

CENTRAL REGISTRY.

Central Registry No. and Date.

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N^o 10

SUBJECT, AND OFFICE OF ORIGIN.

Operations: Bapaume — Bullecourt.

Omitting comments on 1st attack on
Hindenburg Line

Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date
11 copies		Copy to. Sirdar			
		2 - M ^r Pearce M ^r Long Admiral de Robeck Admiral Threlby.			
				P. A.	Date

Schedule of Correspondence.

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DONATED RECORDS LIST

3376

3rd Series (75)

Operations by 1st Anzac Corps during the period

17th March to 13th May, 1917.

- (a) Capture of Bapaume and the villages in its vicinity.
 - (b) Attacks on and occupation of Hindenburg Line near Bullecourt.
-

Our continuous and unrelenting pressure on the Germans throughout the winter resulted in their withdrawal from the line of trenches they had held covering Bapaume, and our troops (2nd and 4th Divisions) entered that town and the villages near it on the 17th March without much fighting. They were able to push on through other villages such as Fremicourt, Favreuil, Beugnatre, Beugny, Haplincourt, Vaulx Vraucourt, Le Bucquiere and Velu without serious opposition, the Germans retiring to the villages to the North East. At the village of Beaumetz the 15th Brigade had a certain amount of fighting in ousting the Germans, who on the 23rd March counter-attacked them there, and temporarily regained the village. A second attack was immediately launched against them, however, when it was recovered, some 60 Germans being bayoneted during the operation.

The whole of the country through which we passed had been entirely desolated by the Germans, who had laid it waste in very much the same way as I imagine the Russians did their own country when retreating before Napoleon. Buildings of every description had been blown up, while even the ~~sm~~ small fruit trees had been cut down. Delay action mines had also been placed in many of the houses and cellars, the first one to take effect being that under the town hall in Bapaume, which was blown up during the night of the 25th March. A feature of the town hall was its fine, old brick tower, dated 1610, and though much battered about when we entered the town, it was still a noticeable landmark, and I remember wondering why it was the Germans had left it standing. From prisoners we heard that they had expected a divisional headquarters would almost certainly be established in the cellars. I am glad to say that this was not the case, but a few details were there, and on that particular night two French deputies also took up their quarters in them.

On the morning of the 26th March, it had been arranged that we should take the village of Lagnicourt, and that the 5th Corps on our left should simultaneously attack Ecoist Longatte, it being hoped that the attack on these two places would squeeze out the Germans in the village of Noreuil. On this morning, however, the 5th Corps were not ready to attack, so we took Lagnicourt by ourselves/

ourselves. The attack was carried out by the 7th Brigade under Wisdom, who made a converging attack from the front and both flanks with complete success. The Germans fought hard, as they had received orders that they were to hang on to it at all costs. During that day's fighting in actually taking the village, our killed were only 22, while we thought we had killed between 300 and 400 Germans. The next day their wireless announced that 1,000 of our corpses were lying around the village, so we trust that their casualties were much heavier than we thought. Ours, too, increased as time went on, for a certain number were taken prisoners, and the brigade lost altogether about 290 men in the operation, which included over 200 wounded - the 26th ^{attalion} Brigade under Travers having most of the fighting.

By the morning of the 2nd April the 5th Corps were ready to attack ~~Exoust~~ Longatte, and we consequently attacked Noreuil at the same time, Glasgow on this occasion taking the village with the 13th Brigade. The Germans again fought hard, but were completely defeated, our men getting right round the village shortly after dawn, and capturing 124 prisoners and several machine guns in it. The 50th Battalion under Salisbury suffered most in the attack, and the total casualties for the 24 hours were about 700, representing Killed 142 - Wounded 412, and Missing 149. Simultaneously with the attack on Noreuil the 5th Division (the 14th Brigade under Hobkirk this time) captured the villages of Louverval and Doignies, astride the Bapaume-Cambrai Road. Both attacks were excellently designed and carried out with complete success, the Germans falling back to the North East. Our casualties in this operation were: Killed 71 - Wounded 374 - Missing 22.

