>684</sup> The result, given the “sea of mud, and the leaden sleet of bullets from the pill-boxes”, was a limited advance “in the late afternoon twilight”<sup>685</sup>, which failed to retrieve a confused situation:

Lieut. Col. Scully at once ordered ‘C’ and ‘D’ Coys, which were in the vicinity of B[attalion]n. HQ, to advance; the men got out of their trenches and moved forward [,] keeping a good line under fairly heavy machine-gun fire. Runners and signallers of Bn. HQ details were sent forward with them. They advanced about 300 [yards] in front of VIRILE FARM and dug themselves in. The line thus forward ran from VOX FARM on the right to about V.29.b.40.70. when it bent back to the original line. The enemy attack did not get through our barrage.<sup>686</sup>

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<sup>683</sup>*Engländernest*: An improvised but strong defensive position dug by infiltrating British troops. A Bavarian regiment noted the previous year: ‘Once they had established themselves the British could prove very hard to dislodge, for they might have their Lewis guns and trench mortars with them, and they were astonishingly speedy diggers’. See Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme 1916* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), p. 274.

<sup>684</sup> Captain C.H. Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Council of the Newcastle and Gateshead Incorporated Chamber of Commerce, 1923) p. 89 and IWM 4723: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33’, 5 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>685</sup> *Ibid* and Michael Stedman, *Salford Pals: A History of the Salford Brigade – The 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalions the Lancashire Fusiliers 1914-19* (London: Leo Cooper, 1993), p. 156.

<sup>686</sup> TNA: WO/95/2398: 16<sup>th</sup> NF War Diary.

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Scully subsequently reported that the enemy “did not follow up” the retiring troops, nor did he see any Germans. His primary concern, as he led his men forward into the void, was for his companies’ vulnerable flanks: “In view of the fact that the enemy were in possession of HILL 52 and that there were no organised troops to hold our frontline, the OC 16<sup>th</sup> North’d Fusiliers decided that any further advance of his Battalion would expose our line to attack from the direction of Hill 52 and that, moreover, both his own flanks would be exposed as he advanced”.<sup>687</sup> *IR94*’s postwar historian, writing of Scully’s forlorn progress, remarked: “At 5:00 p.m. [German time] the English attacked again in many waves in an attempt to capture the area on the right flank. A timely response with rifle and machine-gun fire prevented this”.<sup>688</sup> The new position, a shallow bight of ground 300 yards from the original start line with both flanks refused, was rapidly consolidated in the growing darkness.



**Plate 5.1 Lieutenant-Colonel A.J. Scully**  
(Source: Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers*)

<sup>687</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part IV, Narrative Dealing with the Retirement of the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 17.

<sup>688</sup> Alexander von Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Verlag von Klasing & Co., 1921), p. 238.

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2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, having been previously forced back to its jumping-off line at 3:30 p.m., did not experience any further attacks after 4:15 p.m.<sup>689</sup> The Germans, satisfied with regaining the *Vorfeldzonelinie* below Hill 52, focused their efforts on strengthening shell hole posts and sections of trenchline. 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, still stalled in front of Vat Cottages, failed to maintain any of the small gains made beneath the dominant strongpoint:

It was obvious that a hostile counter-attack might be expected and this took place about 4 p.m. on the afternoon of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, preceded by an intense artillery barrage. What exactly happened is not very definite, but it is clear that the line [came] under the enemy barrage, and owing to difficulties of communication and the heavy casualties amongst officers and NCOs, was found farther back toward our original position. It appears that, following the barrage, the enemy attacked with one battalion, which considerably cut-up by our counter-fire, came within a certain distance of our positions and then broke and retired. The attack and counter-attack, therefore, though not exactly a failure, had on account of unexpected difficulties, only partially succeeded”.<sup>690</sup>

17<sup>th</sup> HLI's return to the jumping-off line, its postwar historians note, was “almost general”, some outposts “still hanging on to the advanced positions on the 3<sup>rd</sup>”.<sup>691</sup> On the far left, 15<sup>th</sup> LF repelled vigorous attacks against a refused right flank extended during the late morning to connect with 17<sup>th</sup> HLI.<sup>692</sup> Counter-attacks originating north and NW of the Battalion's line failed, as predicted, to materialise due to impassable ground conditions.<sup>693</sup>

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<sup>689</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

<sup>690</sup> TNA: WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

<sup>691</sup> J.W. Arthur & I.S. Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry (Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Battalion): Record of War Service 1914-1918* (Glasgow: David J. Clark, 1920) p. 69.

<sup>692</sup> Major-General J.C. Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes Vol. 1* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949). p. 277.

<sup>693</sup> See TNA: WO/95/2400: ‘Notes to Accompany Special Intelligence Maps of the Area V.15 – V.30’ November 1917, 97 Brigade War Diary.

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VIII Corps HQ first received notification that something was afoot at 4:20 p.m.: “From II Corps. SOS went up on right of II Corps 4:10 p.m.”. 8<sup>th</sup> Division followed with another report ten minutes later: “SOS went up on our front at 4.3 p.m.”.<sup>694</sup> II Corps telegraphed another message, confirming plans to resume operations during the early hours of 3 December, at 4:40 p.m.:

32<sup>nd</sup> Division will consolidate the line now held between TEALL COT (V.30.b.15.50.) and TOURNANT FARM in V.28.b.4.1. aaa The 32<sup>nd</sup> Division will [,] on the night of 2/3 December [,] carry out a minor operation with a view to capturing VEAL COT. and HILL 52 and improving the siting of the line held in the vicinity of these places aaa The zero hour for this operation will be settled by the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, but will not be before 3:30 a.m. on the morning of 3 Dec. aaa as soon as the exact hours is decided [,] the 32<sup>nd</sup> Div. will inform II Corps HQ, II Corps HA, and 8<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> div[isions] direct aaa 7 Sqd. RFC will arrange for a contact aeroplane to fly over the front in question at 7:30 a.m. on 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec. and call for flares [,] and also arrange for an aeroplane to be in the air from dawn 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec. to give warning of counter-attacks and to receive messages from B[attalio]n HQ.<sup>695</sup>

Three more reports from the CHA (“counter-batteries carried out 4 concentrations and intense neutralization throughout the day aaa SOS calls 4.3 and 4:27 p.m. were answered”), 33<sup>rd</sup> Division (“Intermittent shelling of Passchendaele all day aaa Heavy shelling of D.15 at 2:30 p.m. aaa Wind NW aaa SOS left of Passchendaele at 4.3 p.m. aaa Prisoners total 2”) and II Corps (“32<sup>nd</sup> Div. report time 3:45 p.m. aaa TEALL COTTAGE recaptured with 40 prisoners aaa Line now reported to run TEALL COT. inclusive VOCATION and VOX FARMS both inclusive [,] VOID inclusive thence along southern edge of MALLET COPSE, south of VAT COTTAGES to about V.23.c.0.2. aaa VAT

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<sup>694</sup> BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid and TNA: WO/95/643: ‘Secret Priority G.520’, 2 December 1917, II Corps War Diary.

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COT. held by M.G.s and wired”) followed before news of the German counter-attack was received from 8<sup>th</sup> Division at 5:05 p.m.: “25<sup>th</sup> Brigade report enemy attacking believed in some force aaa Report time 4:20 p.m.”.<sup>696</sup>

Major-General Shute, certain that Hill 52, Void Farm and Mallet Copse were in British hands, still anticipated the eventual capture of Vat and Veal cottages when an SOS signal was reported (4:07 p.m.) from the direction of Mallet Copse.<sup>697</sup> A telephone message to Brigadier-General Tyler (BGRA 32<sup>nd</sup> Division) followed three minutes later: “SOS on 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade front at MALLET WOOD. They are coming through MALLET WOOD. We occupy HILL 52”. This report, its sender obviously unaware of the dire circumstances, appears to relate the earlier observed trickling of enemy troops from the direction of the inundated weald, so no word of the developing counter-attack reached Division HQ during this time. Indeed, the usual reports, orders and queries continued to flow as 38<sup>th</sup> Division’s riposte developed: Captain Knox forwarded further interview results (reasonably accurate as it turned out) gathered from wounded survivors at 4:00 p.m.: “A man of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI states that his Battalion are holding VOID FARM. A man of the Borders states his Battalion is holding VELDT FARM. A man of 17<sup>th</sup> HLI states his Battalion holds approximately the line of 1<sup>st</sup> objective. A man of 15<sup>th</sup> Lancs. Fus. states they hold final objective. Very few give any idea of time”. Concerns about the timing of 97 Brigade’s forthcoming resumption of operations were expressed during another

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<sup>696</sup> BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

<sup>697</sup> 32<sup>nd</sup> Division’s DMGO wrote afterward: ‘At 4-06 p.m. [sic] all [barrage machine-] guns replied to the SOS, ‘fire being opened within 30 seconds’. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action Report: ‘Appendix ‘H’: Action of Machine-guns During Operations Near Passchendaele, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 16 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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telephone call at 4:20 p.m.: “Attack is not to be before 3:30 a.m. – Order from the [II] Corps – on account of something else on the right.<sup>698</sup> We have got to tell them exact. Will you let us know as soon as you know?” Previous anxiety over retention of objectives gained was exacerbated by a telegraph message received three minutes later: “Wire timed 4:23 p.m. From 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade. SOS 4:23 p.m.”<sup>699</sup>

The exchange of messages continued as before, 14 Brigade, making preparations to attack through 97 Brigade on the night of 3/4 December, being queried by telephone about recent troop movements at 4:30 p.m.: [Div. HQ] “Which of your battalions are moving up tonight?” [14 Bde] “2 companies of 15<sup>th</sup> HLI have moved to Meetcheele at request of 97<sup>th</sup> Bde”. [Div. HQ] “What is this about do you know? Nothing is going wrong?” [14 Bde] “Latest report from 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade is that they are on HILL 52. They have also got TEALL COTTAGE and 40 prisoners and they have also VOID FARM. That was before the SOS sent up”. A final note from Captain Knox was delivered at 4:49 p.m.: “A Captain of the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI states that the situation on the left was as follows at 12 noon: 15<sup>th</sup> LF in original front line.<sup>700</sup> Left Coy. of 17<sup>th</sup> HLI in original line. Right Coy. 17<sup>th</sup> HLI slightly advanced on line approximately of VAT COTTAGES, but he does not know situation on right”.<sup>701</sup>

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<sup>698</sup> ‘[S]omething else on the right’: A possible reference to renewed activity contemplated by 8<sup>th</sup> Division.

<sup>699</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, p. 25 and ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>700</sup> The informant was probably basing his statement on earlier proximity to 15<sup>th</sup> LF’s refused right flank.

<sup>701</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Lack of any available news following the observed SOS signal led 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ, at the GOC 97 Brigade's request, to order batteries (engaging enemy movements since 3:20 p.m.) to reduce rates of fire: "To CRA. [Brigadier-] General Blacklock thinks you should go back to normal rates. You should search all around VALUATION HOUSES, etc.". A telegraph (5:05 p.m.) reporting the SOS signal on 8<sup>th</sup> Division's front preceded an inconclusive telephone conversation (copied down at the receiving end during real-time transcription) between Major-General Shute and Blacklock at 5:10 p.m.:

I have just wired to you that the SOS has gone up on the 8<sup>th</sup> Division front. You have heard from the wounded that certain parts of your front have had to give way. You think it is the front of the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI. Have you heard anything about the Borders? What time did this [counter-] attack take place? You have stopped firing on SOS lines: fairly quiet now. A certain amount of machine-gun fire from VALUATION HOUSES, artillery fire has died down. Do you know what is happening on the right? You have sent out patrols to VINDICTIVE CROSSROADS and to VIRILE FARM for information to try and find out your right and what is going on your front.<sup>702</sup>

Shute later observed: "This information was regarded as unreliable by the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade who thought that the attack was on the front of the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI." The somewhat mollified GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's focus now shifted to where his line joined Brigadier-General Coffin's 25 Brigade. He telephoned (5:19 p.m.) 8<sup>th</sup> Division in order to find out whether or not his neighbours were aware of their left battalion's (2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade) situation opposite Northern Redoubt. The GOC 97 Brigade was rung up a second time (5:32 p.m.) after a short conversation with Major-General Heneker's HQ:

Shute: The information from the 8<sup>th</sup> Division is that their line runs D.6.b.9.1. – E.1.a.2.8. – W.25.c.3.1., W.25.c.2.4.

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<sup>702</sup> Ibid.

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– W.25.c.1.9. – V.30.b.7.3. – V.30.b.1.4., which is practically TEALL COTTAGE with a post at V.30.b.8.5.<sup>703</sup>

Blacklock: The five commanding officers are now with their B[attalio]ns. Officers are trying to find out the situation. 16 MGs of 96<sup>th</sup> Bde are at VIRILE FARM: 8 of them are going to be employed for the close defence of the line.<sup>704</sup> [I am going] to get in touch with Colonel Scully.

Shute: He has got on to HILL 52 hasn't he? Have you found any of the KOYLI yet?

Blacklock: Not any more yet.

Shute: When do you think we will get news of what did happen?

Blacklock's response is not recorded. 8<sup>th</sup> Division telephoned confirmation of the German counter-attack on their front at 5:50 p.m.: "25<sup>th</sup> Brigade report enemy attacking, believed in some force. Report timed 4:20 p.m.".<sup>705</sup>

8<sup>th</sup> Division HQ telegraphed a report detailing what was known of the general situation on its front: "Hostile artillery fairly quiet till 11:40 a.m. then heavy barrage round KOREK – GRAVENSTAFEL area. SOS went up at 4:10 p.m. Situation now reported quieter. Prisoners captured now 3 officers and 52 ORs".<sup>706</sup> Twenty-five minutes

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<sup>703</sup> The original report, received by VIII Corps HQ at 5:35 p.m., began: 'SOUTHERN REDOUBT now reported held by enemy...' See BL: 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

<sup>704</sup> Sixteen Vickers guns of 96 Company MGC were deployed near Virile Farm to provide indirect fire support during the attack. See Chapter 2, p. 125.

<sup>705</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', p. 14 and 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>706</sup> Message received by VIII Corps HQ at 5:10 p.m. 'Repeated by wire to 2<sup>nd</sup> Army [Report] Centre [and] II Corps'. See BL: 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

would pass before Major-General Shute received another telephone report (6:15 p.m.) from 97 Brigade:

Situation as follows: When [counter-] attack started Colonel Scully sent two platoons to HILL 52, where he had already one company.<sup>707</sup> He is up there now, no reports received from him, but I think it is fairly alright there. [He sent] 2 more platoons to the Borders, who are well forward in MALLEY COPSE and probably suffered a good deal, but wherever they are they are probably very thin. 17<sup>th</sup> HLI men doubtful part of the line. I have not been able to get any news of them. It seems that their line may be anywhere. The 15<sup>th</sup> [LF] on the left report their left company is on objective and possibly their other two companies are there. It is possible that the people on their right [17<sup>th</sup> HLI] brought them back. Otherwise all clear.

Major Scott 16<sup>th</sup> HLI and McLellan 2<sup>nd</sup> in command, have been wounded, which only leaves the Adjutant with the Battalion. All battalions have suffered heavy casualties in officers. The General [Blacklock] thinks this operation would be very difficult to carry out, as he has not got officers to collect the men. With the help of his MGs he can take on holding the line, but might like an extra two companies sent to him in case he wants them on the left. He won't ask for them unless he cannot possibly help it. Left company of 15<sup>th</sup> [LF] has two machine-guns with it. Major Scott, who was taking orders to Col. Scully from him has been wounded. TM Battery commander killed. Genl. Blacklock will push out where he can but cannot take on minor operation.<sup>708</sup>

The situation was more serious than this report made out: Hill 52 had been lost before dawn; 16<sup>th</sup> HLI held on to an exposed salient around Void Farm; remnants of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI were, except for a few outposts, back on their original jumping-off line. 15<sup>th</sup> LF successfully secured its entire objective, but had to extend a refused right flank to 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, while 16<sup>th</sup> NF's afternoon advance came nowhere near Hill 52 and

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<sup>707</sup> See fn. 663.

<sup>708</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Mallet Copse. 97 Brigade HQ's ignorance over the true state of affairs is explicable when one considers the often fragmentary and contradictory nature of reports coming in. Brigadier-General Blacklock, nevertheless, now recognised his shattered battalions could do no more; the proposed pre-dawn minor operation to secure what remained of the red line objective was beyond their capabilities.

32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ received a slightly reassuring telegraph from 14 Brigade at 6:30 p.m.: "15<sup>th</sup> HLI reports 5:50 p.m. Situation apparently normal. The 2 companies have not been sent to MEETCHEELE. Apparently calm all along the front". 8<sup>th</sup> Division followed with a telegraph reiterating previously confirmed (by telephone at 5:19 p.m.) map reference coordinates of 25 Brigade's current line.<sup>709</sup> Hill 52, overlooking the Paddebeek valley south of Vat Cottage Ridge, remained the key feature north of Passchendaele. The tactically important hillock and its environs, so Brigadier-General Blacklock believed, had been retained despite the recent German counter-attack. Subsequent post-dusk discussion between 32<sup>nd</sup> Division and 97 Brigade HQs took place under this misconception:

6:55 p.m. Verbal. [Div. HQ] To 97<sup>th</sup> Bde. 97<sup>th</sup> Brigade will establish itself tonight on the line TEALL COTTAGE (inclusive) HILL 52 (inclusive) VOID FARM (inclusive) MALLET COPSE – VEAL COTTAGES (inclusive) – V.23.c.2.4. This line to be strongly consolidated. Battalions and companies to be re-organised. Guides to learn position of their units so as to be able to lead up reliefs tomorrow night. Two companies cannot be placed at your [Blacklock's] disposal in view of tomorrow's relief. If you require more troops you should keep KOYLI in reserve behind the left about TOURNANT FARM. Machine-guns

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<sup>709</sup> Ibid.

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to be moved up to defensive positions in the line indicated. Corps has been informed that 3:30 a.m. is the time the VEAL COTTAGE thing will be done. The General [Blacklock] has had that?

97 Bde: Genl. Blacklock spoke to Major Turner [unidentified] about it.

Blacklock, armed with new information concerning the state of his Brigade and clearly apprehensive about security of the line, took up the receiver and, with a characteristic directness, spelled-out the unpleasant operational particulars (the first part copied down at the receiving end during transcription) to his superiors:

Div. HQ: Genl. Blacklock speaking now: You are afraid of the responsibility of the line: You are very weak on your left and very disorganised. Major Scott [CO 16<sup>th</sup> HLI] and other Colonel<sup>710</sup> who were running the show have been knocked out. Borders back in our frontline. Do you mean to say you are back on your frontline everywhere? I never heard that before.

Blacklock: They [Germans] came right through down to our old frontline. VOID FARM has gone back to VOCATION [FARM].<sup>711</sup>

Div. HQ: Is the Boche in our frontline?

Blacklock: He is back in his forward zone in the areas of No.3 [11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment] and No. 4 [17<sup>th</sup> HLI] battalions.

Div. HQ: Are we behind our old frontline do you know? You cannot get on to the old [red line] objective. Are you sure you have any line of defence at all now?<sup>712</sup>

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<sup>710</sup> Consulted war diaries and regimental histories shed no light on the identity of the ‘other Colonel’ referred to.

<sup>711</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, contrary to Brigadier-General Blacklock’s belief that a withdrawal to Vocation Farm had occurred, still maintained posts around Void Farm after dusk.

<sup>712</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Appendix ‘J’, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Major-General Shute, finally acquiescing to Blacklock's on-the-spot estimation, concluded it was "impracticable to resume the offensive with the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade". A rash scheme to carry on with Brigadier-General Lumsden's 14 Brigade was pondered shortly afterward: "The question of moving the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade forward at once and attacking with them through 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade was considered, but this course was rejected, as it was considered that the assembly of the Brigade and the delivery of an attack in the dark without adequate reconnaissance was an operation not offering the necessary chances of success".<sup>713</sup>

Major-General Shute telephoned II Corps at 7:08 p.m.; nothing else remained but to inform his superiors about the retirement:

I have bad news for you. We were counter-attacked and except for holding HILL 52, where we have got a couple companies, we are back on our frontline. I had sent out my orders when I had got this news through, but I'm afraid it is no good trying to carry out your orders.<sup>714</sup> I do not think we can do anything until tomorrow. I think we can do it then with another brigade on the line where we started from except on HILL 52. The Bosche is very close up to our old line. If I had known this earlier, I would have relieved tonight. I do not think we are at VOX [FARM].<sup>715</sup> This is the first news I have had: I presume it was that SOS. What I can do tonight is to push that line forward a little if I can.<sup>716</sup>

The doleful situation, Shute was fairly certain, could be turned around by another effort the following night: "The Divisional commander, therefore, decided to attack with 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and two battalions of the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade on the night December

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<sup>713</sup> Ibid: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', 11 December 1917, p. 14.

<sup>714</sup> Telegraphed by II Corps at 4:40 p.m. See above.

<sup>715</sup> Vox Farm remained in British hands.

<sup>716</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

3/4". Orders "indicating the situation which had arisen on the front of 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and the operation to be undertaken" were subsequently issued to Brigadier-General Lumsden, who was asked to "submit his plans at once..."<sup>717</sup>

Hours had passed since the start of the German counter-attack. Earlier reports, based on sketchy information and erroneous conclusions, concerning the extent and consequences of the recently reported withdrawal resulted in a heated telephone exchange (7:20 p.m.) between Major-General Shute and Brigadier-General Blacklock:

Shute: Why did you not report that you had been biffed back by that counter-attack? No message came through to us. No. It was not reported to Col[onel] MacNamara [sic]<sup>718</sup> nor to me. Are you in TEALL COTTAGE? Are you holding HILL 52? Is it to be understood that you have not got VOX FARM? On the left are you beaten back behind our old frontline? On their old frontline. What attacked you and at what time? Why did they have to come back then? Had you no MGs or Lewis Guns or Stokes Mortars? Well why didn't they fire?<sup>719</sup>

Blacklock's replies to this relentless cross-examination are not recorded in the surviving transcripts, but it is easy, given the heavy casualties, ensuing disorganisation and how much still remained unknown in the chaotic aftermath of the German counter-thrust, to commiserate with the censured Brigadier.<sup>720</sup> Shute, his ire aroused by what appeared to be an avoidable setback and (taking into account the local dominance of enemy machine-

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<sup>717</sup> Ibid: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', 11 December 1917, p. 14.

<sup>718</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. McNamara (GSO 1).

<sup>719</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>720</sup> 'The ramifications of casualties are great. Strength, equipment and leaders are lost. Apart from its physical impact, [hostile] fire contributes to the dispersion and dislocation of surviving troops. In concert with terrain, reduced visibility and noise it creates a chaotic environment'. See Roger Noble, 'Raising the White Flag: The Surrender of Australian Soldiers on the Western Front', *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire*, No. 72-1990, p. 57.

guns) wanting to husband 14 Brigade for the next effort, then informed Blacklock of his intention to keep the worn-out 97 Brigade in the line for two more nights:

Well then, the only possible way of facing the situation is that you have to improve your position as you can during the night. It is impossible to relieve you and it is impossible to reinforce you. You are practically right back into your old line. That's what it comes to. There is nothing more to say except that you must hold on to what you have got. They [battalions] had evidently not consolidated their line, MGs were not in position and Stokes mortars were not firing and, of course, as a result they simply came straight back as soon as they were attacked. The only thing to do is improve your line and get it thoroughly organised. You are to try and get VAT COTTAGES if you can and Lumsden will have to make the same attack tomorrow.