On the 9th April the 1st Division, which had relieved the 5th on our right front, took the villages of Hermies (in the angle of the Canal du Nord), Demicourt and Boursies, on the Cambrai Road. The 1st Brigade under Lesslie took the first^{two} named, and the 3rd Brigade under Bennett, Demicourt and Boursies. These attacks were also excellently planned, and resulted in complete success, the Germans being ejected from all three villages leaving 200 prisoners in our hands. In this combined operation our casualties were Killed 184 - Wounded 495 - Missing 9. The capture of these villages

- a total of 25 since the taking of Bapaume - brought us up to the main Hindenburg Line.

Orders were received that we were to attack the Hindenburg Line between Queant and Bullecourt on the morning of the 10th April in conjunction with 5th Corps, who were to attack the line West of Bullecourt. The weather was very bad - extremely cold with snow and very strong wind. There had been no time to cut by artillery fire the enormous width of wire which had been constructed in front of the whole of this line, and there had been no intention of attacking until the wire was cut. On the 8th, however, the 3rd Army commenced their big offensive in front of Arras, striking down South East along the Arras-Cambrai Road. It was hoped that they would reach the vicinity of Cherisy and Fontaine, and that consequent upon our being able to strike up towards Riencourt and Hendecourt, we should probably cut off a large number of Germans in the angle between us. We were to be given twelve "tanks" to assist us in the operation, the idea being that they would go successfully through the wire and over the trenches, making roads for us, and knocking out strong points. The "tanks" were to rendezvous at Noreuil during the night, and lead our advance through the enemy's wire.

During a blizzard in the night, however, the "tanks" missed their way, and arrived only as daylight was breaking, making it too late for any attack to be feasible. I personally was delighted at this, and regarded it as an intervention of Providence, for I had been most anxious not to attack under existing conditions. The evening before, I heard that the 3rd Army had not made the progress anticipated, when I at once called up the 5th Army, saying that under the circumstances I presumed our attack would not take place. I was told, however, there was all the more reason for us to shove through, and get the village of Riencourt.

The "tanks" having failed us, there was nothing for it but to postpone the attack. The next morning a meeting was called at Army Headquarters at Albert to discuss plans for the operation. I commenced by pointing out the objections to making an attack on positions with the wire uncut, adding that both the Chief and the

Army/

Army Commander had agreed with me originally that no attack should be made until the wire was cut. At this, the Army Commander (Gough), while agreeing, stated that conditions were altered by the fact of twelve "tanks" being placed at our disposal on such a narrow front, and in country which was eminently suitable for their use, being quite open with very few shell holes, and having a definite objective, etc.

While this question was being discussed, Gough was called away to the telephone to speak to the C.G.S. at G.H.Q. He came back to the meeting and said that Kiggell had called him up, telling him that there was every hope that the attack by 3rd Army on Cherisy and Fontaine would be a great success, and that it was of the greatest importance that we, i.e., 5th Army, should shove through to capture Riencourt and Hendecourt, as it would throw out a separate flank, which might well hope to succeed in capturing a large number of Germans driven down from the North West by the 3rd Army. Indeed, I understood that G.H.Q. wanted to know if the attack could not be delivered the same evening, but Gough informed us he had said that it would not be possible until the following morning. With such information it was of course impossible for me to make any further objections, as though I still had personal doubts as to the wisdom of making such an attack, yet, after all, it was only a small part of a large operation carried out in accordance with the Commander-in-Chief's plans. The attack was accordingly launched at 4.30 a.m. on the morning of the 11th.