The discussion concluded with a query as to where the GOC 97 Brigade would like his SOS lines placed. Shute closed with a terse statement of expectations: "You will have to hold your line throughout tomorrow and I will order Lumsden to attack through you tomorrow night".<sup>721</sup>

On 25 Brigade's front, efforts to form a "continuous and connected" line proceeded after dusk (**Map 13**). Moonrise was at 7:28 p.m., so several hours of darkness remained to organise and improve positions just opposite Venison trench and the redoubts.<sup>722</sup> Brigadier-General Coffin, "Knowing that his line was but thinly held, owing to casualties which had been sustained, decided to order the 3 remaining companies of

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<sup>721</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. A subsequent complaint about perceived failure of 14 Brigade's Stokes mortars to deploy near Tournant Farm (see Chapter 2 pp. 125-26) was made by the CO 15<sup>th</sup> LF. Brigadier-General Lumsden replied that the battery was in place by zero + 2 hours, the officer in charge testifying that he reported to Lieutenant-Colonel Utterson at 4:30 a.m. Major-General Shute, based on Lumsden's response, rejected Utterson's claim. See IWM 4723: '32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1.1499/20/1' 5 December 1917 and '14<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. G.230/0/5', 10 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2) and Appendix 8.

<sup>722</sup> Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 167 and TNA: WO/157/288: 'Calendar for December 1917: Times Calculated for Second Army Front and Greenwich Mean Time', II Corps Intelligence File.

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the 2<sup>nd</sup> West Yorkshire Regt. to move up to BELLEVUE.<sup>723</sup> At the same time, the 41<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade [14<sup>th</sup> Division] were informed of the situation and warned to be ready to reinforce if required”. These precautions, implemented during the German counter-attack, turned out to be unnecessary: “At 5 p.m. the enemy’s barrage began to die down ... Information was also received that our line was intact and at 5:20 p.m. a message was sent informing the 2<sup>nd</sup> West Yorkshire Regt. that the 3 companies were not now required”.<sup>724</sup>

Sporadic flare-ups continued as the enemy, alarmed by the close proximity of the new British frontline to the *Vorfeldzonelinie*, engaged any signs of activity with rifle and machine-gun fire: “Heavy fighting started again at 5:00 pm. [German time]. It was especially severe for 12<sup>th</sup> Company. By sheer luck this unit had been issued new hand grenades and was thus well equipped to resist. Arrival of darkness also assisted the beleaguered men”.<sup>725</sup> 25 Brigade’s situation remained, despite enemy efforts, relatively secure following the attempted counter-attack. Battalion commanders, anticipating the promised relief by 41 Brigade (7<sup>th</sup> King’s Royal Rifle Corps, 8<sup>th</sup> King’s Royal Rifle Corps [KRRC], 7<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigade, 8<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigade) eagerly awaited the appearance of advanced parties from the incoming battalions.<sup>726</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling recalled: “All guides for the relief who tried to reach Bn. HQ up to date having been [sic] casualties, I sent down Lieutenant Burne (Signal Officer) with guides from HQ details at

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<sup>723</sup> The fourth company of 2<sup>nd</sup> West Yorkshire (23 Brigade) had previously (night of 1 December) been dispatched to 25 Brigade reserve to replace a company – kept forward following heavy losses from shellfire by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire’s incoming ‘C’ Company – of 1<sup>st</sup> RIR. See Chapter 3, p 157.

<sup>724</sup> TNA: WO/95/1727: ‘Report on Operations’, 7 December 1917, 25 Brigade War Diary.

<sup>725</sup> Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin (3. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117*, p. 196.

<sup>726</sup> See TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2’, 25 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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about 6:45 p.m. to meet incoming unit, at the same time collecting more guides from coys. [to] take the 8<sup>th</sup> Bn. KRRC forward from Bn. HQ". 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Upton had not reported in yet, but it was hoped he would be able to extricate his small party from Venison Trench before 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire's relief was complete.<sup>727</sup>

At Volgeltje Chateau, Brigadier-General Aspinall (BGGs VIII Corps), still awaiting word about the general situation after nightfall, received two telegraphed situation reports from 8<sup>th</sup> Division at 5:55 and 6:40 p.m respectively: "Following from 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. Timed 5:10 p.m. aaa Situation appears to be quietening down aaa Another wire timed 5:35 p.m. reads aaa Situation quiet but still obscure"; "Reference Corps Commander's enquiry: Heavy MG fire, which opened at Zero in bright moonlight appear [sic] to be cause of failure left battalion". Another telegraph, this time from II Corps reported, "No change in the situation in Goudberg sector". Relative peace, readily discerned by a measurable decline in artillery and small arms fire, seemed to reign on 8<sup>th</sup> Division's front when the neighbouring 33<sup>rd</sup> Division telegraphed, "Front now reported quiet" at 7:00 p.m.<sup>728</sup> Additional confirmation of what was already known at 32<sup>nd</sup> Division HQ was telegraphed by its supporting gunners twenty minutes later: "No. 2 FOO Group reports situation approximately back in old frontline from VIRILE FARM to V.29.a.5.3. Situation on the left [vicinity of Hill 52] not clear. Front quiet. Timed 7 p.m."<sup>729</sup>

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<sup>727</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary.

<sup>728</sup> BL: 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

<sup>729</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

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Advanced companies of Brigadier-General P.C.B. Skinner's 41 Brigade "reached WATERLOO about 8:30 p.m." and the expected relief of 25 Brigade "was carried out by small parties and was completed without any great difficulty..."<sup>730</sup> On the right, Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling, overseeing the relief of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire, recorded in his after-action report: "At about 9 p.m. or 9:30 p.m. 2<sup>nd</sup> L[ieutenan]t Upton reported with his party at Bn. HQ having succeeded in extricating himself. I sent him forward to a position [gap between 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire] where he later reported himself to be". Upton and his men, gaunt, muddy and bloodstained, had held on to their short section of Venison Trench for almost twenty hours. Heavy losses amongst officers and men left Stirling with no choice but to order them back to help constitute a "continuous and connected line" until the arrival of 8<sup>th</sup> KRRC. "The relief occurred without further incident".<sup>731</sup> In the centre, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire was able, like 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire, to disengage unmolested. Lieutenant-Colonel Irwin subsequently wrote: "Two companies of 8<sup>th</sup> R[ifle] B[rigade] relieved the Battalion that night. One company taking over the advanced outpost line, the other company relieving my reserve coy. The relief was complete between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m." <sup>732</sup> On the left, posts occupied by elements of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade were also taken over by 8<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigade. "Relief was carried out individually by small bodies of men and few casualties were sustained". 1<sup>st</sup> RIR, in

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<sup>730</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 'Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917', 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary. Relieving troops of 41 Brigade remained under Major-General Heneker's command until 12:00 p.m. on 3 December. See TNA: WO/95/1873: 'VIII Corps G. 2236', 29 November 1917, 14<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>731</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: 'Appendix B', 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary and Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, pp. 166-67.

<sup>732</sup> TNA: WO/95/1730: 'Report on Action of Battn from 2:30 p.m. 1.12.17 - M.N. 2/3 .12. 17', 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary.

immediate support since the night of 1/2 December, remained in position until replaced by an incoming battalion of 41 Brigade.<sup>733</sup>

Major-General Shute's determination to resume the attack on the night of 3/4 December was almost certainly influenced by the mistaken belief that Hill 52, notwithstanding reported reverses on the right and left, was still held by "a couple of companies". Retention of its tactically valuable false crest and NE slope would, it appeared, further facilitate another attempt to gain Vat Cottage Ridge. A telephone call (7:55 p.m.) to 14 Brigade HQ revealed, regardless of prevailing uncertainties, the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's intent:

Shute: You have just heard the news [retirement of 97 Brigade]. We have just heard it also. Yes. It will be another scheme and it will be more troops. Yes. It is the whole thing over again. That is how it stands at the moment. We have only just got this news, so it is rather hard to answer now. You know the orders for the battalion [15<sup>th</sup> HLI] at BELLEVUE occupying MEETCHEELE – MOSSELMARKT Spur.<sup>734</sup> Well it is to be ready and alert as the whole of that front is pretty rocky. You will have two battalions up there tonight.<sup>735</sup>

Meanwhile, in response to Brigadier-General Blacklock's request, "artillery and machine-guns were ordered to bring SOS lines back to cover the positions now held by 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade". Re-organisation and reliefs duly commenced in close proximity to the enemy, while Brigadier-General Lumsden and his staff, still situated at Kansas Cross,

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<sup>733</sup> TNA: WO/95/1731: 'Report of the part played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn. The Rifle Brigade in the Operations at Passchendaele', 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary and James W. Taylor, *The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), p. 119.

<sup>734</sup> 14 Brigade's four battalions were positioned from west to east at Irish Farm, Hilltop, Wurst Farm and Bellevue. See TNA: WO/95/2370: '32<sup>nd</sup> Division Offensive Instructions No. 11: Special Instructions to G.O.C., Brigade in Divisional Support (14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade) and G.O.C., Brigade in Divisional Reserve (96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade)', 30 November 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>735</sup> Ibid: After-action report, 'Appendix 'J', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division: Telephone and Telegraph Messages 2 December 1917', 11 December 1917.

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drew up plans for the proposed operation. Shute and his GSO 1 Lieutenant-Colonel MacNamara simultaneously prepared their own yet to be sanctioned proposal for the continuance of operations. Preparations to resume the attack on the following night would, nonetheless, progress in anticipation of the hoped for assent from II Corps.<sup>736</sup>

Erratic machine-gun and rifle fire exchanges erupted under the momentary glow of descending flares as inter-battalion reliefs and adjustments were carried out along 97 Brigade's indiscriminate frontline.<sup>737</sup> Ration carrying parties for units tasked to remain in that line, well underway before the onset of darkness, were overseen by dedicated transport officers and quartermaster sergeants [QMS]: "Up the long, perilously exposed tracks hot meals were carried: the fatigue of the carry alone was enough for normal men". The hazards of negotiating winding, broken duckboard paths leading to and from the forward zone were further demonstrated by the fate of those directly responsible for delivering rations to 16<sup>th</sup> NF: "Tragedy hovered over the trip. On the night of 2<sup>nd</sup> December, Second-Lieutenant Collings, the Transport Officer, accompanied by QMS Hood, reached Battalion HQ [at Virile Farm] in fulfilment of their duty. They left, were guided on to the track, but were never seen again".<sup>738</sup> Men were withdrawn and reorganised as far as possible into their respective units during the hours after sundown. No amount of re-organisation and adjustment could make up for the severe losses sustained by 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI; surviving elements were withdrawn, their place between Teall Cottage and Hill 52 taken over by the previously dispatched companies of 16<sup>th</sup> NF, to

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<sup>736</sup> Ibid: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', 11 December 1917, pp. 14-15.

<sup>737</sup> See Appendix 11 for '97 Brigade Order No. 182' issued at 9:30 pm on 2 December.

<sup>738</sup> Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers*, p. 89. 17-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Frank Reginald Collings and 33-year-old QMS Thomas Hood have no known grave and are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.

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Irish Farm before dawn on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>739</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> HLI still resolutely clung to the salient about Void Farm. Its injured commander (Major Scott), seriously wounded by an enemy shell, “reported at Brigade HQ and command of the Battalion was transferred to OC 16<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers...”<sup>740</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Scully’s responsibilities were now two-fold: Take both battalions (16<sup>th</sup> HLI and 16<sup>th</sup> NF) in hand to consolidate any territorial gains before sunrise.<sup>741</sup> Remnants of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, now reformed on the jumping-off line, fortified positions from the left of Virile Farm to the boundary with 17<sup>th</sup> HLI. On the left and far left, 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, uncertain of the location of advanced posts still holding out beyond the old frontline, and 15<sup>th</sup> LF, “dug in and consolidated on its objective”, laboured throughout the night to preserve a connected line.<sup>742</sup> Sir Henry Rawlinson expressed dismay about the unsatisfactory operational outcome in his diary that evening:

The 32 and 8 Div[isions] attacked at 1:55 AM this morning with limited objectives and though they won some ground [,] they did not get very far forward – In the afternoon at 4:15 PM [,] the Bosch put in a strong counter-attack and drove us back to our original line [,] which is very disappointing – We cannot [,] I fear [,] continue the offensive [,] as we have no fresh div[isions] and reinforcements are coming in but [unintelligible] so I have told corps to consolidate the line they are now on with a view of making it quite secure against attack.<sup>743</sup>

Sir Douglas Haig prematurely remarked – based on early reports – that the night operation appeared to be a conditional success: “Second Army carried out an operation

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<sup>739</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI War Diary.

<sup>740</sup> TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary.

<sup>741</sup> The CO 16<sup>th</sup> NF described the final position as ‘about 250 to 300 yards in advance of the original line: ‘My No. 3 Company dropped back a defensive flank to VOCATION FARM to keep in touch with my No.2 Company. My No. 4 Company dropped back a defensive flank to cover the left of the Battalion’. See IWM 4723: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33’, 5 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>742</sup> TNA: WO/95/2405 17<sup>th</sup> HLI and WO/95/2397 15<sup>th</sup> LF war diaries.

<sup>743</sup> CAC: RVLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 2 December 1917.

on north end of the Passchendaele ridge in the moonlight on a front of about 4000 yards [sic] by the 8<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> divisions. The object was to obtain certain points, which gave the enemy observation westwards onto our communications. All were captured except one and our troops are now within a hundred yards of it”.<sup>744</sup> Major-General Shute’s request to resume the attack on the night of 3/4 December had been passed on to II Corps HQ, which in turn asked Second Army for sanction. The final decision was out of Rawlinson’s hands. It was now up to Haig, no doubt made aware of the actual situation by the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, to determine whether or not further efforts and consequent losses would be worth any sort of tangible attainment of objectives.

## 5.2 Aftermath

Lieutenant-General Hunter-Weston motored to Lieutenant-General Jacob’s (GOC II Corps) HQ at Lovie Chateau on the morning of 2 December. Lunch with Major-General Heneker in his Canal Bank dugout followed during the early afternoon. The GOC VIII Corps then returned to Lovie Chateau for a conference with Sir Henry Rawlinson at 3:00 p.m. Meanwhile, mixed reports, received by VIII Corps HQ between 2:35 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., told of hold ups at some points and objectives gained at others. “The situation remained obscure until 4:30 p.m. at which hour reports had been received that the SOS had been sent up on the entire front of the attack, and, shortly afterwards, a report was received from II Corps that they had re-captured TEALL COTTAGE with 40 prisoners at 3:45 p.m. but that VAT COTTAGES were held by the enemy with machine-guns”. 8<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>744</sup> Haig diary entry 2 December 1917 in ‘The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig’s Autograph Great War Diary’, Parts 9-10 1917 (NLS Acc., 3155, Reel No. 5. 96, 97 and 141-53 (Brighton: Harvester Press Microfilm Publications LTD, 1987) and Gary Sheffield & John Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), pp. 354-55.

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Division HQ telephoned the latest map coordinates of 25 Brigade's frontline, along with intelligence confirming the enemy had recaptured Southern Redoubt, at 5:30 p.m. Another report, telegraphed by II Corps at 7:45 p.m., divulged the regrettable news that 97 Brigade had been driven back to the jumping-off line, "with the possible exception of two companies holding the near lip of HILL 52, and some little ground on the extreme left". At 8:30 p.m. II Corps reported "the enemy had delivered a heavy counter-attack against the left and centre [of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division], which had succeeded in driving the attacking troops back to the original frontline. It was, however, thought that TEALL COTTAGE and HILL 52 were in our hands and the ground had been gained on the left of the attack". Heneker, never hesitant about expressing a viewpoint to superiors, had already passed on Brigadier-General Coffin's morning pronouncement that "Northern Redoubt could only be attacked in conjunction with an attack on TEALL COTTAGE and HILL 52". Available documentary evidence fails to confirm whether or not VIII Corps, now that both neighbouring objectives were reported captured, contemplated or approached Second Army about renewing operations with fresh troops the following night. Such a proposal, if put forward, was probably dependant on authorization for Major-General Shute's earlier attack recommendation.<sup>745</sup>

The disastrous operational outcome, predicted by Major-General Heneker during the course of planning discussions in mid-November, led to a thinly veiled recrimination in the guise of a verbal report: "In the evening, following on a telephone conversation

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<sup>745</sup> BL: 48366: Hunter-Weston Diary, 2 December 1917, Vol. XII and 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917', Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

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with the Corps Commander, [the] GOC 8<sup>th</sup> Division reported he considered that heavy machine-gun fire, which opened at zero hour, in bright moonlight, had hindered the advance on his left flank”.<sup>746</sup> Lieutenant-General Hunter-Weston, who had backed Major-General Shute’s controversial attack scheme, could hardly have failed to miss his subordinate’s point. Heneker’s subsequent diary entry reveals outrage and disgust over the perceived waste and futility: “Attacked at 1:55 a.m. 32<sup>nd</sup> Division got nowhere and are back on original frontline owing to heavy casualties from M.G. fire. I took a bit of ground but not all my objectives. Just as I said. Damnable operation. Lost 600 officers and men and did little. Tillett, commanding 2<sup>nd</sup> Devons, mortally wounded.<sup>747</sup> Brand, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade, badly wounded but I hope he will recover”.<sup>748</sup>

II Corps HQ reported the situation of the current frontline, based on information received up to 10:00 p.m., as “still obscure but it is probable we still hold the line from HILL 52 to TEALL COTT [AGE] inclusive”.<sup>749</sup> Further information dispatched from the forward zone or, weather permitting, resulting from the early morning flyover by the designated contact aircraft from No. 7 Squadron, was expected to clear up indefinite aspects of earlier reports. Major Nosworthy (GSO Intelligence) advised those authorised to review his evening summaries that a “map would be issued with tomorrow’s summary showing our new frontline and the dispositions of the enemy’s troops opposed to us”. A recently acquired German map, he added, “captured by the [VIII] Corps on our right

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<sup>746</sup> Ibid.

<sup>747</sup> 25-year-old Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Tillett MC (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Devonshire): Wounded by shellfire on 29 November. DOW 3 December; subsequently awarded a posthumous DSO. The postwar regimental history incorrectly states he was wounded during the German riposte on 30 November. Tillett is buried in Nine Elms British Cemetery. See TNA: WO/95/1712: 2<sup>nd</sup> Devonshire War Diary and C.T. Atkinson, *The Devonshire Regiment 1914-1918* (London: Eland Brothers, 1926), p. 319.

<sup>748</sup> IWM: 66/541/1: Heneker Diary, 2 December 1917.

<sup>749</sup> TNA: WO/157/288: ‘II Corps Summary of Information’, 2 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File.

shows the positions of various headquarters of the division in reserve to the WESTROOSEBEKE – PASSCHENDAELE sector and the actual and proposed positions of readiness of the battalions. Copies of this map will be issued to all concerned”.<sup>750</sup>

41 Brigade completed its relief of 25 Brigade by 2:40 a.m. on 3 December. Casualties were reported to be “slight”, even though popular Major and acting Lieutenant-Colonel John Maxwell (CO 8<sup>th</sup> KRRC) was mortally wounded while making his way up the Gravenstafel – Bellevue Road.<sup>751</sup> On 97 Brigade’s front, Lieutenant-Colonel Scully, uneasy about the vulnerable salient around Void Farm, ordered 16<sup>th</sup> HLI to retire before sunrise: “Next morning at 5 o’clock the survivors of 16<sup>th</sup> HLI were ordered to withdraw from their isolated posts at Void Farm and, under Captain A. Fraser, came into the line with the other divisional units. Although sorely beset, they had obeyed orders and clung to their shell holes for 28 hours”. Exhausted survivors took their place on the original jumping-off line by 6:00 a.m.<sup>752</sup> Some, cut-off or too far forward, were unable to make their way back before daylight. Twenty-year-old 40717 Private William Gilmour of ‘C’ Company found himself, along with several companions, unable to fall back from the shelter of their shell hole outpost. The coming of dawn and rifles made useless by glutinous mud left no alternative but surrender to cautiously advancing German infantry. Gilmour and the others were quickly disarmed and led off under armed escort to nearby Roulers.<sup>753</sup>

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<sup>750</sup> Ibid.

<sup>751</sup> 12 ORs of 7<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigade, 8<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigade and 8<sup>th</sup> KRRC were killed during the relief. 36-year-old Major John Maxwell MC DOW on 4 December. He is buried in Ypres Reservoir Cemetery. See Geoff’s CWGC 1914-21 Search Engine <<http://www.hut-six.co.uk/cgi-bin/search14-21.php>>

<sup>752</sup> TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary and Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland*, p. 111.

<sup>753</sup> The Red Cross subsequently informed Pte. Gilmour’s parents – the latter having first received word their only son was ‘missing presumed killed’ – that he had been made prisoner. William Gilmour spent the

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**Plate 5.2 Private W. Gilmour**  
(Source: Dr George Gilmour)

Monday 3 December: The sun rose at 7:29 a.m. to impart a clear, cold day with strong winds.<sup>754</sup> Anxiety for the frontline opposite Venison Trench diminished – “Intermittent shelling of Passchendaele and surrounding areas” was reported by 33<sup>rd</sup> Division, while 8<sup>th</sup> Division noted “situation quiet” – as the hours before dawn passed without serious disturbance in VIII Corps’ sector.<sup>755</sup> II Corps HQ, still in the dark about 97 Brigade’s frontline, reported: “Situation quiet on left [35<sup>th</sup>] divisional sector aaa Report from right [32<sup>nd</sup>] Division sector is not yet received” at 5:50 a.m.<sup>756</sup> Previously

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remainder of the war as a POW farm labourer where, in exchange for teaching his employer’s two young daughters English, he became a proficient German speaker. Reparation to Great Britain followed in 1919. Email correspondence with Dr George Gilmour (Pte. Gilmour’s son) 6 October 2008.

<sup>754</sup> TNA: WO/157/288: ‘Calendar for December 1917, Times Calculated for Second Army Front and Greenwich Meantime’, II Corps Intelligence File and LHCMA: Second Army War Diary, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/16, King’s College, London.

<sup>755</sup> Two prisoners from *IR117* gave themselves up to the right battalion of 33<sup>rd</sup> Division before dawn. They claimed to be Belgian nationals from Liege who ‘only came into the line last night’.

<sup>756</sup> BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

grounded contact aircraft were skyward not long after first light: “High wind interfered with work, though contact patrols and a certain amount of artillery and photographic work was carried out” by corps squadrons. “Vertical photographs over the enemy area were unsuccessful...”<sup>757</sup> Reports that Hill 52 and Teall Cottage remained in enemy hands were confirmed by II Corps sometime before 10:00 a.m.: “Line runs from point 150 yards south of Teall Cot[tage] along original frontline to VOX FARM inclusive”.<sup>758</sup> The crew of the low-flying RE 8 contact aircraft from No. 21 Squadron, discharging a fuselage-mounted Klaxon Horn while sweeping over Venison Trench and its redoubts at 9:40 a.m., observed a pell-mell collection of outposts close up or inside the *Hauptwiderstandslinie*:

Contact plane reports our troops seen in whole of Southern Redoubt in W.25.c. and in trench connecting same to Northern Redoubt in V.30.b. aaa Our troops also located in southern portion of Northern Redoubt and in a newly dug post [at] V.30.b.55.55. aaa Northern portion of Northern Redoubt contains several bombing blocks and all of this portion appears to be occupied by Germans aaa Observer has no doubt as to corrections of his observations. Colours of uniform were clearly distinguishable aaa There was no khaki visible in the northern portion of Northern Redoubt and no field grey in line occupied by British aaa Inference therefore is that all troops seen were alive but they lighted no flares and made no signs to aeroplane.<sup>759</sup>

Failure to discern lit flares or manipulated Watson Fans combined with high speeds; hostile ground fire and consequent fleeting opportunities for direct observation made accurate assessments difficult even at low altitudes. Southern Redoubt had been

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<sup>757</sup> TNA: WO/157/288: ‘II Corps Summary of Information’, 3 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File.

<sup>758</sup> How this was discovered remains unclear. Major Evelegh (CO 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Signal School) subsequently remarked: ‘Neither contact planes nor counter-attack planes dropped any messages throughout the operations’. See BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers and TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report: ‘Appendix ‘I’: Communications’, December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>759</sup> TNA: WO/157/288: ‘II Corps Summary of Information’, 3 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File.

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recaptured by *IR116* during the late morning of 2 December, so it must be surmised that any observed khaki clad only the dead and wounded left behind in its environs. Infantry outside the redoubt, reluctant to expose new positions to the enemy, shrank from making their presence known to designate contact aircraft.<sup>760</sup> Who actually held the bastion did not become known with certainty until the morning of 4 December.<sup>761</sup>



**Plate 5.3 RE 8 of No. 21 Squadron**  
(Source: Air of Authority <<http://rafweb.org/Sqn021-25.htm>>)

Projected manpower shortages, coupled with the slim possibility of any favourable outcome, gave GHQ pause when considering Major-General Shute's request

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<sup>760</sup> The reluctance of infantry to signal overhead contact aircraft was a perennial problem throughout 1915-17. David Jordan, in an analysis of air/ground communication efforts during the Battle of Arras, observed that climate 'was not the chief culprit: the lack of flares was the main failing'. Sir Edmund Allenby (GOC Third Army) 'noted that the pilots had attempted direct observation but that this was ineffective. On 23 April he sent a succinct order to his officers making clear his views on the matter: 'RFC report flares hardly used by infantry again today. This makes effective artillery support almost impossible. Attention of all ranks is to be called to the importance of lighting flares when called for'. No other Army Commander appears to have followed Allenby's lead: it is tempting to speculate that the success of contact patrols would have been less erratic had others done so'. See David John Jordan, 'The Army Co-operation Missions of the Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force 1914-1918' (Unpublished PhD Thesis. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1997), p. 101.

<sup>761</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> Division HQ telegraphed VIII Corps at 10:10 a.m.: 'Aeroplane reconnaissance carried out at 9:40 a.m. this morning shows our line as follows aaa D.6.b.9.1. – W.25.c.4.3. (from bottom grid) *Southern Redoubt inclusive* [my emphasis] – V.30.b.80.10. – TEALL COTTAGES exclusive'. See BL: 48359: 'Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918', Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers.

to resume operations. Brigadier-General Davidson (DMO GHQ) conveyed Sir Douglas Haig's final decision to Second Army during a brief morning telephone exchange:

Sir H. Rawlinson rang up [at] 10:45 a.m. & stated that the enemy attacked last night & drove most of our troops back to where they had started from on the previous night. Shute wanted to resume the attack again tomorrow. I said that the C in C wished to economise troops & did not want to get involved in anymore unnecessary fighting. Sir HR said he would stop anything further being done. It was also his opinion – The N[ew] Zealanders are going for Polderhoek Chateau today between 12 & 1 pm.<sup>762</sup>

The British Field Marshal's choice, primarily influenced by an overriding concern for deficits in the BEF's potential reinforcement pool, was based on recent disturbing developments at home and abroad. The effective distribution of available manpower to meet the military and industrial demands of Great Britain's war effort had become a significant point of civil-military contention by the close of the year. "Indeed in December 1917 a manpower crisis was identified, and, for the first time, the War Cabinet became actively involved in relating manpower provision to priority areas of the war effort".<sup>763</sup> A highly critical public speech on 4 November followed by an equally contentious opening address to the recently convened Supreme War Council<sup>764</sup> on 1 December, made clear Prime Minister David Lloyd George's resolve to husband manpower resources whilst diminishing perceived prodigality of British lives on the

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<sup>762</sup> Brigadier-General J.H. Davidson hand-written note (3 December 1917), TNA: WO/158/209: Second Army Operations File.

<sup>763</sup> Keith Grieves, *The Politics of Manpower 1914-18* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 175.

<sup>764</sup> John Grigg, *Lloyd George: War Leader 1916-1918* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 283 and 288. Lloyd George's controversial November speech was delivered in Paris after attending the Rapallo Conference (6/7 November) on the Ligurian coast east of Genoa. This conference of French, British and Italian leaders was ostensibly convened to address the dire situation after Caporetto. The British Prime Minister, however, also successfully used this occasion as an opportunity to push for the establishment of Supreme War Council, which he hoped would achieve better direction of the Entente's war effort.

Western Front.<sup>765</sup> On 27 November Haig told Lieutenant-General Sir Nevil Macready (Adjutant-General to the Forces) that by “31 March British infantry units would be 250,000 men or approximately forty per cent below establishment, unless reinforcements were sent to rectify this situation”. Lord Derby (Secretary of State for War) followed his lead at a Cabinet meeting on 3 December by demanding to know when the BEF could expect substantial reinforcements.<sup>766</sup> Such appeals, following on a costly and seemingly inconclusive Flanders campaign and subsequent Cambrai debacle, would make little headway with an increasingly disenchanted War Cabinet. Governmental concerns appeared to be further substantiated when, after Derby’s outburst, Sir Auckland Geddes (Director of National Service) “submitted a memorandum which indicated how close the nation was to the limit of its manpower”. The “stark reality” behind this report was that “future quotas of fit men for military service would necessitate the automatic reduction of either the shipbuilding, food-production or munitions programmes”.<sup>767</sup> 3 December was also the date armistice negotiations commenced between the new Bolshevik regime and Imperial Germany. That same day, Haig – in recognition of the grand strategic implications of a Russian cease-fire – instructed his four Army commanders to prepare for the imminent, albeit short-term, loss of the strategic initiative:

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<sup>765</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to examine in detail the political/strategic ramifications of the Flanders offensive. For interpretations of the British government’s deliberations and responses during and after the Third Battle of Ypres see David Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (East Brunswick NJ: Associated University Presses, 1983), chapters 8 to 10, Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996), chapters 14 and 18, John Turner, ‘Lloyd George, the War Cabinet and High Politics’, Liddle (ed) in *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres*, pp. 14-44, Grigg, *Lloyd George: War Leader 1916-1918*, chapters 13 to 16 and Brock Millman, *Pessimism and British War Policy 1916-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 92-108.

<sup>766</sup> Grievés, *Politics of Manpower*, pp. 157 and 166. Lord Derby subsequently informed the War Cabinet on 6 December that the BEF was short an estimated 100,000 men. See Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele*, p. 190 and Keith Grievés, ‘The ‘Recruiting Margin’ in Britain: Debates on Manpower during the Third Battle of Ypres’, in Peter Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997) pp. 390-405.

<sup>767</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 166-67.

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[T]he general situation on the Russian and Italian fronts, combined with the paucity of reinforcements which we are likely to receive, will in all probability necessitate our adopting a defensive attitude for the next few months. We must be prepared to meet a strong and sustained hostile offensive. It is therefore of the first importance that Army commanders should give their immediate and personal attention to the organisation of the zones for defensive purposes and to the rest and training of their troops.<sup>768</sup>

GHQ's desire to gain more ground in the vicinity of Passchendaele and Westroosebeke would, given prevailing circumstances, have to be put aside while larger issues of manpower and strategy were debated in London and Versailles. Shute subsequently commented: "The proposal to attack with the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade on the night of 3/4<sup>th</sup> December was submitted to the [II] Corps but was not approved and orders were received that no further active operations were to be undertaken".<sup>769</sup> The projected two-battalion attack against Polderhoek Chateau by the New Zealand Division would, nevertheless, be allowed to proceed. Zero hour was scheduled for 12:00 p.m. on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

The morning of 3 December, 41 Brigade's diarist noted, was "fairly quiet" in the sector opposite Venison Trench. 14<sup>th</sup> Division's GSO 3, on orders from VIII Corps, was sent forward to reconnoitre and pinpoint outposts along the recently occupied frontline: "Owing to lack of guides he did not go beyond Battalion HQ, and obtained dispositions as far as could be ascertained from the Battalion intelligence officer of the 8<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigade". It would be several days before the general course of the outpost line was

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<sup>768</sup> Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1918 Vol. 1* (London: Macmillan, 1935), p. 37. GHQ, Edmonds also observed, brought the lengthy 1917 campaign season to an 'official' end on 3 December with the termination of the Battle of Cambrai.

<sup>769</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 15.

plotted out.<sup>770</sup> 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's diarist recorded more activity in the sector opposite Hill 52 and Vat Cottage Ridge: "Enemy artillery fairly active on roads and tracks throughout the day. His snipers were active particularly near Vat Cottages". Fire by the latter eventually subsided as attempts to retrieve casualties were observed:

Many wounded were lying out, suffering the most appalling rigours of war and the Battalion stretcher-bearers displayed great devotion to duty in ignoring the heavy fire while bringing them to comparative shelter. The work at first was extremely dangerous, but later on in the day a lull occurred when it was possible to carry on this labour of mercy under less trying conditions. And it must be recorded, as far as this battle is concerned, that from this point onward the German reversed his frequent policy and shewed respect for the Red Cross flag, only one instance of sniping taking place when one of the Battalion stretcher-bearers was shot dead while bending over a wounded comrade. Enemy stretcher-bearers were also at work and in some instances they reciprocated attentions given to their wounded by dressing and carrying our casualties. In this way all the wounded were got in before the [97] Brigade was relieved that night.<sup>771</sup>

The Reverend R.E. Grice-Hutchison (Chaplain to 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's attached 161 Field Artillery Brigade) first heard news of "a fairly extensive attack which our infantry made last night from Passchendaele" on 2 December following the usual Sunday services. Word of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant V.J. Horton's (FOO attached to 16<sup>th</sup> HLI) death was received early on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Grice-Hutchison, distressed by the loss of this officer, resolved to retrieve his remains from the forward area:

I went in the morning to D.161 waggon-lines to see about poor Horton. I found he had been killed on liaison with the infantry at Bellevue some little way behind the line. Buckley and I first went back to CRA, where we telephoned through to the place to make sure his body was

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<sup>770</sup> TNA: WO/95/1894: 41Brigade and WO/95/1873: 14<sup>th</sup> Division war diaries.

<sup>771</sup> J.W. Arthur & I.S. Munro (eds), *The Seventeenth Highland Light Infantry (Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Battalion): Record of War Service 1914-1918* (Glasgow: David J. Clark, 1920) p. 69.

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there before going up. We left about 11:30 with four volunteers, and walked the whole way to Bellevue. Never have I been through or pictured such a scene of desolation – mile after mile of shell holes and wreckage. We found poor Horton lying just outside the pillbox where he was killed together with another officer and seven men. The shell went clean through the door and burst inside. The pillbox (there are two) stands on the top of a kind of knoll with a fine view in every direction, particularly of Westroosebeke and the ridge. We had a very long and heavy carry along the duckboards for some four miles to Cheddar Villa, where we put him on a light railway which runs close to the waggon-lines. What shelling there was was always where we had been. So back home.<sup>772</sup>

Across no man's land a young German *Offizier-Aspirant* (candidate for commission) attached to *IR95 (38<sup>th</sup> Division)* experienced for the first time the same grim conditions encountered by the imperturbable Grice-Hutchison. His introduction to the Passchendaele – Westroosebeke sector had been a gradual initiation into miserable surroundings:

On 1<sup>st</sup> Dec[embe]r we paraded before the Battalion Commander (GOFLER) who kept us in the bitter cold for an hour to listen to his babbling. In the afternoon we went forward. As we knew, we were destined for the most contested bit of all FLANDERS, PASSCHENDAELE, a peculiar mood ceased hold of us – some of us tipsy from the tea-with-alcohol, some full of the fear of death. To OOSTNIEUWKERKE, the billet was occupied, and before we could bivouac, the order came back to pack up and back we went to ROULERS. Here we were put into an out of the way farmhouse, the wealthy owner of which had apparently left in great haste.

2 December. The next morning we had made ourselves quite comfortable. F... came, and we drank and read together. Again came orders to “get ready” and a quarter of an hour later “corpses” marched off past us. Half an hour later we all got orders to go further forward; since then I have never seen F... again. To COLLIEROLENHOEK. Once more into ruined barns in the bitter cold ... En route we met wounded of the [25<sup>th</sup>] Division on the left, the 116<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>772</sup> A.B. Scott, R.E. Grice-Hutchison, *et al*, *Artillery & Trench Mortar Memories: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1932), pp. 282-83.

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and 117<sup>th</sup>, who told us that the English had attacked their Rosbautz (?) B[attalio]n, had advanced in some places and been driven back with loss in others. In the morning, therefore, we were alarmed and shuddered. At 6 o'clock in the evening the barrage began; at 7 we were warned by telephone that a counter-attack without artillery preparation would be made at 10:32. At 11 p.m. I was called by the Coy. Commander and told I must go forward into support as advanced party. HEIDENGOED at 8 o'clock next morning.

The long trek to the mined dugouts at Heidengoed Farm (SE of Westroosebeke) began just before sunrise on 3 December:

Next day I went forward. I wanted to go by the map but N... begged me to go his way. The further we went the more miserable it became. Got to HEIDENGOED near WESTROOSEBEKE. Quarrelled with the 4<sup>th</sup> Coy. regarding accommodation. The night previous a dugout had been hit and 1 officer and 8 men killed. The CSM of the coy. in support was filled with horror; his coy. had to counter-attack in full daylight. To settle the quarrel, went to the KTK. Heard our B[attalio]n is to go into frontline tonight. I went in daylight to NORDHOF (VOID FARM). 12 dead lying there from yesterday and a wounded Tommy. I heard from Lieut[enant] X that the 5<sup>th</sup> Coy. was in front, 14 men all told, supported by the 3<sup>rd</sup> B[attalio]n. The English had broken in on the front of the 94<sup>th</sup> and got behind the 5<sup>th</sup> Coy. ... they had got to within 50 yards of the NORDHOF.<sup>773</sup>

25<sup>th</sup> Division was able to reinforce and consolidate threatened portions of its *Hauptwiderstandslinie* throughout the night of 2/3 December. *IR115*, responsible for defences opposite Passchendaele, dispatched its reserve battalion to the embattled centre where, after bolstering the front battalion of *IR116*, it “eked out two full days in the

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<sup>773</sup> TNA: WO/157/120: ‘Annexe to Second Army Summary Dated 19<sup>th</sup> Dec[embe]r 1917: Translation of the closing pages of a diary taken from a dead German (probably a warrant officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Coy. 95<sup>th</sup> Inf. Regt., 38<sup>th</sup> Division) who was shot in V.29.b. in the early morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> inst.’, Second Army Intelligence Files.

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forward-most lines of the adjacent right sector”.<sup>774</sup> Hard-bitten, heavily armed *Stosstruppen* of 25<sup>th</sup> *Sturmabteilung*,<sup>775</sup> appearing in *IR117*’s advanced positions sometime after midnight, immediately went forward and “cleared the *Sicherungslinie* area without further loss”.<sup>776</sup> Observers in *Luftstrietkräfte* (German Army Air Service) two-seater reconnaissance and artillery spotting aircraft, communicating with 25<sup>th</sup> *Division* HQ by wireless or lamp signalling apparatus, reported the “enemy line to be heavily occupied” after daybreak on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, “although the anticipated attack failed to materialise”.<sup>777</sup>

Battalion stretcher-bearers and RAPs carried out removal and initial succour of the wounded with reasonable efficiency during 2-3 December. Devoted RAMC personnel of the 25<sup>th</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup>, 91<sup>st</sup> and 92<sup>nd</sup> field ambulances (supported by attached parties of infantry) provided vital transport assistance, despite intensive shellfire on roads and tracks,

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<sup>774</sup> Victor von Frankenberg und Ludwigsdorff, *Das Leibgarde Infanterie Regiment (1. Grossherzoglich Hessisches Nr. 115) im Weltkrieg 1914-1918* (Stuttgart: Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1921), p. 162.

<sup>775</sup> Two members of this elite divisional asset were captured east of Passchendaele on 2/3 December. They ‘had been completing their course of instruction (commenced in July) at ZILVERBERG under the direction of the OC 25<sup>th</sup> *Sturmabteilung* (Lt. von der Bense)’. Organic *Stosstruppe* companies had been established in most, but by no means all, German divisions at the close of 1916. 38<sup>th</sup> *Division* had ‘no trained storm troops’. See TNA: WO/157/121: ‘Annexe to Second Army Summary Dated 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917: Information Obtained from Prisoners’, ‘Annexe to Second Army Summary Dated 4<sup>th</sup> December 1917: Information Obtained from Prisoners’, Second Army Intelligence File and D.B. Nash, *Imperial German Army Handbook 1914-1918* (London: Ian Allen, 1980), p. 46

<sup>776</sup> Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin (3. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117*, p. 196.

<sup>777</sup> Prof. Albert Hiss, *Infanterie-Regiment Kaiser Wilhelm (2. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 116* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1924), p. 159. Reconnaissance Flights ‘A’ [artillery spotting] were ‘under the command of the division for reconnaissance and for observation of artillery and Minenwerfer fire. Its wireless transmissions were received at the aerodrome by the divisional ARKO [Artillery Commander] and his subordinate groups. Since, against the repeated wishes of the troops, special flights could not be made available for infantry aircraft service, so the Reconnaissance Flights A had to take over that service. For that purpose the number of their aircraft was increased from 6 to 9. The infantry aircraft, called ‘jfl’, monitored the battlefield. Both in attack and defence they offered the quickest and most reliable transmission to the command posts of events and progress, on the most advanced front, at any given time’. See Hermann Cron, *Imperial German Army 1914-18: Organisation, Structure, Orders-of-Battle* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2002), p. 184.

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throughout the tortuous evacuation by “hand carriage” from RAP to ADS. Colonel G. St. C. Thom (ADMS 32<sup>nd</sup> Division) noted that by 6:00 a.m. on the 2<sup>nd</sup>: “2 officers and 74 other ranks, all walking cases, had passed through” the ADS. These were transported by light railway to the CMDS. Stretcher cases, he added, started to arrive at the ADS shortly after 6:00 a.m. “Owing to enemy shellfire it was decided that, as the light railway was about to be destroyed, lying cases should all be evacuated by ambulance cars and the railway used for walking and sitting cases only”. A section of light railway track was eventually interrupted by shellfire near Bridge House on the Kansas Cross – Wieltje Road at 11:00 a.m. “This, however, did not delay evacuation as Red Cross lorries were available to take walking wounded from BRIDGE HOUSE. A train happened to be on the line between the Advanced Dressing Station and the destroyed part, consequently sitting cases were sent by train from the Advanced Dressing Station as far as the destroyed part of the line”, where they “detrained and entrained again on the farther side of the destroyed part”. The evacuation, nonetheless, “went on smoothly” following track repairs by 2:00 p.m. “After fighting had ceased both our and the enemy [stretcher-] bearers collected wounded in the open. The bearers carried small Red Cross flags and were not fired upon”. Additional support provided by 14 Brigade (one officer and fifty men) was sent forward at 11:00 p.m. “to assist the stretcher-bearers of 92<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance who were getting quite done up”. All RAPs, Thom concluded, were “reported clear by 3 a.m. on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December”. The entire line was clear of any remaining wounded as far as the ADS by 5:00 a.m. On 4 December – a fair, cloudy day interspersed with sudden snow storms – British observers reported considerable movement of small German parties “throughout the day on the WESTROOSEBEKE –

PASSCHENDAELE Ridge, and collection of the wounded is apparently still in progress”.<sup>778</sup>

Little notice was probably taken by the average *Times* reader, the majority no doubt enjoying the meagre contents of a home front breakfast, of recent developments in Flanders. Headlines above the usual column of despatches (telegraphed daily by GHQ for domestic consumption) on 3 December read:

BATTLES FOR CAMBRAI

ENEMY’S BIG PLAN FAILS

MORE LOST GROUND WON BACK

The following communiqués primarily dealt with Third Army’s dogged defence against counter-attacking German “hordes” during 2 December. A comparatively unremarkable report – inserted by time of receipt amongst more newsworthy items – recounted further territorial gains on the Passchendaele Ridge with a brief summation of the basic facts:

10:14 p.m. – A minor operation was undertaken early this morning by Rifle, North Country and Home County battalions north-east of Ypres. Some fortified buildings and strongpoints on the main ridge north of Passchendaele were captured and our troops have taken a number of prisoners.<sup>779</sup>

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<sup>778</sup> See TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘8<sup>th</sup> Division Instructions No. 2’, 25 November 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary, WO/95/2370: ‘Report on Medical Arrangements During the Recent Operations: Night 1/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 15 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, WO/157/288: ‘II Corps Summary of Information’, 4 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File and LHCMA: Second Army War Diary, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/16, King’s College, London.

<sup>779</sup> *The Times*, Monday 3 December 1917, p. 9. A subsequent despatch, appearing in print the following day, stated: ‘In a minor operation carried out yesterday north of Passchendaele 129 prisoners and a few machine-guns were taken by us’.

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A concise synopsis of another minor operation, this time 7000 yards SW of Passchendaele village, on the Ypres front would shortly appear in *The Times* GHQ despatch column for 4 December.

The New Zealand Division (temporary GOC Brigadier-General W.G. Braithwaite)<sup>780</sup> took over the frontline opposite Polderhoek Chateau on the night of 25 November (**Text Map 5.1.1**). Its scheduled attack against the worrying German strongpoint was fraught with difficulties.<sup>781</sup> The flooded Reutelbeek and Scherriabeek streams bound the spur on which the chateau and its outlying defences were situated to the north and south respectively. “Two alternative lines of attack offered themselves. The chateau might be carried from the flank and rear by troops advancing from the [II] ANZAC [Corps] positions across the Reutelbeek, or, secondly, a frontal assault could be delivered straight down the spur from the IX Corps position on the [Gheluvelt] plateau”. Deadly enfilade fire from the east, supporting artillery barrage issues,<sup>782</sup> lack of satisfactory assembly positions and a virtually impassable Reutelbeek valley<sup>783</sup> ruled out any possible advance from the north. “For these reasons recourse was had for the second alternative, which offered several advantages. Assembly trenches were available directly opposite and in close proximity to the chateau. A frontal barrage could be obtained. The

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<sup>780</sup> Major-General A. Russell had been invalided back to Great Britain after being diagnosed with bronchitis. See Glyn Harper, *Massacre at Passchendaele: The New Zealand Story* (Auckland: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 99.

<sup>781</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 64-66 for the genesis of the Polderhoek Chateau operation.

<sup>782</sup> Batteries situated to the north would have to fire in enfilade.

<sup>783</sup> The Reutelbeek was by this time an unfordable mass of continuous shell holes 20 to 30 feet wide. From its left bank extended an ‘impenetrable black morass of soft mud, into which patrols sank to their knees within 100 yards of advanced posts...’

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IX Corps heavies could carry out a preparatory bombardment, and the tell-tale registration by a large number of new guns could be avoided”.<sup>784</sup>



**Map 5.1.1 Polderhoek Chateau: New Zealand objectives (Source: TNA: W0/95/3659)**

<sup>784</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919: A Popular History Based on Official Records* (Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1921), pp. 305-06.