The ~~at~~ idea was that with twelve "tanks" on such a small front, there would be no difficulty about their breaking through the wire and trenches, when six of them would wheel to the left through Bullecourt, sweeping along the trenches and wire to the East of that village, and by destroying the wire in front of the 62nd Division of the 5th Army, make progress possible for them in conjunction with the attacks by my corps. The "tanks" however proved a complete failure, as far as were concerned. It was the first time my corps had seen them in action, and though we had felt that they were not things to be relied on for a definite success, yet we had hoped that we should get much benefit from their cooperation, while both the Army and the "Tank" commander were enthusiastic about them, and very confident
that/

that at least 75% of them would do all that was expected. The going for them was certainly good, and the distance to be traversed short, so it was reasonable to hope that they would be to some extent successful. The contrary ~~to~~ proved to be the case, and I believe that only one or two of the twelve reached the enemy's trenches. Moreover, the fact that "tanks" were used prevented our employing the usual artillery barrage, which the men swear by.

In spite of this, the 4th and 12th Brigades of the 4th Division, who had been nominated for the attack, went forward, and forced their way through the enemy's wire in a manner which is beyond all praise. A certain amount of this had been destroyed by artillery fire; there were a few lanes which the enemy had left for their own use, and men managed to scramble over in ~~the~~ other places with the aid of mats, which they took with them. Both brigades established themselves in the trenches, where they fought hard for a considerable time. They were attacked, however, in great force in front and on both flanks, and before long their supply of bombs gave out. It was impossible to replace these, owing to there being no communication trenches, and the fact that no barrage could be kept on the enemy's line, as we were uncertain as to the exact location of our men or the "tanks." Both brigades then had to be withdrawn - naturally a most difficult and dangerous operation with strong forces of the enemy in front and on the two flanks of Bullecourt and Queant respectively. The retirement, however, was carried out in excellent order, officers seeing their men through the wire, and quietly following in rear, as a result of which I am sorry to say they suffered extremely heavy casualties. The casualties in these two brigades in this day's operations amounted to 2,967 made up as follows: Killed 231 - Wounded 762 - Missing 1,974. We then returned to our original line, Noreuil being on the left and Hermies on the right flank of the corps front.

On this front the Germans delivered a strong attack on the night of the 15th May, extending from Hermies on my right, through Demicourt, Boursies and Lagnicourt, to Noreuil. I was holding this front with the 1st, 3rd and 5th Brigades from right to left. The position here is all nice, open, rolling country, while roughly
parallel/

parallel with our whole front, at a distance of about 1,000 yards, stretches the formidable Hindenburg Line. The enemy issued from their trenches and through their own wire, and as soon as I heard of the attack at about 5 a.m., and they were coming on in numbers, I at once said - "Capital! We ought to scupper the whole lot of them before they can get back again." I felt confident that, even though they were making a strong attack, it was unlikely that they would attempt to establish themselves beyond their Hindenburg Line, so I felt pretty sure there would not be the real heart in it, as is the case with men who know they have definitely gone forward with no question of retirement - and such I am glad to say proved to be correct. Their orders apparently were to occupy our advanced villages - capture our guns - remain there for twenty four hours, and return the following night.

I may explain that I have been compelled to advance a considerable number of guns to what undoubtedly is dangerous proximity to the German trenches, but this has been absolutely essential to enable the field guns to deal with the trenches at effective range. I always felt it was possible that the Germans might make attacks on us from time to time, and in going round outpost villages, I always impress upon every commander, from that of a company to a brigade, that I shall never say a word if small posts are overwhelmed by superior numbers, as long as they have all arrangements ready for launching a counter-attack at once to regain the positions and inflict heavy losses on the enemy. This I am glad to say we have been able to do in cases ^{such} like when the enemy temporarily got into Beaumetz, and again during this attack.