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Two Battalions (1<sup>st</sup> Canterbury and 1<sup>st</sup> Otago) of 2 New Zealand Brigade jumped-off from their support line at 12:00 p.m. on 3 December. Preliminary forenoon bombardments, a ruse devised to keep defenders below ground at the time of assault, on 28 and 30 November failed to cow an alert enemy ensconced in pillboxes and ruin cellars: “The garrison of the chateau was confidently aggressive. Both on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> they attempted small raids which were completely repulsed. They had, however, no suspicion of the impending attack and exposed themselves injudiciously about the spur to our snipers”. The attack plan was conceived as a pincer movement to envelope the enemy defences: “It would be made by 2 companies in each battalion advancing abreast in 2 waves. The first wave would carry the line to an intermediate objective beyond the chateau, and the second, following 50 yards behind, would then ‘leap frog’ through, and push on to a final objective some 300 yards further, sufficiently far down the eastern slope to give observation of the flats” beyond. Companies of select personnel, recently reinforced by a large proportion of inexperienced drafts, had been reduced for this operation to an acceptable fighting strength of 100 all ranks.<sup>785</sup> Hopes of catching the enemy off guard were immediately frustrated when, maintaining vigilance during the now customary forenoon bombardment, *IR163 (17<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division)* opened fire with machine-guns from pillboxes situated about the chateau grounds and from the south at Gheluelvelt.<sup>786</sup> “Undismayed, however, the first wave pushed on, crossed our frontline, and were rapidly among the wilderness of tree stumps where the wire was found demolished”. Protective smoke barrages, discharged to cover the exposed left and right

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<sup>785</sup> Ibid, pp. 307-09. ‘Reinforcements received during November were particularly poor, lacking even in elementary training’. See TNA: WO/95/3659: ‘Operations of the New Zealand Division: Period November 1<sup>st</sup> - December 1<sup>st</sup> 1917’, New Zealand Division War Diary.

<sup>786</sup> Close proximity of the opposing lines prevented German batteries from engaging the attackers after Zero. Identical circumstances compelled British gunners to abandon a preliminary heavy bombardment.

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flanks from enfilading machine-guns, were dissipated by strong winds and casualties began to mount. 1<sup>st</sup> Canterbury, “faced with a series of strong pillboxes, including those at the stables and at the Manager’s House”, was, nevertheless, able to secure, after fierce fighting, the right flank along slopes overlooking the mired Scherriabeek valley to a point 150 yards short of the first objective. 1<sup>st</sup> Otago, tasked with capturing Polderhoek Chateau, made good initial progress until an “overwhelming barrage of machine-gun fire” forced survivors to seek cover opposite the first objective.<sup>787</sup> “The enemy’s pillboxes”, II ANZAC Corps’ diarist later observed, “undamaged and strongly garrisoned with troops and MGs, proved so formidable an obstacle that our attacking troops were held up and were compelled to consolidate a line about 150 yards east of the CHATEAU grounds, but west of the CHATEAU itself”.<sup>788</sup> Loss of half the assault battalions’ effectives hindered fresh attempts to push on. Brigadier-General Braithwaite “urged a further effort after dark and suggested an enveloping movement from the Reutelbeek slopes”, but arrival of German reinforcements, “together with the continued alertness of the enemy and the continued activity of his machine-guns did not favour surprise”.<sup>789</sup>

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<sup>787</sup> Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919*, pp. 309-10 and 312. Private Henry James Nicholas MM (Nelson Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Canterbury Regiment) was awarded the Victoria Cross for destroying a machine-gun position during the advance.

<sup>788</sup> TNA: WO/157/593: II ANZAC Corps Intelligence File.

<sup>789</sup> Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919*, p 313. 2 NZ Brigade’s after-action report noted the primary cause of the failure was ‘inadequacy’ of training: ‘Though several days (November 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, both inclusive) were devoted to practice over ground especially marked out for the purpose, all reports go to show that the men were not ‘intensively’ trained to the necessary standard. They started off with considerable *élan*, and there was no lack of natural courage and grit once a line was formed and the course of action obvious. But a large proportion of officers and men were reinforcement drafts quite unfamiliar with hostile shelling or our own barrage fire. When the experienced officers and other ranks became casualties, many falling in the most gallant efforts to push forward, the new hands ... were at a loss and failed to show the necessary qualities of dash, determination, and readiness for self-sacrifice which were indispensable factors for success in this operation ... All competent observers lay stress on this lack of training, and there is no question but that this is the main reason for the failure’. See Captain David Ferguson MC, *The History of the Canterbury Regiment NZEF 1914-1919* (Auckland: Whitcomb & Tombs, 1921), pp. 217-18.



**Plate 5.4 Polderhoek Chateau grounds from the air**  
(Source: Flandernland <<http://www.flandernland.de/>>)

97 Brigade's situation remained unchanged throughout 3 December. Hours of tedium punctuated by incidents of sudden terror passed, as the somewhat irregular frontline was reinforced and strengthened under active sniping and desultory machine-gun fire (**Map 14**). Brigade HQ issued orders for the anticipated relief at 2:00 p.m.<sup>790</sup> The prospect of impending escape from the frightful Goudberg sector cheered up weary men whose battalions had been in close contact with the enemy for over forty-eight hours. 5/6<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots, 1<sup>st</sup> Dorsetshire Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Manchester Regiment (14 Brigade) began to relieve the depleted battalions of 97 Brigade after nightfall:

On arrival here early on the 3<sup>rd</sup> it was learnt that the situation was very bad and the Battalion was placed under orders to be ready to move at a moment's notice: while waiting orders, however, the enemy shelled Bellevue heavily, killing 2 and wounding 4 men. At 10:30 p.m., the

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<sup>790</sup> See Appendix 12.

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Manchesters moved up to the left sub-sector and relieved the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers, the front held being an organised system of shell holes, and Battalion headquarters being at Pillbox 88.<sup>791</sup>

Harassing fire, maintained by supporting artillery and machine-guns throughout the day, continued into the night.<sup>792</sup> The historian of 309<sup>th</sup> Honourable Artillery Company Siege Battery, situated in advanced positions just south of the Lekkerboterbeek, recalled:

As for our own shooting, we had taken up so advanced a position at Hannixbeek in anticipation of an attack to be made on the night of December 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup>. This was duly made, and we fired in it, but unfortunately it met with but little success. We retained the position, however, and fired (but not too frequently, as we could often be observed) on batteries, and at night on roads, our ‘arc of fire’ extending from Stadenreef almost to Passchendaele itself, but our chief activity centring round Westroosebeke.<sup>793</sup>

Reconnaissance patrols were active in the semi-darkness, as relieving infantry attempted to discover the enemy’s whereabouts. Several of these enterprises came under direct fire as they approached hostile, heavily manned outposts, one particularly active sniper near Vat Cottages engaging targets easily under the bright moonlight. Losses, nevertheless, had been surprisingly light by the time 14 Brigade telegraphed ‘HOLES’ or relief complete before dawn on 4 December.<sup>794</sup> The weather remained “damp and frightfully cold” as the desolate landscape came into view after sunrise: “It is almost impossible to describe the barrenness of the country in that locality. There was not a shrub or a tree of

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<sup>791</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary and Colonel H.C. Wylly, *History of the Manchester Regiment (Late 63<sup>rd</sup> and 96<sup>th</sup> Foot) Vol. 2* (London: Foster Groom & Co., 1925), p. 169.

<sup>792</sup> Ibid. A portion of territory gained on 15<sup>th</sup> LF’s right was unintentionally abandoned by 2<sup>nd</sup> Manchester during the confusion of the relief. See IWM 4723: ‘32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/20/2’, ‘Sender No. V.B.84.A’, 5 December 1917 and ‘G.230/0/4’, 8 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>793</sup> W.R. Kingham, *London Gunners: The Story of the H.A.C. Siege Battery in Action* (London: Methuen & Co., 1919), pp. 78-79.

<sup>794</sup> Total fatalities for 1<sup>st</sup> Dorsetshire, 2<sup>nd</sup> Manchester and 15<sup>th</sup> HLI (in immediate support) were 8 ORs. See TNA: WO/95/2370: 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, WO/95/2400: 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. Operation Order No. 183’, 3 December 1917’, 97 Brigade War Diary and Geoff’s CWGC 1914-21 Search Engine <<http://www.hut-six.co.uk/cgi-bin/search14-21.php>>

any kind and the whole place was mud, ploughed up by continuous shellfire. We were occupying ground that had been fought for every inch, and the only features in the landscape behind our lines were badly battered pillboxes and derelict tanks”.<sup>795</sup> Morning, with all its apocalyptic-like revelations, also found the young *Offizier-Aspirant* still trying to locate his company:

4 December. The position is better than the HOUTHULST FOREST one, drier, just as sinister; it reeks of battle and blood. Only the dead of yesterday and the day before around, bootless and sockless ...<sup>796</sup> There is more firing here than in the HOUTHULST FOREST sector and less protection. Relief is to come on the 5<sup>th</sup> at midnight ... Well, I went to the KTK for the second time and learned that our Coy. had gone over to Tommy. I went, therefore, to HEIDENGOED and reported to POHLENER, who was quite disheartened.<sup>797</sup>

Sir Henry Rawlinson, unhappy, although not wholly disheartened, about the outcome of the Passchendaele and Polderhoek operations, confided sentiments in his diary the previous evening that were sadly reminiscent of the entry for 10 November: “The New Zealanders attacked at Polderhoek Chateau today but [,] after severe fighting [,] failed to take it chiefly on account of the pillboxes on the south of it and a trench in the rear [,] which commanded the entrance to the concrete shelter in the chateau – It is very disappointing that both the attack n[orth] of Passchendaele and on Polderhoek should have failed”.<sup>798</sup> Sir Douglas Haig’s 3 December instructions on projected manpower deficiencies and adoption of a short-term defensive policy had been the primary reason

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<sup>795</sup> Major H.D. Thwaytes *op. cit.*, quoted in Regimental History Committee, *History of the Dorsetshire Regiment 1914-1919 Vol. 1* (London: Henry Ling, 1932), p. 111.

<sup>796</sup> Shortage of materials to manufacture quality issue footwear for the German Army often led to the appropriation of boots and socks from the British dead.

<sup>797</sup> TNA: WO/157/120: ‘Annexe to Second Army Summary Dated 19<sup>th</sup> Dec [embe] r 1917: Translation of the closing pages of a diary taken from a dead German (probably a warrant officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Coy. 95<sup>th</sup> Inf. Regt., 38<sup>th</sup> Division) who was shot in V.29.b. in the early morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> inst.’, Second Army Intelligence Files.

<sup>798</sup> CAC: RVLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 3 December 1917.

for halting further attacks north of Passchendaele. GHQ's additional demands for reinforcements would stretch Rawlinson's available reserves for attack or defence to the limit: "News from Cambrai area is that the Bosches are persisting in their assaults in spite of very heavy casualties – Tonight Tavish [Davidson DMO GHQ] rang up to say they wanted nine div[isions] down south [,] so I have to send away the 63 Naval Div[ision] which is well up to strength [,] and the 19 Div[ision] which is well rested and I had hoped to put in the line to relieve tired ones. The Cambrai battle is going to make us very short of troops I fear..."<sup>799</sup>

Extraordinarily hard fighting, followed by conspicuous British failure, contributed to the reservedly triumphalist tone of the daily German *Heersbericht* (Army Bulletin):

Front of Crown Prince Rupprecht: – Early yesterday, after violent drumfire during a moonlight night, the English with strong forces attacked our positions at and north of Passchendaele. Thüringian and Hessian troops threw back the enemy in a sharp counter-attack and made 60 prisoners. After the attack had been beaten off the firing died down. It increased again at times during the evening to considerable violence.<sup>800</sup>

There was, nevertheless, a great deal to be congratulatory about. The enemy's latest attempt to seize more ground on the vital Passchendaele plateau had been repelled with heavy losses:

The English gained not an inch of ground. They were thrown back to their position in the *sumpf* [mud]. The commanding heights remained in our hands. On the bodies

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<sup>799</sup> Ibid. Second Army related the decision to 'consolidate the line at present held and discontinue further offensive operations for the present' in a general order the following day. See LHCMA: '1/7 (G)', 4 December 1917, Second Army War Diary, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/16, King's College, London.

<sup>800</sup> Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg*, p. 238 and *The Times*, Tuesday, 4 December 1917, p. 9.

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of the English dead were discovered maps that revealed the enemy had attacked with five battalions; very few of these poor souls returned. In the *Vorfeldzone* lay hundreds of English dead. Our losses, however, were not few, but, thank God, more were wounded than dead. Captured booty consisted of 14 prisoners and eight Lewis Guns. On 2 December 1917 the Regiment [IR95] again demonstrated, despite a lack of rest for months, great heroism. Through all this fighting it maintained its reputation with the high command.<sup>801</sup>

IR95's postwar historian also grasped, with some exaggeration, the strategic stakes involved: "Through captured maps it was discovered that it was highly important for the English to reach the commanding heights in order to overlook the U-boat bases in the Brugge basin. The eastern slopes of the *Feldherrnhügel* protected the entire light and heavy artillery. It would have been a tremendous victory had the English succeeded. Such a success may have led to an early ending to the war".<sup>802</sup> The German official history of the desperate series of defensive battles conducted in Flanders by *Fourth Army* from late July to early December 1917 summed up the final result of this last (in their eyes) major British assault with exceptional accuracy: "On 2 December, after a long pause in the struggle, there roared again, over Flanders terrain transformed into mud fields, a powerful storm of intense bombardment. But the attacks undertaken on a narrow front by two English brigades against the front divisions of *Gruppen Staden* (38. Inf. Div.) and *Ypern* (25. Inf. Div.) were, after initial partial success, driven back and proof was restored to the English that there was no other outcome".<sup>803</sup>

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<sup>801</sup> Buttmann, *Kriegsgeschichte des Königlich Preussischen 6. Thüringischen Infanterie Regiment Nr. 95: 1914-1918*, pp. 253-54.

<sup>802</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>803</sup> Werner Beumelburg, *Flandern 1917* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1928), p. 167. Crown Prince Rupprecht, in a diary entry for 3 December, simply remarked: 'Yesterday the 4th Army halted attacks by two English divisions near and north of Passchendaele'. See Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern, *In Treue Fest – Mein Kriegstagebuch Vol. 2* (Munich: Deutscher National Verlag, 1929), p. 300.

### 5.3 Tactical Debrief

8<sup>th</sup> Division moved, immediately following relief by 14<sup>th</sup> Division, to the Wizernes area SW of St Omer in French Flanders. Major-General Heneker remarked in his diary with some satisfaction: “Nice comfortable chateau and good training area”.<sup>804</sup> 25 Brigade, after marching to camps at St Jean, travelled by light railway on 3 December to equally agreeable – in sharp contrast to the grisly ambience of the Passchendaele Salient – billets nearby. 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade and 1<sup>st</sup> RIR finally settled down for much needed clean-up, re-organisation and training at Wizernes and the outlying hamlets of Boisdingham, Noir Carme and Zudausque. Lieutenant Nettleton recalled after reaching his final destination that 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade “looked more like a weak company than a proper battalion and everybody felt extremely low”.<sup>805</sup> 32<sup>nd</sup> Division remained responsible for the Goudberg sector after relief of 97 Brigade, so the five battle-worn assault battalions returned to camps in divisional reserve and support north and NE of St Jean and near Vlamertinghe respectively. 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, departing from positions opposite Hill 52 on the night of 2/3<sup>rd</sup> December, made its way to Irish Farm before being transported by bus to Dambre Camp on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI spent a short time at Hilltop and Irish farms before entraining at St Jean station for Brake and Hospital camps. 15<sup>th</sup> LF and 16<sup>th</sup> NF, now back with 96 Brigade, made themselves at home as best they could inside “Nissen huts floating in the mud” that made up the austere, unsalutary enclosures around Irish Farm. Battalion roll

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<sup>804</sup> IWM: 66/541/1: Heneker Diary, 4 December 1917. Lieutenant-Colonel Beddington (BGGS) departed from 8<sup>th</sup> Division the previous day to become GSO 1 (Operations) for Fifth Army: ‘Thus ended one of the happiest years of my life’. See Beddington, ‘My Life’, p. 119.

<sup>805</sup> Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 167, F. Loraine Petre, *The Royal Berkshire Regiment Vol. 2* (Reading: The Reading Barracks, 1925), p. 97, TNA: WO/95/1730: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary, R. Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918 Vol. 2* (London: Rifle Brigade Club, 1927), p. 166, Taylor, *The 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War*, p. 119 and John Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns: An Infantry Officer on the Western Front* (London: William Kimber, 1979), p. 119.

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calls, one of the first orders of business in the immediate aftermath of an attack, were particularly poignant in the most hard-hit battalions: “At Brake Camp the roll-call was one of the saddest since 1915. Twenty officers and 469 other ranks went forward on Passchendaele [sic]. Eight officers and 204 other ranks now answered their names. More than half of the Battalion were casualties...”<sup>806</sup> Among those not accounted for were former tank gunner Private Fred Wakely, Private Hugh Cairns (who had enlisted whilst underage) and ex-sports journalist and popular former RAMC NCO 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Will Ridgway.<sup>807</sup>

“An important but often overlooked feature of [British] GHQ’s thrust to improve standard tactics”, Paddy Griffith has observed, “consisted of extensive debriefs and questionnaires that were often completed immediately after combat. On some occasions this was done to in an attempt to identify scapegoats and incompetents ... On other occasions a very different motive came into play, as some particular organisation or HQ attempted to establish and document its own credentials in order to impress its rivals”.<sup>808</sup> Some tactical debriefs “were mounted so quickly after the event that they should be classified more as ‘immediate situation reports’ than as detached historical investigations”.<sup>809</sup> Commanders and staffs, nevertheless, “really did often want to know the full detail of what was going on in mudfields ahead of them, and they were avid to

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<sup>806</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald C. Bond DSO, *The King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War Vol. 3* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1929), p. 912, TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, WO/95/2403: 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, WO/95/2397: 15<sup>th</sup> LF war diaries, Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers*, p. 89 and Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland*, p. 111.

<sup>807</sup> See Appendix 17.

<sup>808</sup> Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack 1916-1918* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 186-87.

<sup>809</sup> *Ibid.*

interrogate absolutely every individual who emerged from that zone”. Overall, the primary motivation for “collecting post-combat impressions was purely and simply an interest in genuine tactical science”.<sup>810</sup> This empirical (bottom-up by necessity) approach is evident in the immediate aftermath of the night operation, as battalion commanders, having queried surviving subordinates, passed along reports and questionnaires to brigade, who, in turn, passed on their own reports, based on received battalion comments, to division. Division commanders and staffs, who also, on occasions, conducted inquiries and face-to-face interviews, were then expected to write-up, based on total collected evidence from subordinate formations, a final after-action report for the edification of Corps and Army HQs.<sup>811</sup>

25 Brigade HQ began the formal process of gathering post-combat impressions by forwarding a questionnaire to its three assault battalion commanders, who, in addition to providing the routine detailed after-action report, were asked to comment on five distinct (barrage, assembly, enemy fire, forming-up and equipment) operational aspects. Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire) noted that the supporting barrage “was effective, although there “were many shorts”. Battalion officers, he added, “state that the barrage seemed to lift too quickly after the original beginning. All agree that the defensive barrage of artillery ... was excellent”.<sup>812</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire’s assembly,

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<sup>810</sup> Ibid.

<sup>811</sup> ‘All divisions produced a narrative of operations after major actions and many specifically studied the lessons to be learned. The quality and thoroughness of these reports are a valuable source of study when asserting the performance of individual divisions and the evolution of the BEF in general’. See John Lee, ‘Command and Control in Battle: British Divisions on the Menin Road Ridge 20 September 1917’, Gary Sheffield & Dan Todman (eds) *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army’s Experience 1914-1918* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), en. 8, p. 139.

<sup>812</sup> For an account of the direct tactical support (bombardment of roads and support areas) provided by 62<sup>nd</sup> HAG see TNA: WO/95/1677: ‘Action of Heavy Artillery’, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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Stirling observed, was almost compromised by poor overland communications: “The duckboards were raised too high above ground, so when the men got off where there were gaps, it was difficult to get on again. A new tape should have been laid from the head of the duckboards, as the old one was hardly discoverable”. Observations about enemy fire focused on the hostile barrage, which “came down from our old frontline back to behind the PASSCHENDAELE – VINDICTIVE X roads”. Forming-up along the jumping-off line, regardless of the exhausting march forward, was expedited by accurate layout of direction tapes, although “some of them were not securely fastened and had moved in the wind”. No shortage of equipment was experienced and overloading was not a serious problem “except in the mud and on the duckboards, but the carrying of spare stores by the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave was a mistake”, as the use of these battle supplies “never eventuated”. This designated 3<sup>rd</sup> wave ‘carrying platoon’ would, in Stirling’s opinion, have been “invaluable as a support but got it into its head that it was there to carry. I [Stirling] consider a totally separate carrying party to go up when the barrage had moderated would be better”. Stirling concluded by attributing absence of “complete success to lack of depth on my centre due to the easing off of to keep touch with the left ... I consider that the forming-up could only have been done in moonlight, but the attack would have gone better if it had been darker, as the Germans could not have located where are men were and I think, in this case, we could have held on to the [Southern] redoubt”.<sup>813</sup>

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<sup>813</sup> ‘TNA: WO/95/1929: ‘Appendix B’, 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary. See Appendix 13 for complete transcript.

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The adjutant of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment, replying to the Brigade questionnaire on Lieutenant-Colonel Irwin's behalf, noted the barrage was "efficient", despite some unwelcome howitzer 'shorts'. German machine-gun fire and the subsequent hold up made it impossible to determine if the barrage pace was satisfactory or not. The march to assembly was also an ordeal as the Battalion traversed Track No. 5 South to the jumping-off line: "There was not more than 20 yards length continuous + track was laid too high off the ground ... Owing to the condition of the track, my battalion and the Berkshires were a little mixed up by the head of the track, otherwise the assembly was not worried much. Hostile fire caused an average of 10-15 casualties a company before assembly". The enemy's barrage fire was observed "about Zero + 9. It was his MG and rifle fire (rifle fire negligible), which stopped the advance. His MGs opened at Zero + 3 minutes". Forming-up was, as with 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire's experience, ably assisted by proper placement of direction tapes, which proved "undoubtedly useful". Equipment concerns were, for the most part, minimal, overloading and the abysmal state of No. 5 Track being the chief causes of fatigue prior to Zero. Spare Lewis Gun magazines, however, were in short supply and it was recommended that these be distributed "throughout the assaulting troops" in the future.<sup>814</sup>

Lieutenant Anderson, adjutant and acting CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade since Lieutenant-Colonel Brand was wounded, also found the supporting barrage to be efficient with an acceptable pace and "not many shorts". Assembly had been "carried out with only slight interference from the enemy, although, from their subsequent action, the forming-up on

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<sup>814</sup> TNA: WO/95/1730: 'Report on Action of the Battn. from 2:30 p.m. 1-12-17 – M.N. 2/3-12-17', 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary. See Appendix 13 for complete transcript.

the tapes was apparently observed by them”. Hostile batteries maintained “searching fire from about Zero + 5 in rear of support line. Machine-gun fire [was] particularly deadly. Machine-guns firing low – about 2 feet from the ground”. Forming-up along the direction tapes, despite Teall Cottage being in enemy hands, was “all that could be desired”. The men were not overloaded with equipment prior to the assault and there were no discernable shortages “except for very lights”. German casualties, Anderson noted, appeared to be equally severe: “From our new line the ground slopes very slightly to the Northern Redoubt and thence steeply to the NE. This has a considerable number of enemy dead between our advanced posts and the Northern Redoubt”.<sup>815</sup>

All three battalion commanders, therefore, appear to have generally agreed on the relative effectiveness of the supporting barrage, soundness of procedure (notwithstanding the condition of Track No. 5) during assembly and forming-up, lethal efficiency of the German machine-gun fire and satisfactory quality and quantity of issue equipment. Two (Lieutenant-Colonel Stirling and Lieutenant Anderson) believed the primary cause of the reverse was increased visibility resulting from the bright moonlight. Stirling, while acknowledging, “forming-up could only have been done in moonlight”, also opined it could have been darker, while Anderson noted in his after-action report, “Visibility in the moonlight was up to 500 yards. The moon was behind us. It seems obvious that the enemy observed our forming-up...” Lieutenant-Colonel Irwin’s judgement that machine-

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<sup>815</sup> TNA: WO/95/1731: ‘Report of the Part Played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn. The Rifle Brigade in the Recent Operations at Passchendaele’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary. See Appendix 13 for complete transcript. Major-General Heneker subsequently observed that the field artillery barrage could have remained on Venion Trench beyond the fixed (1 minute) part of the timetable: ‘I did not like to leave it on this trench for a longer period for fear of catching my own infantry should they be sweeping successfully. As it happens [,] the 2/Rifle Brigade noted this barrage and say it did not stay on this line long enough’. WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

guns “stopped the advance” of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire appears, by implication, to have further substantiated Stirling and Anderson’s perspective even though he failed specifically to endorse moonlight as the leading tactical handicap in his after-action report.<sup>816</sup>

Major-General Heneker (whose contingency plans had been overruled)<sup>817</sup> wholly agreed with the battalion commanders on the principal reason for the failure. He had, as we have seen, predicted the negative impact of a full moon and un-subdued machine-guns during the initial planning phase of the attack. Although 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s subsequent after-action report bears the signature of Brigadier-General Coffin,<sup>818</sup> it is obvious, when evaluating tone and content that Heneker (who departed for home leave on 10 December) and the like-minded GOC 25 Brigade collaborated on a forthright narrative document that closed with a damning indictment of the entire operational scheme:

To attempt a surprise on a bright moonlight [sic] night when bodies of men can be seen easily on the move at a distance of 300 yards is not sound. Directly the right of 32<sup>nd</sup> Division and left of 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade rose at Zero hour in order to advance, the machine-guns in TEALL COTTAGE opened and others N. W, and E of them took it up almost at once. I have heard it said that when snow is on the ground, and when the night is bright with the moon full, bodies of

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<sup>816</sup> TNA: WO/95/1929: ‘Appendix B’, 5 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire War Diary, WO/95/1731: ‘Report of the Part Played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn. The Rifle Brigade in the Recent Operations at Passchendaele’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade War Diary and WO/95/1730: ‘Report on Action of the Battn. from 2:30 p.m. 1-12-17 – M.N. 2/3-12-17’, 6 December 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire War Diary.

<sup>817</sup> See Chapter 2, pp. 59-60.

<sup>818</sup> Brigadier-General Coffin’s earlier after-action report was written (without critical commentary) in pure narrative style. His view on the failure to hold Southern Redoubt, however, is discernable in the 8<sup>th</sup> Division after-action report of 13 December: ‘Owing to casualties to runners, and to the fact that a verbal message was delivered wrongly, the reserve [‘A’] company of the right Battalion [2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire] was sent to the extreme right where it was not needed. Had it been sent to help the situation in the SOUTHERN REDOUBT, there can be no doubt but that the objectives there would have been held’. This criticism is challenged by evidence that ‘A’ Company was dispatched to the right *after* 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire was ejected from Southern Redoubt. See TNA: WO/95/1727: ‘Report on Operations’, 7 December 1917, 25 Brigade War Diary, WO/95/1677: ‘Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917’, 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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men at 200 yards cannot be seen. This is not my experience.

To expect infantry to advance some 200 yards over an area cut-up by shellfire in the face of accurate machine-gun fire, and without the protection of an artillery barrage, is to expect too much ... I lost two very valuable commanding officers and a great many junior officers. As usual, the men were splendid...<sup>819</sup>

The night operation, 8<sup>th</sup> Division's postwar historians (J.H. Boraston and C.E.O. Bax) observed, could "only be regarded, at best, as a qualified success".<sup>820</sup> This surprising assessment must, however, be viewed in context. 8<sup>th</sup> Division had a gruelling and somewhat unlucky war experience and it is likely its 'establishment' chroniclers moderated their judgment with targeted interwar veteran readership in mind.<sup>821</sup> It is also certain, based on comments found in Heneker's diary and the divisional after-action report, that post-operational impressions of any sort of "success", qualified or otherwise, among Division and Brigade leadership were completely non-existent. Boraston and Bax, nevertheless, adequately elucidated the lamentable tactical circumstances and melancholy results with contemporaneous clarity:

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<sup>819</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 'Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/ 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917', 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary. The two battalion commanders referred to were Lieutenant-Colonel R. Brand (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade) wounded just prior to Zero on 2 December and Lieutenant-Colonel A. Tillet (CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Devonshire) mortally wounded on 29 November.

<sup>820</sup> Sir Douglas Haig observed in the divisional history's foreword: 'In the major offensives in which it took a direct part the 8<sup>th</sup> Division, despite unflinching gallantry, was signally [sic] unfortunate'. See Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, pp. viii and 167.

<sup>821</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston (private secretary to and staunch supporter of Sir Douglas Haig) had previously edited the omnibus edition (1919) of the British Field Marshal's wartime despatches and co-authored, along with popular outdoor (*The Book of the Dry Fly* 1897, *South Country Streams* 1899, etc.) writer, official war correspondent and (*Saturday Review* 1914-17 and *The Nineteenth Century* 1919-25) editor G.A.B. Dewar, the controversial two-volume *Sir Douglas Haig's Command 1915-1918* in 1922. In their preface (pp. ix-x) for the 1926 divisional history, the authors (Boraston & Bax) speculated the narrative would be of 'special interest to the junior officers and rank and file of the of the division, who, it is common experience, had neither the time nor the opportunity during the war itself to give much thought to what was happening outside their own battery or battalion. It is hoped that this history will be the means to enable them in retrospect to take a broader view of the memorable events in which they took so worthy a part...'

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[A]lthough about 150 prisoners<sup>822</sup> and 4 machine-guns had been captured and a certain amount of ground had been gained, the main purpose of this attack – the capture of the two redoubts and the gaining of observations down the valleys they commanded – had not been accomplished. The noise inseparable from forming-up for the attack among such trying conditions of mud and water had put the enemy on his guard; thereafter the brightness of the moonlight and the absence of a protecting barrage during the first crucial eight minutes were responsible for all that followed. It was evidently possible for the enemy to see our men, moving forward in bodies, at a distance of 200 yards. Assuming that he could do that and that he made proper use of his opportunities, failure was inevitable.<sup>823</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Beddington (GSO 1) concurred in an unpublished memoir forty-three years later when he recollected that 8<sup>th</sup> Division had “gained two thirds of the ground we set out to capture, but did not succeed in gaining the crest of the hill and, with it, the observation north-eastwards that we wanted”.<sup>824</sup>



**Plate 5.5 Observation denied: Site of Venison Trench looking east from new British outpost line (Source: Rob Thompson)**

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<sup>822</sup> This figure is contradicted by contemporary reports. See Conclusion, fn. 927.

<sup>823</sup> Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 167.

<sup>824</sup> See Edward Beddington, ‘My Life’ (UK: Privately Printed, 1960), p. 119. Capture and retention of a further ‘two-thirds’ of the *Vorfeldzonelinie* directly opposite the objective may have resulted in the view (more than likely originating as some sort of post-operational ‘spin’ by higher – possibly VIII Corps – formation HQs) that the night attack was a ‘qualified success’.

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What sort of conclusions did the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division arrive at in his nineteen-page after-action report? A similar bureaucratic method, as adopted by the neighbouring 8<sup>th</sup> Division, of obtaining facts based on information gathered from subordinate units existed in 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, although no evidence of a 97 Brigade questionnaire has come to light. Thus an almost identical bottom-up inquiry process, based on a routine combination of submitted written accounts, enquiries and personal interviews, was applied during the subsequent tactical debrief.<sup>825</sup> Heavy casualties amongst the junior leadership would, nonetheless, contribute to some debatable conclusions while leaving certain questions unanswered.

Brigadier-General Blacklock attributed the failure to enemy foreknowledge, “therefore the element of surprise failed and the assault became movement without supporting fire of any description”; subsequent “heavy casualties and initial disorganisation were never overcome”. Failure to retain captured positions was, in his considered opinion, due to three primary factors: Loss of touch between units “in the dark and over bad going”; severe losses amongst junior officers that ensured “there was nobody on the spot to reorganise and supervise the consolidation” and the almost complete absence of timely subordinate situation reports deemed essential for ascertaining “a sufficiently clear situation to act upon”.<sup>826</sup>

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<sup>825</sup> A window into the process adopted by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division can be found in IWM 4723 Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert papers (Box 80/10/2), which contains ‘correspondence relating to the attack carried out by the Division on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917...’ not archived in the corresponding TNA file. Standard subordinate (brigade, battalion, MG and RE companies) unit after-action reports are also accompanied by a series of memos, divisional enquiries and typescript/hand-written statements.

<sup>826</sup> IWM 4723: Typescript ‘Preliminary Report on Operations, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>’, 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2). An undated hand-written summary by Brigadier-General Blacklock also observed, ‘Comments: (1) It was calculated that the 97<sup>th</sup> Bde would reach its objective at Zero + 32 or 2:27 a.m. At this time then [,] commanding officers should have moved up to

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Only two of six battalion (15<sup>th</sup> LF and 16<sup>th</sup> NF) after-action reports were located. The former only examined consequences of the battalion's exposed right flank. The latter, besides observing that the enemy's defensive fire "was not heavy enough to stop the attack" had nothing further to add about the initial assault phase.<sup>827</sup> Two (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI) of six battalion war diary accounts attribute the failure to enemy foreknowledge of the attack, lethal defensive machine-gun fire and consequent heavy losses among officers and NCOs.<sup>828</sup> The remaining four (16<sup>th</sup> HLI, 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, 15<sup>th</sup> LF, 16<sup>th</sup> NF) are narratives with no real attempt at post-operational analysis, although most of the factors related by 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI are referred to at one time or another. Moreover, no direct reference to moonlight as a significant hindrance appears in any of these contemporary battalion records. One postwar regimental history (2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI) subsequently noted, "movement of troops before 'Zero' hour had been only too easily observed", while another (16<sup>th</sup> HLI) commented that the enemy had "a free hand for five minutes on a target that looked grotesquely big against the bright moon". The

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supervise consolidation. Commanding officers had not visited their battalions even by 3 a.m. by which time daylight made moves difficult if not impossible. Had commanding officers gone up to their battalions any time before 3 a.m. & 5 a.m. [,] they would have been able to see the situation and push on the advance b[ly] a series of encircling moves as taught. (2) Report of a German prisoner says our men lay down when fired at. In any case [,] encircling movements were not made nor were the enemy strongpoints rushed. Casualties were thus largely increased & our men pinned to the ground & lost our barrage. (3) Company officers and platoon commanders sent back no reports of the situation. (4) Although the failure of the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI to advance was early known at Brigade HQ [,] the danger of this gap in our line, through which the final weak counter-attack eventually came, was not grasped, nor were orders at ??? sent out to move round Veal Cottages. (5) Men scattered & hid in shell holes or moved to the rear as casualties when unfit [?] Thus very heavy casualties were reported [?] when these had, in truth, not occurred. (6) The final counter-attack [,] which drove back the 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, 11<sup>th</sup> Border Rgt, & part of the 15<sup>th</sup> Lancs. Fus. only consisted of 200 men. Stokes mortars at Tournant Farm & south of Vat Cottage did not open fire upon them. No attempt was made to ??? & 2 ½ batt[alions] moved rapidly to the rear [,] 50 odd men of them not stopping until caught by straggler points. (7) Little or no effort was made to dig in or place Lewis guns or machine-guns in position'. See *ibid*: 'Summary of the Attack of the 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. with 2 battalions of the 96<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. on December 2 [1917]', *ibid*.

<sup>827</sup> See *ibid*, 'Narrative of Operations 2/3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917, 15<sup>th</sup> (S) Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers', 4 December 1917 and '32<sup>nd</sup>. Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33', 5 December 1917. Both reports contain terse, hand-written marginalia comments by Major-General Shute.

<sup>828</sup> TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI and WO/95/2405 17<sup>th</sup> HLI war diaries.

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author of a third (16<sup>th</sup> NF) observed: “The night [of the attack] was clear and moonlit. At once the advance was seen...”<sup>829</sup> These published interwar impressions, however, still conform to the immediate battalion war diary entries, which, by manifest inference (passing mention of a bright moon when relating prevailing weather conditions, perceived enemy awareness of impending attack and almost instantaneous opening up of hostile machine-guns) indirectly emphasise the adverse effect of moonlight on the recent operation.<sup>830</sup>

Major-General Shute concluded his after-action report with a narrative of 97 Brigade’s retirement followed by a general analytic précis – ‘Reasons for the Failure of the Operation’. Losses among officers and NCOs, he observed at the head of the former, made it “difficult to collect reliable details as to the reason of [sic] the withdrawal ...” Recent reports, based on “best information available”, debunking that certain key objectives were captured or retained for any lengthy period had, nevertheless, finally been verified: “During no period of the day were we in possession of TEALL COTTAGE. We were never in possession of HILL 52 after we had been driven off it by the enemy’s counter-attack at 5:30 a.m.”<sup>831</sup>

11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, which had advanced the farthest distance to Mallet Copse, was the subject of a great deal of official disapprobation for retiring in the face of the

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<sup>829</sup> See Bond, *The King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War Vol. 3*, p. 911, Chalmers (ed), *A Saga of Scotland*, pp. 109-10 and Cooke, *Historical Records of the 16<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers*, p. 88.

<sup>830</sup> See TNA: WO/95/2402: 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI, WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, WO/95/2403: 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, WO/95/2405: 17<sup>th</sup> HLI, WO/95/2397: 15<sup>th</sup> LF and WO/95/2398: 16<sup>th</sup> NF war diaries.

<sup>831</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part IV, Narrative Dealing with the Retirement of the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 16.

4:10 p.m. counter-attack: “There is nothing”, Major-General Shute remarked, “to indicate that the strength of the attack or the artillery fire employed by the enemy in the slightest degree justified this withdrawal”.<sup>832</sup> The Lonsdales’ retreat, while highly questionable in his eyes, was somewhat mitigated by the Battalion’s isolated position and enemy resourcefulness: “The German seems throughout to have shewn [sic] a good deal of enterprise and to have persistently tried to work round the flanks of 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment”. Shute also recognised that the hard-pressed men were “without leaders, had been fighting all day and their stamina was probably nearly exhausted. This explanation”, he nevertheless observed, “cannot be accepted and all that can be said is that the 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regt., who are normally fine fighters, failed on this occasion”.<sup>833</sup>

Major-General Shute also cast a critical eye on 16<sup>th</sup> HLI by remarking that the afternoon counter-attack, extending to the Battalion’s left, brought about a withdrawal at the same time as 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment. Fatigue and losses among junior leadership were, as with the neighbouring 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, taken into account: “This Battalion had also had very heavy fighting all day and had had heavy casualties in officers and NCOs, the commanding officer being amongst the officers hit”. Shute, while not indifferent to these circumstances, nonetheless dryly observed that 16<sup>th</sup> HLI’s “action in withdrawing is not explained and there seems little excuse beyond the extreme strain imposed on the men in their leaderless condition”.<sup>834</sup> This conclusion, despite contrary evidence in the

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<sup>832</sup> Ibid.

<sup>833</sup> Ibid, pp. 16-17.

<sup>834</sup> Ibid, p.17. This assertion was probably based on after-action reports submitted by 97 Brigade. See IWM 4723: ‘Preliminary Report on Operations, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>’, 4 December 1917 and ‘Summary of the Attack of the 97<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. with 2 Battalions of the 96<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bde. on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1917’, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

relevant Battalion war diary, is puzzling. 16<sup>th</sup> HLI, after successfully repelling the German counter-attack, did not retire from positions around Void Farm until ordered to do so before dawn on 3 December. Perhaps Brigadier-General Blacklock's previous remark that the Battalion had retired to Vocation Farm following the counter-attack combined with the wounding and evacuation of Major Scott (acting CO) on the late afternoon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> had a negative impact on the quality of information subsequently related by the latter's successor (Lieutenant-Colonel Scully).<sup>835</sup>

The precipitate action taken by 16<sup>th</sup> NF in the wake of the afternoon counter-attack, Major-General Shute commented, "requires explanation". The designate 'counter-attack counter-attack' battalion's advance from the vicinity of Virile Farm resulted in a minimal gain of 300 yards from the original jumping-off line with both flanks refused. This circumscribed forward movement, made regardless of the fact that "the enemy did not follow up our retiring troops and the OC 16<sup>th</sup> North'd Fusiliers did not see any Germans advancing", was justified – during the course of an interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Scully – by the fact that no organised troops remained to defend the old frontline as the Battalion moved forward.<sup>836</sup> Concern for exposed flanks also contributed to the perceived untimely halt. Shute, however, remained unconvinced: "I am of the opinion

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<sup>835</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Scully made no mention of the pre-dawn (5:00 a.m. 3 December) order for 16<sup>th</sup> HLI to withdraw posts from Void Farm in his subsequent after-action report. See IWM 4732: '32<sup>nd</sup> Div. No.G.S.1499/3/33', 4 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>836</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Scully's replies to a series of questions (not stated) from Division HQ further illuminate his decision to halt the advance: 'Ref. Questions (a) My No. 3 and 4 companies dug in on the line they advanced to i.e. about 250 yards ahead of our line. They started digging in about 4:30. (b) No counter-attack was seen by any of my battalion but it was reported from the direction of MALLET COPSE. (c) I visited the advanced line (Nos. 2 and 3 companies) at 6 p.m. By that time they were reorganised and were already dug in (about 4 to 5 feet deep) they had established touch and put out defensive flanks. (d) I never saw any trench mortars. My Lewis guns were used to engage hostile machine-guns and to fire on any bodies of hostile infantry. Very few however were seen. (e) My Battalion was detailed as the forward body for CCA [counter counter-attack] My Battalion did not retire but pushed forward as soon as the troops in front were seen to be retiring'. Ibid.

that the OC 16<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fus. was wrong in the decision he came to, and that he should have advanced at once to VOID FARM and attacked the enemy he encountered. The situation in which he found himself, however, was a difficult one, and the reasons he gives for his action are reasonable”.<sup>837</sup>

The last section (‘Reasons for the Failure of the Operation’) of Major-General Shute’s after-action report is of particular interest for what is not – the detrimental impact of moonlight – directly addressed. This is not surprising given his past advocacy of night attacks under similar atmospheric conditions. Moreover, three pre-disposed tactical viewpoints likely influenced Shute’s overall assessment of the disappointing results: First, the importance of units maintaining direction and cohesion by moonlight; second, a ready acceptance of the need for operational risk-taking; third, clear recognition that the enemy had successfully adapted to British offensive tactics (hence the unusual hybrid tactical approach that dispensed with a barrage for the first 8 minutes of the attack) by late 1917. It is also fair to point out the unfortunate tactical situation confronting 32<sup>nd</sup> Division left few alternatives once Second Army ordered the attack. Thus Shute, always the confident and aggressive soldier, made the best of bad job by attempting to introduce surprise as a crucial element in the first phase of the operational scheme. Errors had obviously been made at subordinate levels. The novel attack plan (the best that could be devised given the circumstances) was, in his view, not at fault.

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<sup>837</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part IV, Narrative Dealing with the Retirement of the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p.17.

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The primary factor, “which directly conduced to the failure of this operation”, the GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division observed, “was that fact that machine-guns were all alive and in action from Zero plus 7 onwards”. The enemy’s establishment of complete “fire superiority” forced the attackers to seek cover in scattered shell holes. “Local advances were attempted and carried out after this period, but all movement cost us dearly in leaders, who had to expose themselves in organising and leading these advances”. Most units, therefore, “were practically without leaders and when the time of stress [afternoon counter-attack] came, the men, being deprived of their usual commanders and a good deal disorganised by the day’s fighting, failed to deal with the situation”. The “indirect cause”, Shute continued, was the “firing from west to east, while the attack was being delivered from south to north”, of the supporting artillery. This made it “impossible to organise an effective creeping barrage to cover the infantry advance”. Had it been possible to place batteries directly behind 97 Brigade, he concluded, “the enemy machine-guns might have been kept under until captured”. The “contributory cause”, Shute added in perhaps the most controversial section of ‘Reasons for the Failure of the Operation’ was disorganisation resulting from an “attack delivered in darkness ... accentuated by the loss of officers”. Thus command and control broke down, as surviving ORs (lacking prerequisite training and initiative) proved unwilling or unable to act as substitutes for fallen commissioned leadership: “Although night attacks have been carried out with complete success, it must be realised that we are now dealing with only partially trained troops, whose training and discipline may not be sufficiently good to enable them to surmount the difficulties of control entailed by an attack in the darkness”.<sup>838</sup>

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<sup>838</sup> Ibid, p. 18. Severe losses among junior leadership would often decide the fate of an attack: ‘There is much to be said for the view that by the summer of 1917 ‘war was becoming more than ever a platoon

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Major-General Shute prefaced his closing summary by observing “that an intercepted German message shews [sic] that an attack by us was expected by the enemy on the night of 1/2<sup>nd</sup> [December], and that although his frontline of posts had not been manned, his main line of defence had been reinforced, and his machine-guns were ready for our men”. Enemy anticipation and consequent augmented vigilance, as opposed to bright moonlight was, therefore, the reason why his machine-guns achieved fire superiority shortly after Zero. “Our attack, therefore, although generally successful in surprising his posts, failed in coming as a surprise to his troops in the main line of defence and this fact made the operation more difficult”. The reason for the afternoon retirement “in the face of a not very considerable enemy attack” by such “staunch fighters” as 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment, was, Shute remarked, difficult to explain:

The loss of officers was no doubt a direct cause of their failure. A contributory cause may be that conditions at this time of year are very trying on a man’s vitality, and that after some hours of fighting in the wet and muddy ground his stamina and powers of resistance are worn out and unless resolute leadership is present he is no condition to withstand further high tests on his endurance.

The remedy for this, he concluded, “is not easy to discover. It may be desirable to relieve the attacking troops a few hours after Zero by fresh troops moving through them. On this occasion this would have been difficult owing to the machine-gun fire. In most operations it would be equally difficult to accomplish owing to the enemy’s barrage”.<sup>839</sup>

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commander’s war, for it would be on their initiative and determination that success would depend’. See A.M. McGilchrist *op.cit.*, in Gary Sheffield, ‘The Indispensable Factor: The Performance of British Troops in 1918’, Peter Dennis & Jeffery Grey (eds), *1918: Defining Victory: Proceedings of the Chief of Army’s History Conference Held at the National Convention Centre, Canberra 29 September 1998* (Canberra: Army History Unit, 1999), p. 89.