In the attack on Hermies, the Germans were never able to get into the village, and a tremendous number of them were killed within a short distance of it. At Boursies they got into the extreme end of it, but were quickly ejected, while at Noreuil they came within about 200 yards of our ~~brig~~ brigade headquarters. At Lagnicourt, where I had two brigades of artillery, they got right in and that is the one point of contention I have with my infantry, for the enemy ~~was~~ allowed to get right up to the guns without suffering from infantry fire. You may have noticed that the German wireless claims/

claimed that they captured twenty-two guns. As a matter of fact, they blew up four 18 pounders and one 4.5" howitzer, while they had prepared several others with gun cotton charges. One of course hates the idea of ever losing a gun, and had there been any question of one being removed, I should have been in a state of fury, but I feel I would far rather have five guns destroyed, than lose one good Australian soldier, for the former can be replaced, while the latter cannot.

At this stage of their work, our counter-attack fell upon them with complete success, for the Germans found machine guns at them everywhere from front and flanks, with a real good artillery barrage behind them. They then realised that the game was up, and started retiring and surrendering all along the front. As they were driven further back towards their own wire, I got the whole of our heavies on to them, as well as those of the corps on our left, and I think it was there they probably suffered heaviest, as the wire is about 250 yards across, and they were able to get through it only in the narrow lanes in single file lines left during its construction. What they lost there we do not know, but we have actually counted over 2,000 dead in front of us, while we took over 400 prisoners. Our own total casualties, including all slightly wounded, are not 500, so I think we may say we are well one up over this.

From identification of prisoners, we have discovered that four divisions, including two of the Prussian Guards, were against us - a total of about eighteen battalions, all the companies of some being identified. Curiously enough, for some little time we were unable to identify the presence of one division, which we thought was sure to be there, as we had no prisoners from it. Two nights later patrols in pushing further on found German dead in a depression in the ground, lying in rows as thick as the Turks were in that big attack they made on us at Anzac on 20th May, when we calculated we had killed 3,000. This, as I am sure all will agree, is very satisfactory, and is some slight compensation to us for previous losses, though I always feel that nothing makes up for them.

It is hard to imagine how really delighted my troops are at the success of this counter-attack. I went up through Lagnicourt and Noreuil/

Noreuil with them, as soon as I possibly could, and it was difficult to escape from the many stories of individual actions, which they insisted on telling me, while they were quite gloating over the big bags they had made!

From now onwards the German wire and trenches in the vicinity of Bullecourt and Queant were kept under a continuous bombardment. We were given a considerable addition to our heavy artillery, which eventually consisted of some 30 batteries. Keeping these busy night and day resulted in the enemy's wire being completely cut. It was determined again to attack the Hindenburg Line at dawn on the 3rd May at the same place as the attack was made on the 11th April. On this occasion the operation was carried out by Smyth's (2nd) Division, which had in its front line the 5th and 6th Brigades under Smith and Gellibrand respectively. We attacked with our left rather to the East of the village of Bullecourt, that village and the Hindenburg Line to the West of it being simultaneously attacked by the 62nd Division of the 5th Corps. My two brigades fought their way well into the trenches, and there established themselves. The 62nd Division, though attaining partial success in places, were unfortunately not successful throughout, and eventually had to withdraw to their original line, leaving my brigades holding a front of some 800 yards in the re-entrant between Bullecourt and Queant. The casualties of the two brigades during this day's fighting were rather over 2,000. Holding merely a short length of trench in the middle of the enemy's system, they were naturally subjected to desperate attacks day and night from in front and both flanks.

We had, however, commenced work on a good communication trench the moment the attack was launched, while large stores of bombs had been prepared as far forward as possible. As a result of this, we were enabled to establish communications with the captured position without any great delay, and to keep the force in front well supplied with bombs. Continuous hand to hand fighting or perhaps I should say a continuous series of bomb fights ensued, very much resembling the hard fighting which the 1st Brigade experienced when they took the Turkish position of Lone Pine on the Peninsula/

Peninsula in August 1915. The fighting here, however, was much more severe owing to the fact that, in addition to the actual fighting, the Germans kept up a continuous and extremely heavy bombardment on our flanks - on the whole of the ground just short of the line, and on all communications, causing necessarily heavy casualties. Nothing daunted the men however, and they never yielded for a second.