<sup>839</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

The GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's general and specific criticism of collective and individual actions by battalions and battalion commanders appear to be tainted, despite recognition of the impact of battlefield conditions upon troop stamina, with censure engendered by his personal stake in the success of the night operation.<sup>840</sup> These controversial views, which have an echo in a contentious verdict of the subsequent Cambrai enquiry, were also expressed in an existing atmosphere of personal and professional anxiety amongst responsible mid-level commanders over future employment in the aftermath of recent successful German counter-attacks.<sup>841</sup> Shute's observations about perceived infantry shortcomings were, nonetheless, founded on valid contemporary concerns:

The calibre of infantry, as seen by the British officer corps between 1914 and 1918, was rarely encouraging. The tide of volunteers and the heavy casualties suffered by the BEF in 1914 and early 1915 meant that the supplies of the experienced officers necessary to train and lead the unmilitary British masses in the New Armies were inadequate. As the war went on, this difficulty increased as the pool of eligible and 'appropriate' officers dwindled along with the quality of recruits in the rank and file. The enthusiastic patriots and mature men were to be replaced by those unpatriotic slackers who required conscription to join the army and defend King and Country ... By 1918, the average British platoon of 50 men would be lucky to have one soldier with prewar training, although the vast majority of the remainder had at least one year of combat

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<sup>840</sup> See Chapter 4, p. 275.

<sup>841</sup> A court of enquiry to investigate German success during the Cambrai counter-attack was convened (Lieutenant-General A. Hamilton Gordon GOC IX Corps presiding) at Hesdin by order of Sir Douglas Haig on 21 January 1918. 'In its finding the court was careful to refrain from criticism of the 'higher commanders' and was 'mainly concerned with reasons why the British forward positions were taken by surprise and why resistance broke down. Whilst displaying some appreciation of their difficulties the tendency was still to lay blame on the troops', whose level of training was perceived to be unsatisfactory. Three corps commanders (one by his own volition), nevertheless, went home as a result of Cambrai. Division and brigade commanders of the most effected infantry divisions remained in place. See Captain Wilfred Miles, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 3* (London: HMSO, 1948), p. 297 and Jeffery Williams, *Byng of Vimy: General and Governor General* (London: Leo Cooper, 1983), pp. 204-08. Special thanks to Mr Andy Lonergan for clarifying the circumstances by which Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas D'Oyly Snow (GOC VII Corps) departed from his post.

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experience, while between one-third and one-half of the strength of an average platoon of the German Army in March 1918 was made up of soldiers trained before the war.<sup>842</sup>

Absorption of new drafts similar to the hapless party of 4 officers and 65 ORs dispatched to 16<sup>th</sup> HLI on the eve of the night attack or, for that matter, a large reinforcement draft to 2 New Zealand Brigade prior to the Polderhoek Chateau operation,<sup>843</sup> remained problematic throughout 1917, one infantry brigade HQ noting at the height of Third Ypres that 50 percent of brigade commanders had to rely on ‘short intensive training’ to turn new men “into soldiers, as apart from brave men dressed in khaki”.<sup>844</sup> Shute’s claim that “little was left undone to ensure each man knowing his part”, while contradictory in light of his remarks on the behaviour of “untrained troops”, may imply adherence to a general policy implemented by Second Army that emphasised “it was more and more evident that greater stress must be laid on training in open warfare to encourage initiative and power of leading in the ranks of junior NCOs and privates, which are so necessary when officers become casualties”.<sup>845</sup> Realisation of such lofty goals would prove almost unattainable with the time available and human material provided.<sup>846</sup>

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<sup>842</sup> M.A. Ramsay, *Command and Cohesion: The Citizen Soldier and Minor Tactics in the British Army 1870-1918* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), p. 172.

<sup>843</sup> See fn. 789 and fn. 793.

<sup>844</sup> TNA: WO/95/2404: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI War Diary and 74<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, Operations 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> August 1917’ quoted in Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 89.

<sup>845</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section III, Preliminary Measures’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 7 and ‘Major-General C.H. Harington, Comments on Operations, 20<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1917, Second Army’, 28 September 1917 quoted (original source Montgomery-Massingberd papers) in Robbins, *British Generalship*, p. 93. Major-General Montgomery (MGGS Second Army) probably inherited his predecessor’s ‘Comments’, amongst a plethora of other relevant documents, prior to the latter’s departure for Italy.

<sup>846</sup> By January 1918 ‘the BEF contained a mixture of experienced and inexperienced soldiers. The heavy losses at Passchendaele (some 250,000) were replaced to some extent by recruits, and the tactical wisdom and experience passed on by a hardcore of survivors of Third Ypres compensated to some extent for the casualties – at least in a military sense’. Lieutenant-Colonel C.G. Fuller (GSO 1 29<sup>th</sup> Division 1915-17; BGGs III Corps 1917-18), expressing a jaundiced Regular soldier’s viewpoint, subsequently observed in a

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Major-General Shute's observation in regard to ineffectual artillery support as an "indirect cause" is also valid, inasmuch as batteries firing west to east for an attack moving from south to north obviously failed to provide adequate assistance during the afternoon counter-attack.<sup>847</sup> This handicap was engendered by a dearth of available battery sites within the restricted confines of the Passchendaele Salient. Alternative heavy and field battery positions due west of Westroosebeke proved, regardless of herculean efforts to move guns and supplies east of the Langemarck – Winnipeg Road, inadequate fire support bases from which to engage targeted strongpoints, pillboxes and troop concentrations with sufficient accuracy. Moreover, 128 (protective barrage and area concentration) of the 144 Vickers machine-guns assigned to support the operation, while easily maintaining a steady indirect fire of 50 rounds per minute without overheating, were ultimately found lacking in their nominal role as an effective artillery substitute and force multiplier.<sup>848</sup>

The GOC 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, it will be recalled, subsequently praised RE efforts to improve inadequate overland communications before the attack. Lieutenant-Colonel Pollard (CRE) summed-up experience gained from an "R.E. POINT OF VIEW" in his

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1938 correspondence with official historian Cyril Falls that the 'British fought the war after 1914 (or say 1915) with almost untrained men, and whenever we had to move, in 1917, and especially in 1918, the troops did not know how to do it, nor did the artillery know how to support them' and as a result there was 'unnecessary slaughter, and non-attainment of objectives'. See Sheffield, 'The Indispensable Factor: The Performance of British Troops in 1918', Dennis & Grey (eds), *1918: Defining Victory*, p. 75 and Fuller *op. cit.*, quoted in Robbins, *British Generalship*, p. 85.

<sup>847</sup> Major Eveleigh (CO 32<sup>nd</sup> Division Signal School) subsequently observed: 'The absence of any continuous wave wireless sets inside of RA OP's made itself seriously felt'. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report: 'Appendix 'I': Communications', December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary.

<sup>848</sup> 16 designate 'close defence' guns have been deducted from the 144 available. See TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report: 'Appendix 'H': Action of Machine-guns During Operations near Passchendaele 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary and IWM 4723: 'G.188/4/1', 14 December 1917', 'Action December 2, 1917', Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2) for general comments and detailed narrative by Major H.W. Bolton (DMGO 32<sup>nd</sup> Division), 14<sup>th</sup> and 188<sup>th</sup> MG companies respectively.

lengthy ‘Report after Operations’: It was, he observed, essential that duckboard tracks be extended right up to the frontline. “If for want of materials this cannot be done [,] tapes or wires should be carried on from the track-heads”. RE dumps should be “placed as far forward as possible as long as they are not under direct observation”. Pollard concluded by noting the usefulness of tramways for transporting RE and infantry stores to the forward area. “This line should [,] if possible [,] be kept free of RFA traffic. [A] tramway for RFA to serve as many batteries as possible is of greatest service”.<sup>849</sup>

Official historian Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, commenting on their inherent efficacy, remarked that night attacks are “at least as old” as Gideon’s assault on the Midianite encampment.<sup>850</sup> Major-General Shute, confronted with seemingly insurmountable tactical circumstances (inability to form-up in daylight and a potentially devastating enemy counter-barrage) decided to revert again to this age-old method of warfare, “as so many recent attacks had been made at dawn it was decided to risk the inherent dangers of a night attack on a big scale...”<sup>851</sup> Indeed, the Kirke Committee (established in 1932 to examine the lessons of the Great War)<sup>852</sup> subsequently noted that night operations often ensured that elusive tactical surprise was achieved on the far-flung battlefields of 1914-18.

[T]he increasing use of darkness to cover preliminary movements was a noteworthy feature of all campaigns, whether in trench or open warfare. These were carried out

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<sup>849</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 141 and IWM 4723: ‘A.4/2’, 6 December 1917, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert Papers (Box 80/10/2).

<sup>850</sup> Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1918 Vol. 5* (London: HMSO, 1947), p. 586.

<sup>851</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part II, Plan of Operations, Section I, General’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 2

<sup>852</sup> One of the Kirke Committee’s principal members was Major-General (and former BGGs 32<sup>nd</sup> Division) A.E. McNamara.

on a large scale and over considerable distances in our eastern campaigns, favoured no doubt by conditions of comparatively good visibility. These same conditions also favoured the attacks by night on difficult objectives, which were a marked characteristic of the latter operations in Palestine and Syria. But the fact that night operations were eventually common to all theatres shows their great importance. And this is natural since without a doubt the automatic small-arm weapon forms the great strength of the modern defensive, and anything that tends to blind it must be to the advantage of the attacker if he is suitably trained. The conclusion is that movements by night may often be the only way of obtaining a tactical surprise, and attack by night the most economical way of crowning it by tactical victory.<sup>853</sup>

A need for “comparatively good visibility” was almost certainly taken into account when Shute proposed to attack under conditions of bright moonlight. Conditions of total darkness as opposed to optimal half-light, would, based on Shute’s previous experience, prevent assaulting troops from maintaining desired direction and cohesion while traversing the featureless, “cut-up” terrain. Similar demonstrations of this viable operational technique continued well into 1918 when Shute (as GOC V Corps) oversaw, along with other corps commander counterparts, steady advances during the final ‘Hundred Days’, although these operations, according to Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, were often “continuous and small in scale. Plans were improvised by divisional generals or brigadiers as the situation demanded. Often there was no time to refer these plans to

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<sup>853</sup> Great War Committee, ‘Report of the Committee on the Lessons of the Great War (The Kirke Report)’, *The British Army Review Special Edition* (April 2001), p. 11. ‘In 1933’, David French has observed, ‘at least three officers who were to rise to very senior command in the Second World War took part in training exercises involving night attacks in which real effort was made to learn the lessons Kirke and his colleagues had discovered. In Northern Command, Colonel H.R. Alexander drafted the Command’s training instructions and took the report as his keynote. In the Aldershot Command, Brigadier A.P. Wavell’s 6 Infantry Brigade practiced night attacks. Whilst in Egypt, Brigadier Frederick Pile and one of his battalion commanders, Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard Montgomery, practiced night operations around the Canal Zone. Perhaps it is not fanciful to suggest that one of the seeds which was to germinate into the successful Second Battle of Alamein in 1942 was sowed by [Sir J.E.] Edmonds and fertilized by the Kirke Report’. See Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1918 Vol. 5*, p. 586 and David French, ‘Official but not History?’ Sir James Edmonds and the Official History of the Great War’, *RUSI: Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies Journal*, 131:1 (March 1986), p. 62.

corps commanders, let alone army commanders".<sup>854</sup> The successful application of searchlights ("Monty's Moonlight") to duplicate artificial moonbeams during 1944-45 also attests to the advantage of attacking in semi-darkness provided, as we shall see, corresponding circumstances of atmosphere and terrain are scrutinized. Perhaps Shute, having readily embraced a difficult and dangerous task, should have considered Major-General Heneker's recommended contingencies to deal with potential hostile machine-gun fire before Zero + 8. Support for the original scheme without alteration by both corps commanders further militated against adoption of these reasonable precautions.<sup>855</sup>

Major-General Shute's erroneous conclusion that the Passchendaele operation was compromised before Zero was ultimately based on a flawed interpretation of an intercepted wireless message.<sup>856</sup> Thus the attackers, whose intentions and or movements remained undetected during forming-up, were almost immediately observed while advancing into no man's land. That bright moonlight was subsequently recognised as a potential disadvantage for assembling assault troops is clearly demonstrated in a 32<sup>nd</sup> Division after-action report, which, in summarizing the planning phase of a large-scale raid launched in late February 1918, tellingly observed: "Moonrise on the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> was at 7:30 p.m. and this gave at least one hour of darkness for the assembling of troops. After 7:30, with the prevailing conditions, it was reasonable to suppose that

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<sup>854</sup> Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-18* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992), p. 342. The highly successful night attacks by 64 Brigade (21<sup>st</sup> Division) on 24 August and V Corps on 23 October 1918 were conducted under Lieutenant-General Shute's aegis. See Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1918 Vols. 4 & 5* (London: HMSO, 1947), pp. 242-47 and 362-64 and Peter Simkins, 'Somme Reprise: Reflections on the Fighting for Albert and Bapaume, August 1918', Brian Bond, *et al*, *'Look to Your Front': Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), pp. 147-62.

<sup>855</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 59-61.

<sup>856</sup> See Chapter 3, pp. 179-83.

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towards 8 o'clock the light would improve. Zero hour was therefore fixed at 7:52".<sup>857</sup> Such precautions, when one considers Major-General Heneker's scathing remark concerning the perceived fatal combination of snow, moon and unsuppressed machine-guns on the night of 1/2 December, were taken without due consideration of snow-covered ground as one of three critical foils to achieving surprise. Brigadier-General Aspinall noted on 21 November that the "actual time of Zero will be decided on after trials of the time required for forming-up have been carried out by the divisions concerned".<sup>858</sup> Visibility trials to assess Shute's disputable views on snowfall, bright moonlight and the conspicuousness of advancing infantry at 200 yards distance were, even if feasible, not contemplated in the days leading up to the attack. As former *Wehrmacht* Brigadier-General Alfred Toppe (reflecting on his extensive Second World War experience) astutely observed: "The effect of events taking place at night increases or decreases in proportion to the degree of darkness. Operations taking place during moonlight and starlit nights, especially across snow-covered terrain, may approximate daytime conditions".<sup>859</sup>

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<sup>857</sup> TNA: WO/95/2371: 'Report on Raids South of Houthulst Forest carried out by 32<sup>nd</sup> Division February 27/28<sup>th</sup> 1918, Section II: Plan', 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary. Precautions for dealing with the anticipated full moon were moot, 'as it turned out the weather conditions were unfavourable; the night was cloudy and dark for 2 hours after moonrise and a drizzling rain made the going slippery'. The operation, carried out behind a creeping barrage on a two (14 and 96) brigade frontage, was, nevertheless deemed a great success. See Regimental History Committee, *History of the Dorsetshire Regiment 1914-1919 Vol.1*, pp. 114-17 and Major John Ewing MC, *The Royal Scots 1914-1919 Vol. 2* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1925), pp. 550-51.

<sup>858</sup> See fn. 127.

<sup>859</sup> Brigadier-General Alfred Toppe, *CMH Pub 104-3 Historical Study: Night Combat* (Washington DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 1986), p. 4.

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## C.1 Operational, Strategic & Political Consequences

Post-battle prisoner interrogations and examination of captured documents supplied important details about enemy defences, tactics, equipment, organisation, strength, morale and, most importantly to both sides, orders of battle. Information obtained from captive British ORs was often of limited tactical value, as they were purposely kept in “deliberate ignorance about the make-up of their formations, the names of their leaders and military affairs in general”.<sup>860</sup> The German private soldier, a GHQ intelligence officer later observed, “knew remarkably little about anything except his own unit in the frontline and rarely had any information about reserve troops in their rear, so it was all very localized information we got from captured prisoners”.<sup>861</sup> Nonetheless, “from at least the end of 1915 they [British intelligence officers] sought those that were ‘intelligent and willing to talk’ ... In this respect officers were considered a waste of time because, although intelligent, they would be reluctant to talk. It was felt that the best results came from smart young NCO[s]’ and intelligent soldiers”, who sometimes provided “direct insight into matters of strategic importance”.<sup>862</sup> All three officers captured during 2-3 December appear, as probably anticipated, to have held their tongues. This was not the case with certain astute other ranks like the previously quoted

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<sup>860</sup> Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme 1916* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), p. 42. Examples of British POW interrogation reports during Third Ypres and the types of intelligence conveyed by captive ORs exist in BA-MA Freiburg, PH 3/585: *Vernehmungsprotokolle französischer & englischer Kriegsgefangener im Bereich des AOK 4, Bd. 3 Aug.-Sept.* [1917].

<sup>861</sup> General James Marshall-Cornwall *op. cit.*, quoted in Michael Occleshaw, *Armour Against Fate: British Military Intelligence in the First World War* (London: Columbus Books, 1989), p. 100. Second Army, nevertheless, reckoned in 1917 that PsOW were the ‘most important of all sources’. See James Beach, ‘British Intelligence and the German Army, 1914-1918’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis. London: University College, 2004), p. 33.

<sup>862</sup> Beach, ‘British Intelligence and the German Army, 1914-1918’, pp. 29-30 and 33.

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*Feldwebel* of IR94,<sup>863</sup> who, besides providing a wealth of local intelligence, speculated on the Passchendaele Salient and possible hostile offensive intentions: “There is no talk of any attack developing in this area from the enemy, and it is common rumour that the Battle of Flanders will be forced to die down on account of the condition of the ground” and “He did not think the enemy would attack, but we (the English) are not to be allowed to advance further along the ridge. There are many troops in the villages, and especially in ROULERS for counter-attacking, if necessary. All shoulder-straps are covered up, and it is impossible to say what units are seen”. A *Gefreiter* of the same regiment corroborated this view: “The prisoner knew nothing of an intended attack on a large scale. OSTEND, BRUGES and GHENT are swarming with troops, and it is rumoured that many divisions have been transferred from RUSSIA to the Western Front, but it is not known how many have been transferred to RUSSIA”. He also remarked that the general policy was to “advance the present outpost line [*Vorfeldzonelinie*] about 400 metres”, while the talkative *Feldwebel* observed: “Trenches near ROULERS [are] being worked on.<sup>864</sup> They are not deep and wire is not very strong”.<sup>865</sup> Such revelations, when taking the unsuccessful night operation and recent German counter-attacks at Cambrai into consideration, failed to allay the anxieties (expressed along with rapturous terms of endearment to his wife) of Lieutenant-General Hunter-Weston:

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<sup>863</sup> See Chapter 3, pp. 178-79.

<sup>864</sup> Aerial photographs taken in late November revealed ‘a projected line of [German] trenches southwest of Roulers, halfway between the Roulers line and Roulers’. See TNA: WO/157/287: II Corps War Diary and WO/95/643, ‘II Corps Summary of Information, 28 November 1917’ and ‘II Corps Summary of Information, 29 November 1917’, II Corps Intelligence File.

<sup>865</sup> TNA: WO/157/121 ‘Annexe to Second Army Summary... Information Obtained from Prisoners’, 3 and 5 December 1917, Second Army Intelligence File and WO/157/288: ‘II Corps Summary of Information’ and attached annexes, 2-5 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File. VIII Corps summaries for this period are incomplete, although snippets of their contents were duplicated in Second Army and II Corps intelligence reports.

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The Army commander has given over the defences of the whole Passchendaele Salient to me. An honour, but a perfectly damnable position to hold. If the Germans think it worthwhile to put in an attack in force on this silly salient, we are, I fear, certain to lose it. However, I'll do my little bit to get the horrid place in the best order possible to safeguard it. I have & have had, many damnable & difficult jobs, and, as someone has to do them, it is just as well it should be me, for I am so happy that if the whole world tumbled about my head & everything went wrong (which, by God's help, it shall not do here) I shall still be a happy and contented man in the possession of your wonderous [sic] love...<sup>866</sup>

Sir Henry Rawlinson, having delegated this unwelcome responsibility to an uneasy GOC VIII Corps, was left to consider additional resource demands on Second Army after the German counter-offensive at Cambrai: "Tonight Tavish [Davidson] rang up to say they [GHQ] wanted nine div[isions] down south [,] so I have to send away the 63 Naval Div[ision] which is well up to strength [,] and the 19 Div[ision] which is well rested and I had hoped to put in the line to relieve tired ones. The Cambrai battle is going to make us very short of troops I fear".<sup>867</sup>

Sir Douglas Haig convened an army commanders conference at Doullens on 7 December. "The main topic was the organisation of our defensive lines in view of the

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<sup>866</sup> BL: 48366: Facsimile of letter to Lady Hunter-Weston, Hunter-Weston Diary, 3 December 1917, Vol. XII. Lieutenant-General Hunter-Weston, unhappy about being given sole responsibility for the salient, contemplated resignation before receiving a certain amount of verbal support from a seemingly sympathetic Sir Henry Rawlinson. A subsequent meeting with Sir Douglas Haig allowed the anxious GOC VIII Corps to state his case. He would eventually oversee the voluntary withdrawal – a collateral consequence of the on-going Battle of the Lys (9-29 April 1918) – from the Passchendaele Salient. See Hunter-Weston Diary, 18 December 1917, Haig diary entry 19 December 1917 in 'The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig's Autograph Great War Diary', Parts 9-10 1917 (NLS Acc., 3155, Reel No. 5. 96, 97 and 141-53 (Brighton: Harvester Press Microfilm Publications LTD, 1987) and Gary Sheffield & John Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 361. For Hunter-Weston's egocentric account (as compared with Haig's somewhat laconic diary entry) of this episode see Appendix 15.

<sup>867</sup> CAC: RVLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 3 December 1917.

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Russians having dropped out of the war. This will allow the Germans to employ some 30 more divisions on this front. These can be brought here at a rate of 8 to 10 per month if the Enemy so will it".<sup>868</sup> Sir Henry Rawlinson remarked on the potential threat of these substantial enemy reinforcements and the vulnerability of the exposed salient in his diary the following day: "Things are pretty quiet now here in Flanders [,] but at Cambrai it looks as if there were going to be trouble for the Bosch has 34 div[isions] concentrated there – and may try Passchendaele simultaneously – I think he means to have a jolly good go at us somewhere [,] and I am anxious about this P[asschendaele] salient".<sup>869</sup> That the worrying strategic situation also put paid to any further discussion of a Flanders spring offensive was made clear during a Second Army conference on 9 December:

The collapse of Russia would enable Germany to withdraw divisions from the Eastern Front. No large movement has so far commenced but there were indications that it might begin shortly. The rate of withdrawal can be calculated at from 8 to 10 divisions per month, so that, at this rate, the enemy will be able to increase his force on the Western Front up to the end of March 1918 by some 30 to 40 divisions. In view of the above facts, and taking into consideration the question of manpower, which at present is unsatisfactory, and the probability that America will not be able to put large forces into the field in the near future, there must be a period of five or six months when the enemy will be in preponderance on the Western Front. Therefore, we must look, during this period, to a defensive rather than an offensive policy. Consequently, although the basis of the policy adopted heretofore on the Army front has been the resumption of the offensive in the spring, it is now clear such an offensive is not feasible.<sup>870</sup>

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<sup>868</sup> Haig diary entry 7 December 1917 in 'The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig's Autograph Great War Diary', Reel 5, Parts 9-10 1917 and Sheffield & Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig*, p. 358. Sixteen German divisions were transferred from east to west during December 1917. See John Hussey, 'The Movement of German Divisions to the Western Front, Winter 1917-1918', *War in Society*, Volume 4, Number 2, April 1997, p. 219.

<sup>869</sup> CAC: RVLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 8 December 1917.

<sup>870</sup> LHCMA: 'Proceedings of a Conference held at Second Army Headquarters at 11 a.m., 9 December 1917', Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/16, King's College, London.

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All of this begs the question, was it necessary to launch another operation from the dangerously exposed protuberance?<sup>871</sup> The apparent lack of any tangible gain caused one regimental historian to observe: “It has been difficult to find any reason why the operation about to be described ever took place”.<sup>872</sup> The few recent historians who comment on this episode have been equally dismissive of a seemingly “futile” two-division attack on “meaningless fragments of trench, barbed wire and pillboxes...”<sup>873</sup> Such retrospective judgments, whatever their merit, fail to recognise the larger complex interaction of pressing (dire need for adequate observation facilities and overall tenability of the Passchendaele Salient) operational determinants, contemporary operational methodology and technological capabilities, on-going manpower deficiencies *vis à vis* their relation to the totality of Third Ypres and its uncertain military and political aftermath.

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<sup>871</sup> Second Army’s subsequent war diary entry briefly summarised the night operation as follows: ‘At an early hour our troops attacked north of PASSCHENDAELE. As a result of the fighting a small advance was made north of GOUDBERG COPSE and east of VINDICTIVE CROSSROADS. At one time our troops were reported to have advanced up to the southern end of VEAL COTTAGES – MALLET COPSE – VOID FARM, and to have held HILL 52, TEALL COTTAGE and the SOUTHERN REDOUBT in W.25.c. Counter-attacks, however, forced our troops back to certain points with the result that the line runs approximately – TOURNANT FARM – V.28.b.6.7. – V.29.a.0.7. – V.29.a.6.5. – north of VOX FARM – south of HILL 52 – south of TEALL COTTAGE – V.30.b.6.2. – V.30.b.9.0. – W.25.c.1.5. – W.25.c.3.2. – to original frontline. During these operations 3 officers, 126 other ranks and 3 machine-guns were captured. The reply to our barrage came down eight minutes after zero and was heavy on our front and support lines. Further hostile barrages were put down at 5:20 a.m. and 6:55 a.m. There was a heavy concentration against PASSCHENDAELE from 8:20 to 9:30 a.m. Hostile fire became intense during the afternoon in the area of operations in support of counter-attacks and throughout the day our battery positions near LANGEMARCK, in the STEENBEEK VALLEY and around KANSAS CROSSROADS were intermittently shelled’. See LHCMA: Second Army War Diary, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/16, King’s College, London. Similar operational summaries by VIII and II corps HQs exist in BL: 48359: ‘VIII Corps Official War Diary with Appendices and Addenda’, Hunter-Weston Papers, Vol. V and TNA: WO/95/643: II Corps War Diary.

<sup>872</sup> Major-General J.C. Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949), p. 275.

<sup>873</sup> Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-18* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992), p. 273, Michael Stedman, *Salford Pals: A History of the Salford Brigade – The 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalions the Lancashire Fusiliers 1914-19* (London: Leo Cooper, 1993), p. 156 and William Moore, *See How They Ran: The British Retreat of 1918* (London: Sphere Books, 1975), p. 31.

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**Plate C.1 Map overlay: Area north of Passchendaele January 1918 (Source: MMP)**

The formation of a salient is never desirable, “as there is too much of a threat that the other side will find a way to pinch it off. Additionally, the enemy can concentrate fire in the area of the salient at will”.<sup>874</sup> From 4 October, Second Army attempted a strategic breakthrough that eventually devolved into a series of post-strategic assaults aimed at securing the northern portion of the Passchendaele Ridge before winter set in. These successive drives, culminating in the attack on 10 November, resulted in a lamentably exposed bulge that was to worry the British high command throughout the first quarter of 1918. All thoughts of further local offensives were put on hold after the Polderhoek

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<sup>874</sup> Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-1919* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), p. 172. Pre-war FSR stated: ‘Salients and advanced posts which are held to deny ground to the enemy, and not merely as a screen to the main position, are a weakness if they are exposed to artillery fire which cannot be answered, and if they cannot be supported by effective infantry fire. As a general rule such positions had better be left unoccupied, and the ground between them and the main position be defended either by bringing a crossfire on to it from other parts of the position or by strong entrenchments, which are within supporting distance’. See War Office, *Field Service Regulations Part I: Operations 1909 (Reprinted with Amendments, 1912)* (London: HMSO, 1914), p. 145.

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Chateau operation.<sup>875</sup> On 13 December GHQ issued special instructions (“one of the most remarkable documents which ever emanated from a victorious staff” a cynical Lloyd George would later observe)<sup>876</sup> outlining measures to be taken by Second and Third armies for the defence of the Passchendaele and Flesquières<sup>877</sup> salients: “Here it was decided that the front of the Battle Zone should be the approximately the base of the salient, leaving all in front of it in the Forward Zone”, which, in the event of a serious German attack, would be held chiefly by machine-guns protected by supporting artillery and ample placement of barbed wire obstacles.<sup>878</sup> This reasoned response to appalling tactical circumstances was ultimately based on hardheaded consideration of the key issue (general withdrawal to a more defensible line) raised in Brigadier-General Aspinall’s ‘Appreciation’ of November 1917. Lieutenant-General Kiggell (CGS GHQ) subsequently observed in an order dated 10 January 1918:

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<sup>875</sup> IX Corps reclaimed the Polderhoek Chateau sector from II ANZAC Corps on 4 December. Though of “distinct advantage” to the local garrison, New Zealand gains 150 yards east of the chateau grounds failed to “effect an appreciable improvement with regard to the exposed slopes of Cameron Covert, Reutel and Polygon Wood, where protection from the Polderhoek fire would have to be won by the labour of the spade”. Nine days later (14 December), *IR162 of 17<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division* recaptured the territory overlooking the Scherriabeek valley. Sir Henry Rawlinson wrote afterward: “This morning at 5:45 a.m. the Bosch attacked our position at Polderhoek Chateau with a batt[alion] and succeeded in driving some of the 30<sup>th</sup> Div [ision] from the southern part of our frontline. Our left company held on well and drove off the enemy with loss [,] but the two co [mpanies] on the right were forced back to the support line 100 yards in rear – It is possible the Bosch may press his attack further [,] so as to gain observation”. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1914-1919*, p. 314 and CAC: RVLN 1/9: Rawlinson Diary, 14 December 1917. A scheme to regain the lost territory after Christmas was subsequently cancelled. See Brigadier-General F.C. Stanley, *The History of the 89<sup>th</sup> Brigade 1914-1918* (Liverpool: ‘Daily Post’ Printers, 1919), pp. 241-42.

<sup>876</sup> David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs Vol. 2* (London: Odhams Press abridged edition, 1937), p. 1325. The ex-Prime Minister also remarked in a further display of accusatory excoriation, ‘I need hardly say that this document was withheld from the War Cabinet’, although contemporary maps illustrating unfortunate positions at Passchendaele or Flesquières were certainly available to an inquiring chief executive and his government colleagues.

<sup>877</sup> The development of the equally exposed Flesquières Salient was one of the melancholy consequences of the Battle of Cambrai. See Captain Wilfred Miles, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917 Vol. 3* (London: HMSO, 1948), pp. 267-68.

<sup>878</sup> Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1918 Vol. 1* (London: Macmillan, 1935), pp. 41-43. The ‘Forward Zone’ coincided with the existing front system, while the ‘Battle Zone’ (two or three miles behind) was sited on the best ground available to give battle. A ‘Rear Zone’ (two to eight miles in rear of the Battle Zone) was to be constructed as additional labour became available. See C.E.W. Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France 1918 Vol. V*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1943), pp. 35-36.

### *Conclusion*

1. The policy as regards the defence of the PASSCHENDAELE Salient in the event of a hostile offensive in that neighborhood has been described in O.A.D. 291/29 dated 13 December 1917.<sup>879</sup> The question of shortening our line by a voluntary withdrawal north-east of Ypres, which under exceptional circumstances may become advisable, should also be considered and the necessary plans for such an operation worked out.
2. In this connection it is necessary to bear in mind that there are strong moral and political, as well as military objections to a voluntary withdrawal from Passchendaele. Such a move could, therefore, by the general situation necessitating the strongest possible reinforcement on some other part of the front, in which case the order for withdrawal would be issued from GHQ.<sup>880</sup>

Attention to aforementioned pressing operational determinants and the resultant night attack appear, with the benefit of hindsight, to have been irrelevant in light of subsequently adopted defensive policy. Nevertheless, the capture and retention of Venison Trench, Hill 52 and Vat Cottage Ridge could have resulted in a serious local setback for the German defenders. Loss of the former position and its conjoined redoubts would have provided Second Army with an extended panoramic view (from Broodseinde to NE of Passchendaele village) of the enemy occupied hinterland west of Roulers, while the seizure of Hill 52 (which dominated the triangle Westroosebeke – Vindictive Crossroads – Oostnieuwkerke and nearby hostile battery positions) and Vat Cottage Ridge (overlooking low-lying enemy positions to the north and NW) would also have secured the northern shoulder of the salient. Sir Henry Rawlinson acutely articulated his disappointment over the failure to even achieve these limited objectives, thereby

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<sup>879</sup> See Appendix 14.

<sup>880</sup> TNA: WO/158/210: 'OAD 745', 10 January 1918, Fourth Army Operations File. Second Army became 'Fourth Army' on 20 December 1917.

## Conclusion

emphasising the perceived importance of the night attack as an attempt to improve a “defective, not to say dangerous” position following the post-strategic phase that officially ended with the Second Battle of Passchendaele, in a memorandum dated 10 December: “Nothing we can hope to do can make the line now held a really satisfactory defensive position. We must therefore be prepared to withdraw from it, if the Germans show signs of a serious and sustained offensive on this front, or if an attack elsewhere necessitates the withdrawal of more troops from the front of Second Army”.<sup>881</sup>

No doubt critically viewed by contemporaries as a ‘dud show’, the night operation on the Passchendaele Ridge can also be viewed, irrespective of the apparent failure, as indicative of a bite and hold “style of attack” (adopted from September 1917) where “army merely passed to corps an outline of what it had to do, and corps organised the whole operation, delegating to divisions as necessary”.<sup>882</sup> Pre-assault tactical preparations and organisation prior to this last – albeit unofficial – large-scale formulaic attack of the campaign were further expedited by general adherence to relevant sections of *S.S. 135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*.<sup>883</sup> This was especially true in regard to the all-important logistical arrangements: Light railways, corduroy roads and duckboard tracks were maintained and extended with satisfactory results. Supply dumps along with vital artillery assets, moved forward regardless of almost unimaginable

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<sup>881</sup> Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, pp. 273-74.

<sup>882</sup> Andy Simpson, ‘British Corps Command on the Western Front, 1914-1918’, Gary Sheffield & Dan Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army’s Experience 1914-18* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), p. 115.

<sup>883</sup> ‘Large-scale’ when compared with the number of battalions participating in post-strategic Anglo-Canadian operations from 26 October to 10 November: 26 October (34 battalions); 30 October (12 and ¼ battalions); 6 November (10 battalions); 10 November (11 battalions), 2 December (10 battalions). The Polderhoek Chateau attack (3 December) was carried out by two battalions. See General Staff, *S.S. 135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* (December 1916) and Chris McCarthy, *Passchendaele: The Day-by-Day Account* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1996), pp. 125-39.

## *Conclusion*

battlefield conditions, were also in place before zero hour on 2 December. Counter-battery work by HAGs (a corps artillery asset), according to a II Corps intelligence summary, was “exceptionally successful”.<sup>884</sup> The accuracy of this conclusion is, considering aerial observation was “impossible owing to the high winds”, poor visibility and mist, on-going sound ranging and flash spotting complications, frequent shifting of individual guns and manipulation of dummy battery positions by the enemy and subsequent intense preparatory bombardment experienced before the 4:15 p.m. counter-attack, difficult to substantiate. Perhaps a general comparative perception that the “enemy’s artillery activity was not intense, and it was certainly far less heavy than on our attack of the 10<sup>th</sup> November”,<sup>885</sup> appeared to confirm the overall effectiveness of the recently adopted pre-assault artillery programme (‘Second Army Artillery Instructions No. 28’) notwithstanding acute absence of the usual battle-proven air-artillery co-operation component.<sup>886</sup> Nevertheless, these relatively positive developments have to be considered along with elements (attacking on a narrow front and problematic division of mid-level formation authority) of what appear to be operational and administrative bad practice.

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<sup>884</sup> TNA: WO/157/288: ‘II Corps Summary of Information,’ 2 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File.

<sup>885</sup> Ibid and TNA: WO/95/643: ‘Daily Artillery Report: From Noon 1/12/17 to Noon 2/12/17’, II Corps War Diary

<sup>886</sup> VIII and II corps carried out five and two specified counter-battery programmes respectively during the period 22 November-1 December. RFC counter-battery work was highly rated throughout Third Ypres. During the summer Battle of Langemarck (16-18 August), 67% of missions were classified as ‘faultless’, while 33% varied from ‘adequate to poor. Although such percentages would vary from area to area, depending on local factors (strength of enemy opposition, weather conditions while observing), it is still fair to say that the variations would not be great between brigades’. See BL: 48359: ‘VIII Corps Official War Diary with Appendices and Addenda’, Hunter-Weston Papers, Vol. V, TNA: WO/95/643: II Corps War Diary and David John Jordan, ‘The Army Co-operation Missions of the Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force 1914-1918’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1997), p. 200.

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Adoption of a narrow attack frontage astride firmer ground within the Passchendaele Salient was, given prevailing swampy conditions west of the main ridge opposite Poelcappelle and its environs, clearly unavoidable in early December 1917. Formation of the salient during Sir Herbert Plumer's successive attacks in October and November was a deplorable operational outcome inherited by Sir Henry Rawlinson and his staff. The new GOC Second Army, lacking final authority to withdraw from strategically valuable high ground, deemed one more attack necessary in order to improve the unsatisfactory tactical situation. Having duly sanctioned the hybrid assault scheme, designated objectives lying between 100 and 700 yards beyond the jumping-off line were obviously not considered at army or corps level to be beyond the attacker's capabilities when compared with measurable Canadian success (two bounds of 500 yards on similarly restricted frontages)<sup>887</sup> against more formidable German defences on 6 and 10 November.<sup>888</sup> This was not unreasonable given the fortnight (18 November-1 December) available for planning and preparation. Division of corps responsibilities inside the limited confines of the salient resulted from the maintenance (with some minor adjustments before 2 December) of previously established Second Battle of Passchendaele formation boundaries.<sup>889</sup> Perhaps Second Army HQ should have contemplated, taking into account subsequent relegation of responsibility to VIII Corps, turning over the entire salient to II Corps (tasked with overseeing the most difficult part of the operation) prior to the attack. Administrative and organisational aspects would, no

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<sup>887</sup> Flank attacks on neighbouring Fifth Army's front were discontinued after 30 October. See Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: the Untold Story* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 177.

<sup>888</sup> A dearth of available concrete pillboxes remained a significant drawback to German defenders following the breach of in-depth positions (where *Flanders I* and *Flanders II* lines intersected) during October-November 1917. See Appendix 16 Part A (paras. 13 and 31), Part B (para. 5), Part C (para. 5) and Part F (para. 6).

<sup>889</sup> See TNA: WO/95/643: II Corps and WO/95/821: VIII Corps war diaries.

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doubt, have been rendered more efficient by having one corps provide operational oversight instead of two.<sup>890</sup>

Sir Douglas Haig's overall position had, by the winter of 1917-18, eroded considerably as growing pessimism amongst Great Britain's policy making elite appeared to be confirmed by the inconclusive results of Third Ypres and Cambrai. Preparations for the former offensive had been "accompanied by fierce struggles in Whitehall between the War Office and civil departments" over manpower resources, "which grew in intensity as the phases of the offensive unfolded. In effect the character of the British war effort underwent a transformation in which the military dimension became part of a more integrated and, eventually, transnational [i.e. establishment of a Supreme War Council] war effort". This state of affairs, hastened by a "political response to the final phase and immediate aftermath of Passchendaele", manifested itself in virulent partisan press campaigns, acrimonious Parliamentary debate and bitter civil-military contention that left Haig at a distinct disadvantage in the months leading up to the anticipated German spring offensive.<sup>891</sup> It is in this context of political doubt and despondency, recognised

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<sup>890</sup> Captain Guy Chapman, writing of a vulnerable salient held by his division near Bucquoy in April 1918, observed: 'In defiance of all the rules laid down by FSR, and other authorities that a salient should be held all around by one unit, the apex of this one was the dividing line between battalions, brigades, divisions and, for all I know, corps. In the agitation of the [March] retreat, the higher command appeared to have abandoned even the most rudimentary principles'. Perusal of contemporary FSR reveals the following axiom: 'When a position is extensive it should be divided into sections, each of which should be *assigned to a distinct unit*' (my emphasis). Chapman's interpretation, when one considers the Passchendaele Salient as a distinct part of Second Army's 29,000-yard front, is, as intimated, likely further substantiated by contemporary authoritative sources or generally accepted practice. See Guy Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p. 240 and War Office, *Field Service Regulations Part I: Operations 1909 (Reprinted with Amendments, 1912)*, p. 142.

<sup>891</sup> See Brock Millman, *Pessimism and British War Policy 1916-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 92-108, Keith Grieves, 'The Recruiting Margin' in Britain: Debates on Manpower during the Third Battle of Ypres', in Peter Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), p. 24, J. Lee Thompson, *Northcliffe: Press Baron in Politics 1865-1922* (London: John Murray, 2000), p. 294 and House of Commons, *The Parliamentary Debates: Official Report, Fifth Series* –

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dwindling manpower assets and the consequences of conducting simultaneous operations at Cambrai and Passchendaele that the night attack will now be evaluated.

The desire to clear the Belgian coast in spring 1918 remained Sir Douglas Haig's chief strategic priority as 1917 drew to a close. Indeed, as late as 7 January (during a War Cabinet meeting ostensibly convened to discuss the current state of BEF defences and French demands for it to take responsibility for forty miles of their line south of the Somme) he expostulated that the next four months would be the "critical period of the war" and that the "best defence" in anticipation of a major enemy offensive "would be to continue our offensive in Flanders, because we would retain the initiative and attract German reserves against us".<sup>892</sup> Nevertheless, on 13 October, "when it was evident that no visible success would soon come to British arms in Flanders, the Field Marshal approved preliminary preparations for an operation designed to restore British prestige and strike a theatrical blow against Germany before the winter set in".<sup>893</sup> This often overlooked aspect of the 'first great tank battle' implies political motive for some sort of tangible Western Front victory, albeit without the glittering strategic prospects offered farther north, as an obvious foil to alternative strategic options then under consideration by the Lloyd George government.<sup>894</sup> In the meantime, Second Army prepared to carry out phase one of a projected "advance north of PASSCHENDAELE to include HILL 52 and

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*Volume 101* (London: HMSO, 1918), columns 2247-2251 for Commander Josiah Wedgwood's (MP Newcastle-under-Lyme) spirited criticism of the recent Flanders offensive.

<sup>892</sup> Haig diary entry 7 January 1918 in 'The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig's Autograph Great War Diary', Reel 6, Parts 11-12 1918-19 and Robert Blake (ed), *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914-1919* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952), pp. 277-78.

<sup>893</sup> Paul Guinn, *British Strategy and Politics 1914 to 1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 271-72.

<sup>894</sup> Political motive also had some influence in regard to GHQ's sanctioning of a major attack (Battle of the Ancre 13-18 November 1916) the previous year. See Haig diary entry 12 November 1916 in Bourne & Sheffield, *Douglas Haig*, p. 254.

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SPRIET to north of POELCAPPELLE”, which would, along with other contemplated attacks, “facilitate the initial stages of a possible general offensive operation in the spring”.<sup>895</sup> Thus Haig, with one strategic eye still fixed on Flanders, oversaw Third Army’s preparations for the Cambrai battle. One suspects that the Passchendaele night operation would (considering the close downhill proximity of Roulers and embryonic state of its western defences)<sup>896</sup> have received more support but for the fact that GHQ perceived the need for a triumphal prestige offensive before 1917 reached a perceived indeterminate and bloody conclusion. Haig’s subsequent insistence that costly Cambrai attacks be maintained after all prospects of further success vanished need only concern us in relation to recognised manpower deficits, expectations that the BEF would, besides dispatching five of its 62 infantry divisions with Sir Herbert Plumer to Italy, takeover a sizeable portion of the French line as far as the Oise and such extraneous operational schemes contrived to improve the overall position in Flanders before year’s end.

Manpower shortages became a major cause for concern at GHQ as Third Ypres progressed into its first full month, Sir Douglas Haig informing his senior staff in late August that in order to maintain the flow of drafts it would be “necessary that every service and department should immediately give up every man who is in any way likely, by training, to become fit for service in the ranks of the infantry” if final victory were to be achieved by December.<sup>897</sup> The reinforcement outlook did not improve, as Whitehall’s

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<sup>895</sup> LHCMA: ‘Second Army No. 57 (G), Organisation of Army Front During Winter of 1917-18’, 18 November 1917, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/15, King’s College, London. See fn. 195.

<sup>896</sup> See fn. 868.

<sup>897</sup> Haig diary entry 19 August 1917 in ‘The First World War Political, Social and Military Manuscript Sources: Series One: The Haig Papers from the National Library of Scotland, Part I Haig’s Autograph Great War Diary’, Reel 5, Parts 9-10 1917 and Sheffield & Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig*, p. 319. Comb-outs of rear echelon service personnel had mixed results. An officer of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cameron Highlanders

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commitment, Keith Grieves has observed, to a “frontline 62 division force in France, comprising 680,861 rifles, was thoroughly undermined by news of the battles in the second phase of the offensive which started on 28 August and continued through Menin Road Ridge, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde into the first week of October”. The last appalling phase, which Lloyd George and his cabinet colleagues all but sanctioned despite extreme doubts of a favourable outcome,<sup>898</sup> culminating in the capture of Passchendaele, also “marked the end of the government’s commitment to the ‘large army first’ principle as its confidence in Haig’s purpose in the Ypres salient was progressively undermined”. War Cabinet fears that a “resilient, stoical home front might not withstand the costly and disillusioning outcomes of these continuous battles became of more urgent concern”. By December, the same month that manpower allocation was formally referred to a Cabinet committee, replacement drafts were arriving on the continent at a rate of just 180 men per day.<sup>899</sup>

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subsequently recollected the poor performance of dispatched base and lines of communication details, along with disparate elements from other regiments, during an assault near Frezenberg in late August: ‘The attack on 23 August [sic 22 August] in many places was a complete fiasco. Some men flatly refused to go over the top, saying they were not going to fight under officers they’d never seen, and in strange units; that their commanders were deceiving them and that no breakthrough was possible. Some men lay down and refused to move, others arranged with their pals to shoot each other in cushy parts in the first shell hole. The troops had been bluffed and they knew it’. See Colonel A.F.P. Christison *op. cit.*, quoted in Peter Scott, ‘Law and Order: Discipline and Morale in the British Armies in France, 1917’, Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective*, pp. 357-58.

<sup>898</sup> See Prior & Wilson, *Passchendaele: the Untold Story*, pp. 151-155 and 185-89 for War Cabinet ‘inaction’ and the final phase of Third Ypres.

<sup>899</sup> Grieves, ‘The Recruiting Margin’ in Britain: Debates on Manpower during the Third Battle of Ypres’, in Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective*, p. 395 and Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1918 Vol. I*, p. 50. The controversy over manpower is further complicated by Lloyd George’s later assertion that the War Office ‘decided whether or not to allocate men to machine-gun units, the tank corps, etc., rather than the infantry...’ David Woodward, nevertheless, concludes that ‘throughout 1917 Lloyd George had resisted giving the army all the recruits it requested. To a considerable degree his motive had been to force Haig, albeit unsuccessfully, to economise his losses.’ Moreover, a ‘structural manpower problem’, unrecognised by Lloyd George and Sir Douglas Haig, had an overall negative impact on ‘Logistico-Engineering’ efforts throughout Third Ypres: ‘The former was interested in cutting infantry establishments based on manipulation of manpower figures, whilst the latter still thought in terms of combat infantry’. See David Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (East Brunswick NJ: Associated University Presses, 1983), p. 290 and Rob Thompson, ‘Mud, Blood and Wood: BEF Operational and Combat Logistico-

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Was Sir Douglas Haig wise to sanction the night operation given prevailing strategic and political circumstances? Over three quarters of the Passchendaele Ridge had been secured during three and one half months campaigning. The prospect of a relatively modest offensive toward Roulers in spring 1918 offered an enticingly close strategic prize just beyond reach. Overall feasibility of this paper scheme, of which the hybrid two-division attack on 2 December was a notable preliminary, is debatable. The highly unsatisfactory supply and overland communications infrastructure – unrelentingly harassed by German artillery – east of Ypres may or may not have been sufficiently developed in time for another offensive, but that is by the way when considering consequent political backlash and husbanding of Great Britain’s vital manpower resources.<sup>900</sup> The writing, insofar as manpower appropriation and GHQ’s future Western Front strategy are concerned, was already on the wall by the autumn of 1917 if not earlier. While it is obvious the British Field Marshal hoped his strategic vision for 1918 would ultimately prevail, one has to consider in hindsight the wisdom of ordering a large-scale subsidiary night attack that was, to “economise troops” and avoid getting “involved

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Engineering during the Battle of Third Ypres 1917’, Peter Doyle & Matthew Bennett (eds), *Fields of Battle: Terrain in Military History* (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 252.

<sup>900</sup> Prevailing supply and communication difficulties were, given the poor state of the battlefield and almost continuous hostile bombardments, often overcome with remarkable results: ‘The perfecting of these [corduroy roads and duckboard tracks] communications was jealously guarded by Lieutenant-General Hunter-Weston, KCB, DSO, the [VIII] Corps Commander, himself an officer of the Royal Engineers. Under enormous difficulties he succeeded in establishing a ‘Decauville Track’ from Ypres to Crest Farm, upon which ran an almost regular service of trains consisting of six to eight open trucks driven by a miniature motor engine. Undoubtedly this railway not only saved many lives, but owing to the stealth with which it moved, and the ‘shell-craft’, which is indeed a science, of the drivers, the little trains completed their daily journeys almost without mishap. In fact, the relief train became [sic] to be known as the ‘Passchendaele Express’. Whether or not such achievements would have constituted the logistical basis for a resumed Flanders offensive remains questionable. See Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Seton Hutchison, *The Thirty-Third Division in France and Flanders 1915-1919* (London: Warlow & Sons, 1921), p. 77.

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in anymore unnecessary fighting”, subsequently terminated within ten hours of Zero.<sup>901</sup> The 1,689 combined casualties sustained by 8<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Divisions may seem a drop in the bucket when compared with 733,308 total estimated killed, wounded and missing from 9 April to 31 December.<sup>902</sup> It remains (in the light of political fallout engendered by the BEF’s staggering losses and subsequent unpropitious strategic circumstances as 1917 drew to a close), nonetheless, questionable that two relatively full-strength and rested infantry divisions should have been used in a somewhat risky and ultimately barren “local operation” as the crisis of the war fast approached.<sup>903</sup>



**Plate C.2 Passchendaele winter 1917-18 (Source: IWM 56258)**

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<sup>901</sup> Brigadier-General J.H. Davidson hand-written note (3 December 1917), TNA: WO/158/209: Second Army Operations File.

<sup>902</sup> BEF casualties (killed, wounded and missing) for the April to December 1917 ‘campaign season’ covering Arras, Messines, Third Ypres and Cambrai: 9 April-6 June: 178,416; 7 June-30 July: 103,505; 31 July-19 September: 129,706; 20 September-31 December (including losses sustained during the Passchendaele night operation): 250,296; 20 November-31 December (Battle of Cambrai only): 71,385 or 733,308 total. See War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War 1914-1920* (London: HMSO, 1922), pp. 325-27.

<sup>903</sup> The British Empire was, in the long run, able to absorb its excessive manpower losses better than Imperial Germany, although this was not evident at the time. It could be argued that Sir Douglas Haig’s 1917 strategy was partially based on the BEF’s staying power *vis à vis* the *Westheer* in that a failed risk (i.e., heavy casualties without achieving final victory) as opposed to an outright gamble with the Empire’s reinforcement pool, could be followed by sustainable recovery. Lloyd George and the War Cabinet would, of course, arrive at a different conclusion in the immediate aftermath of Third Ypres and Cambrai.

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### C.2 Costs

Subsequent battalion and company roll-calls, supported by eyewitness accounts and enquiries, established approximate first casualty returns for both divisions. 8<sup>th</sup> Division's losses for 2-3 December were estimated at 40 officers and 584 ORs, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment suffering the most with 154 killed, wounded and missing.

**Table A**<sup>904</sup>

	Killed		Wounded		Missing		Total
	Officers	Other ranks	Officers	Other ranks	Officers	Other ranks	
<b>8<sup>th</sup> DIVISION</b>							
<b>25 Brigade</b>							
Bde HQ			1(b)				1
2 Lines	1	17	11	56		45	130
2 R Berks	1	35	3	73	2	40	154
1 RIR		6	3	55	1(c)	26	91
2 RB	3	22	7	71		27	130
MGC		4	2	10			16
TM Batt.		5		7			12
<b>24 Brigade</b>							
1 Worcs				2		1	3
2 E.Lancs		1		2			3
2 Northants		1					1
MGC		6	3	21			30
<b>23 Brigade</b>							
MGC		6		15(a)			21
RFA			1	5			6
MGC		7	1	8(d)			16
FA RAMC		2		8(e)			10
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>333</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>624</b>
Note: (a) 2 ORs at duty (b) At duty (c) Wounded and missing (d) 1 OR at duty (e) 5 ORs at duty.							

2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade trailed slightly behind with 130 casualties (killed, wounded and missing) each. 1<sup>st</sup> RIR lost 91, while 25 Brigade's supporting machine-gun company and TM battery lost 16 and 12 respectively. Additional

<sup>904</sup> TNA: WO/95/1677: 'Appendix 'J' 8<sup>th</sup> Division: Casualties – 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> December 1917, Narrative of Operations Carried Out by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917', 13 December 1917, 8<sup>th</sup> Division War Diary.

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losses, besides 1 officer from 25 Brigade HQ, in 23 Brigade (21), 24 Brigade (37) and component RFA, MGC and RAMC (32) units brought total reported casualties to 624 officers and men.<sup>905</sup> Added to the number of verified deaths for 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment (36), 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment (18), 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade (25) and 1<sup>st</sup> RIR (6) were the unknown circumstances of 141 infantry recorded as ‘missing’. Their ultimate fate can be deduced by examination of available CWGC data, which lists 173 gravesites and commemorations for the four battalions of 25 Brigade during the period 30 November-3 December as follows: 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire Regiment (49), 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment (52), 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade (44) and 1<sup>st</sup> RIR (28). To this figure should be added 12 men from attached MGC and RAMC units, along with a further 12 infantrymen who died of wounds (3 in captivity) in the seven days after 3 December.<sup>906</sup> Thus 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s losses amounted, by adding the combined adjusted figure of 197 men killed/missing/DOW with the reported 365 wounded minus 10 men (9 infantry<sup>907</sup> and 1 RAMC) known to have died of wounds at CCS and base hospitals during 4-10 December, to approximately 552 officers and men.<sup>908</sup>

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<sup>905</sup> Ibid and Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, *The Eighth Division: 1914-1918* (London: Naval & Military Press reprint of 1926 edition), p. 167.

<sup>906</sup> See Appendix 17.

<sup>907</sup> Three infantrymen (10359 Pte. G.W. Hodgson, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire, Z/738 Rifleman P. Higginbottom and S/10061 Rifleman R.W.G. Shepherd, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade) who subsequently DOW in captivity have been deducted from the aforementioned CWGC total of 12 infantrymen DOW during the period 4-10 December, as they would have been originally recorded ‘missing’. See Appendix 17.

<sup>908</sup> Comparisons of contemporary casualty returns with on-line sources produced the inevitable number of minor anomalies. For instance, 1<sup>st</sup> Worcestershire, 2<sup>nd</sup> East Lancashire and 2<sup>nd</sup> Northamptonshire of 24 Brigade are recorded as having lost a combined total of 3 men (1 missing) during the period (2/3 December 1917) in question, although no matching fatalities for these battalions have been identified using CWGC data. Twenty-four total fatalities were also reported for 8<sup>th</sup> Division’s component 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> and 218<sup>th</sup> machine-gun companies as compared with 11 listed deaths (none from 23<sup>rd</sup> or 24<sup>th</sup> companies) obtained from CWGC sources. It is, nevertheless, also recognised that some casualties may have subsequently DOW in the weeks and months following 4-10 December, but the seven days after 3 December appeared to be an appropriate cut-off point. See Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 167, Geoff’s CWGC 1914-21 Search Engine <<http://www.hut-six.co.uk/cgi-bin/search14-21.php>> and Appendix 17.

## Conclusion

“It only remains to add”, Lieutenant-Colonel Boraston and Captain Bax observed, “that the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division had been even more unfortunate; for though some ground was won at the opening of the assault, all its gains were lost in the afternoon counter-attack...”<sup>909</sup> Total casualties incurred by 97 Brigade were estimated at 66 officers and 1,036 ORs (1,102), 16<sup>th</sup> HLI sustaining the heaviest losses with 245 killed, wounded and missing.

**Table B** <sup>910</sup>

	Killed		Wounded		Missing		Total	
	Officers	Other ranks	Officers	Other ranks	Officers	Other ranks	Officers	Other ranks
<b>32<sup>nd</sup> DIVISION</b>								
<b>97 Brigade</b>								
16 NF		24	4	65	1	8	5	97
15 LF	2	15	5	63		17	7	93
11 Border	5	32	9	159	1	51	15	242
2 KOYLI	4	21	8	116	2	41	14	178
16 HLI	3	17	9	179	1	4	13	245
17 HLI	6	37	5	131		13	11	181
MGC		3	1	20		4	1	27
<b>Totals</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>733</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>1036</b>

11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 17<sup>th</sup> HLI suffered almost as heavily with 242 and 181 respectively. Submitted casualty returns for the remaining three assault battalions and component machine-gun company were 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI (178), 16<sup>th</sup> NF (97), 15<sup>th</sup> LF (93) and 97 MGC (27). Verified deaths reported by these units amounted to 167. The 188 recorded missing must, as with 8<sup>th</sup> Division returns, also be compared with available CWGC data for the period 30 November-3 December, the breakdown of which is as follows: 16<sup>th</sup> HLI (65), 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment (99), 17<sup>th</sup> HLI (62), 2<sup>nd</sup> KOYLI (60), 16<sup>th</sup> NF (27), 15<sup>th</sup> LF

<sup>909</sup> Boraston & Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p. 167.

<sup>910</sup> TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, ‘Part III, Narrative of Events’, 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 15.

## Conclusion

(29) and 97 MGC (7) or 349 total identified gravesites and commemorations. To this figure should be added a further 17 men from attached RFA<sup>911</sup> and MGC units<sup>912</sup>, along with 28 additional infantrymen who died of wounds (one in captivity) between 4-10 December.<sup>913</sup> Total casualties for 32<sup>nd</sup> Division, when adding 394 killed/missing/DOW with 774 recorded wounded (minus 27 infantry<sup>914</sup> and 4 machine-gunners known to have died of wounds at CCS and base hospitals), amounted to approximately 1,137 officers and men.<sup>915</sup>



**Plates C.3, C.4, C.5 L to R: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. W.B. MacDuff, Pte. R.T. Hogg MM 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. R.H. Reid 17<sup>th</sup> HLI KIA 2 December 1917 (Sources: MMP, The Lonsdale Pals Battalion, 11<sup>th</sup> Service Battalion Border Regiment 1914-1918 <[www.freewebs.com/granatloch/](http://www.freewebs.com/granatloch/)> and UGA Roll of Honour <<http://www.gla.ac.uk/honour/>>)**

German casualties (killed, wounded and missing), based on examination of published postwar regimental histories, can only be surmised; *IR117* (239) and *IR94*

<sup>911</sup> Two (116739 Gunner Nigel Edmondson and 152893 Gunner William Edward Healer) of three fatalities of the component 161 RFA Brigade are inexplicably commemorated on the Louverval Memorial to the Missing near Cambrai. See Commonwealth War Graves Commission. <<http://www.cwgc.org>>

<sup>912</sup> 14<sup>th</sup>, 96<sup>th</sup>, 219<sup>th</sup> MG companies and 161 and 168 field artillery brigades. See Appendix 17.

<sup>913</sup> See Appendix 17.

<sup>914</sup> One infantryman (260268 Pte. Frederick F. Bent, 11<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment) who subsequently DOW in captivity has been deducted from the aforementioned CWGC total of 28 infantrymen DOW during the period 4-10 December, as he would have been originally recorded 'missing'. See Appendix 17.

<sup>915</sup> See Geoff's CWGC 1914-21 Search Engine <<http://www.hut-six.co.uk/cgi-bin/search14-21.php>> and TNA: WO/95/2370: After-action report, 'Part III, Narrative of Events', 11 December 1917, 32<sup>nd</sup> Division War Diary, p. 15.

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(211) suffering a combined total of 450 killed, wounded and missing.<sup>916</sup> The former regiment, however, combined losses (the bulk of which were likely sustained during 2-3 December) experienced over a period of six days i.e., after 25<sup>th</sup> Division's takeover of *Abschnitt A* on 26 November. The histories of *IR116* and *IR95*, while acknowledging severe loss (more wounded than dead in the latter's case) provide no concrete numbers to work with.<sup>917</sup> Best estimates, when considering available casualty figures of just over 200 men each for *IR117* and *IR94*, could reasonably be presumed to have totalled around 800 officers and men.<sup>918</sup>

The exact number of British prisoners, included as part of aforementioned contemporary figures for the missing, taken during the night operation is also difficult to determine. Sixty PsOW, according to the daily *Heersbericht*, remained in German hands at the close of the night attack, but this was probably a general estimate based on early reports.<sup>919</sup> Combined figures obtained from three of four consulted regimental histories provide a more accurate headcount (*IR116* (20), *IR94* (46), *IR95* (14) of 80 prisoners.<sup>920</sup> *IR117's* account, unfortunately, is vague about numbers; the only figure provided being a

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<sup>916</sup> Some of the reported missing would have been captured. See below.

<sup>917</sup> See Kurt Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin (3. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1931), p.196, Alexander von Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Verlag von Klasing & Co., 1921), p. 238, Prof. Albert Hiss, *Infanterie-Regiment Kaiser Wilhelm (2. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 116* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1924), p. 158 and Major A.D. Buttmann, *Kriegsgeschichte des Koniglich Preussischen 6. Thüringischen Infanterie Regiment Nr. 95: 1914-1918* (Zeulenroda, Thüringen: Verlag Bernhard Sporn, 1935), p. 254.

<sup>918</sup> Losses sustained by *I Battalion, IR115* (dispatched from reserve to assist the beleaguered *IR116* and *IR117*) could not be ascertained.

<sup>919</sup> Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg*, p. 238 and *The Times*, Tuesday, 4 December 1917.

<sup>920</sup> See Hiss, *Infanterie-Regiment Kaiser Wilhelm (2. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 116*, p. 158, Hartmann, *Das Infanterie Regiment Grossherzog von Sachsen (5. Thüringisches) No. 94 im Weltkrieg*, p. 238 and Buttmann, *Kriegsgeschichte des Koniglich Preussischen 6. Thüringischen Infanterie Regiment Nr. 95: 1914-1918*, p. 254.

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reference to eight compliant prisoners led away in broad daylight by *Gefreiter* Speiz on the morning of 2 December.<sup>921</sup> Nevertheless, it is probably safe to assume that the number of captives attained by 25<sup>th</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> divisions was, give or take, fewer than 100 ORs.<sup>922</sup> Conversely, Second Army noted, based on reports received up to the evening of 2 December, that a combined total of “3 officers, 126 other ranks and 3 machine-guns were captured” by 8<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> divisions. Subsequent figures tabulated by VIII Corps (2 officers and 52 ORs) and II Corps (1 officer and 42 ORs of which 15 were wounded) totaled 96 PsOW accumulated in divisional prison cages or CCS by dusk on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>923</sup>

### C.3 Epilogue

Perceived historical inconsequence does not render insignificant the human tragedy befalling hundreds of bereaved families like those of Private Frederick Wakely, Private Hugh Cairns and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant William Ridgway, all of whom were originally reported missing before being presumed dead by the War Office.<sup>924</sup> Fred Wakely’s remains were

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<sup>921</sup> The narrative implies that additional prisoners were taken before and after this incident. See Offenbacher, *Die Geschichte des Infanterie-Leibregiments Grossherzogin (3. Grossherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 117*, pp. 195-96.

<sup>922</sup> No officers were taken prisoner during the attack. See Messrs. Cox & Co., *List of Officers taken prisoner in the Various Theaters of War between August 1914, and November 1918* (London: London Stamp Exchange, 1988 reprint of 1919 edition).

<sup>923</sup> For data relating to numbers of German prisoners taken during 2-3 December see LHCMA: Second Army War Diary, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, File 7/16, King’s College, London, TNA: WO/157/120: ‘Second Army: 868<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Summary, Part 1’, 3 December 1917, Second Army Intelligence File, BL: 48359: ‘Report of Operations Carried Out by the VIII Army Corps on the Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1917, Official War Diaries with Appendices and Addenda, VIII Army Corps, Passchendaele Front, November 1917-April 1918’, Vol. V, Hunter-Weston Papers, TNA: WO/157/288: ‘II Corps Summary of Information’, 2 and 3 December 1917, II Corps Intelligence File and Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, *The Eighth Division: 1914-1918* (London: Naval & Military Press reprint of 1926 edition), p. 167. The latter source, given its nebulous contradictory figure of ‘about 150 prisoners’, is probably a rough estimate of total captures obtained by 8<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> divisions.

<sup>924</sup> Captain Hubert Essame (2<sup>nd</sup> Northamptonshire Regiment) poignantly described a stricken landscape littered with unburied dead opposite Venison Trench as it appeared at dawn on 1 January 1918: ‘Shell hole intersected shell hole, often containing the ghastly remains of a soldier fallen in the attacks of late November and early December. Around here their shoulder patches showed them to be mainly Royal Berkshires, Lincolns and Rifle Brigade. Defiled with mud and slime they lay huddled on their faces, their

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discovered, along with those of another 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire comrade (17129 Private F. Knott), SE of Exert Farm by an ‘Exhumation Company’<sup>925</sup> in 1921. The location of the bodies confirms both were shot down after mistakenly advancing beyond the final right flank objective.<sup>926</sup> Hugh Cairns’ parents received no additional information about the fate of their next-to-youngest son who vanished without a trace somewhere in the vicinity of Void Farm, while Fred Ridgway (2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Ridgway’s younger brother) recalled many years later: “My parents received a telegram informing them that Will was missing. Another telegram told them he was dead. Like many thousands of other soldiers Will has no marked grave but his name is on the memorial at Tyne Cot Cemetery near Passchendaele...”<sup>927</sup> Such anonymity in death has been overcome by official memorialisation and lingering memories of lost loved ones like Will Ridgway, whose 90-year-old brother paid a final remembrance tribute during a visit to West Flanders shortly before his own passing at Tingewick in late 2000.<sup>928</sup>

Venison Trench, Southern and Northern redoubts, Teall Cottage, Mallet Copse and Mallet Wood have long since vanished. The backwater West Flanders setting, now interspersed with prosperous farms, gigantic greenhouses and some light industry, for the

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equipment still on their backs, their rifles with bayonet fixed still in their hands, their faces almost as if they were asleep. British and German steel helmets, petrol tins, sandbags of jettisoned rations and coke, mingled with the abandoned equipment of the wounded, littered the landscape particularly along the dirty white tapes laid out to show the way to the frontline’. See H. Essame, *The Battle for Europe 1918* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1972), pp. 5-6.

<sup>925</sup> For the organisation and work of postwar exhumation units see Franky Bostyn, Kristof Blicck, Freddy Declerck, Frans Descamps, Jan Van der Fraenen, *Passchendaele 1917: The Story of the Fallen at Tyne Cot Cemetery* (West-Vlaanderen: Roularta Books, 2007), pp. 224-30.

<sup>926</sup> Privates Wakely and Knott are buried in Tyne Cot Cemetery. Their CWGC recorded death date (1 December) is, considering where their remains were subsequently found, open to question. Special thanks to Jan Van der Fraenen for providing additional details on discovery of the bodies at E.I.d.2.4., ‘Passchendaele Sheet 28’ (1: 10,000 scale) map reference.

<sup>927</sup> Telephone interview with Dr Joanne Coyle 29 May 2010 and Angela Foster, ‘Fred Paid His Final Tribute’, *Buckinghamshire Advertiser* (November 2000).

<sup>928</sup> Foster, ‘Fred Paid His Final Tribute’, *Buckinghamshire Advertiser* (November 2000).

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long ago night operation has no draw for battlefield tourists seeking more appreciable sites of commemoration and memorialization (**Maps 15 & 16**). Little local evidence, beyond pertinent gravesites primarily distributed about nearby Tyne Cot and Passchendaele New cemeteries or names listed by regiment on the former's immense memorial to missing United Kingdom and New Zealand servicemen, of the almost forgotten incident remains. One tangible piece of period material culture (currently on display at Tyne Cot Visitor's Centre) connected with the remote events of early December 1917 is a fine sepia military portrait (see Plate 3.2) of Fred Wakely bordered by the moving inscription:

‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course’.  
In Loving Memory of  
Gunner FREDERICK JOHN WAKELY  
Dearly Beloved Son of Mr and Mrs F.J. Wakely  
Killed in Action December 1<sup>st</sup> 1917,<sup>929</sup>  
While Serving His King and Country  
Aged 21 Years  
Too Dearly Loved to be Forgotten

Most recently, on a warm sunny day in August 2004, a hazel sapling was ceremonially planted not far from where the *Goudbergstraat* and *Haringstraat* (just opposite the present-day site of Virile Farm) intersect to commemorate 20-year-old Private Hugh Cairns' short life. An all-weather plaque placed beneath read:

In loving memory of  
Pte Hugh Cairns  
of 16<sup>th</sup> Bn Highland Light Infantry  
who died near this place on Dec 2<sup>nd</sup> 1917  
and who has no known grave  
REST IN PEACE

This modest tribute, a final act of remembrance by Joanne Coyle of Tayport, Fife for the maternal uncle neither she nor her mother (born 1922) ever knew, constitutes the only

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<sup>929</sup> See fn. 930 above.

## Conclusion

existing memorial directly related to an arcane First World War military operation in which 1,689 British officers and men were killed or wounded. Subsequent familial memorialization some eighty-seven years on originated with a dedicated niece's fervent desire to do something meaningful and permanent, for young Hugh, as intimated by relatives, was someone "well-loved and precious". The now burgeoning hazel tree is thus symbolic of potential maturity unrealised.<sup>930</sup>



**Plate C.6 Junction of *Haringstraat* and *Goudbergstraat* 11 August 2004: A hazel sapling commemorating Private Hugh Cairns is ceremonially planted by niece Joanne Coyle (Source: *Wereldoorlog 1 in de Westhoek* <[www.wol.be](http://www.wol.be)>)**

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<sup>930</sup> Telephone interview with Dr Joanne Coyle 29 May 2010.

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