Owing to the casualties and exhaustion in Smyth's (2nd) Division after 48 hours' fighting, their brigades had to be relieved by those of the 1st, who continued the fighting until they were themselves relieved by the 5th Division, who had to be brought up from Albert for the purpose on the 10th May.

Among the constant attacks made, the Germans on the morning of the 6th attempted a big and rather daring counter-attack, coming in from both flanks to "No Man's Land" evidently with the idea of cutting off the troops in the Hindenburg Line. In doing this they exposed their flanks to our reserve brigade on the railway embankment South of the Hindenburg Line. The attack from Bullecourt was made by specially selected Sturm troops, and we afterwards heard from prisoners that this attack was completely wiped out, only some seven men getting back in safety. The attack from Queant was detected before it had fully developed, and was so severely punished by our artillery, that it never properly developed - which I regretted, as I had hoped that it, too, would have shared the fate of the attack on the other flank.

In the meantime, the 7th Division of the 5th Corps had relieved the 62nd, and made another attack on Bullecourt, in which they succeeded in getting the South Eastern and Eastern parts of the village. This enabled them to join up with our left, which considerably relieved the situation. On the 12th the 7th Division made a further attack on the village, with which we cooperated, and in which the 15th Brigade under Elliott did extremely well, capturing 170 prisoners, 5 machine guns and 2 minenwerfers in the South Eastern portion of the village.

Our casualties from the 3rd May up to this stage amounted to 209 officers and 5737 other ranks.

It is difficult for me to express all I feel for the magnificent bravery shown by officers and men during the whole of these operations. The fighting has been, I fancy, as severe as any with which any troops have been faced since the commencement of the war. Never has ^a man flinched, while the greatest determination and bravery have ever been evident. These qualities were particularly displayed when the Germans launched one series of attacks after another on the Hindenburg Line - attacks which were carried out by the best of their picked troops, and every one of which was driven back with heavy loss. Where all have displayed such bravery, it may seem invidious to draw comparisons, but the magnificent work of the stretcher-bearers has stood out most conspicuously. Time after time the Germans turned their machine guns and snipers on to the bearers when they went forward to bring in the wounded, but never for an instance did one of them hesitate in going on to what often appeared certain death.

All units engaged have come out of the fighting with their moral at the very highest pitch, for all have realised what a complete ascendancy they have established over the German troops, once they have come into close contact with them. When we first started training 2½ years ago in Egypt, I used to tell the men that they would find themselves equal to any half dozen Germans - after this fighting I tell them that they can now have complete confidence that any one of them is better than a dozen German soldiers. This I am glad to say they now realise and believe.

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(171)

Attack on Hindenburg Line by 1st Anzac Corps - 11/4/17.

Copy of telegram dated 12/4/17.

From: Commander-in-Chief.

To : General Birdwood.

Please convey to the 4th Australian Division my appreciation of the great gallantry shown by them in yesterday's operations.

Copy of telegram dated 11/4/17.

From: Army Commander (5th Army).

To : General Birdwood.

I fully appreciate the splendid effort made this morning by the 4th Australian Division which so nearly achieved a great and very important success. Even though we have not gained any ground locally, the army I am satisfied that the effect upon the whole situation by the Anzac attack has been of great assistance.

Second attack on Hindenburg Line - 3/5/17.

Copy of telegram dated 6/5/17.

From: Commander-in-Chief.


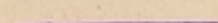


To : General Birdwood.

My warm congratulations to you and 1st Anzac Corps on the fine work you have done and are doing. The capture of the Hindenburg Line East of Bullecourt, and the gallant manner in which it has been held by the 2nd Australian Division and the troops associated with it under General Smyth's command against such constant and desperate efforts to retake it, will rank high among the great deeds of the war, and are helping very appreciably in wearing out the enemy. The fine initiative shown by all commanders down to the lowest is admirable.

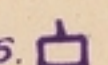
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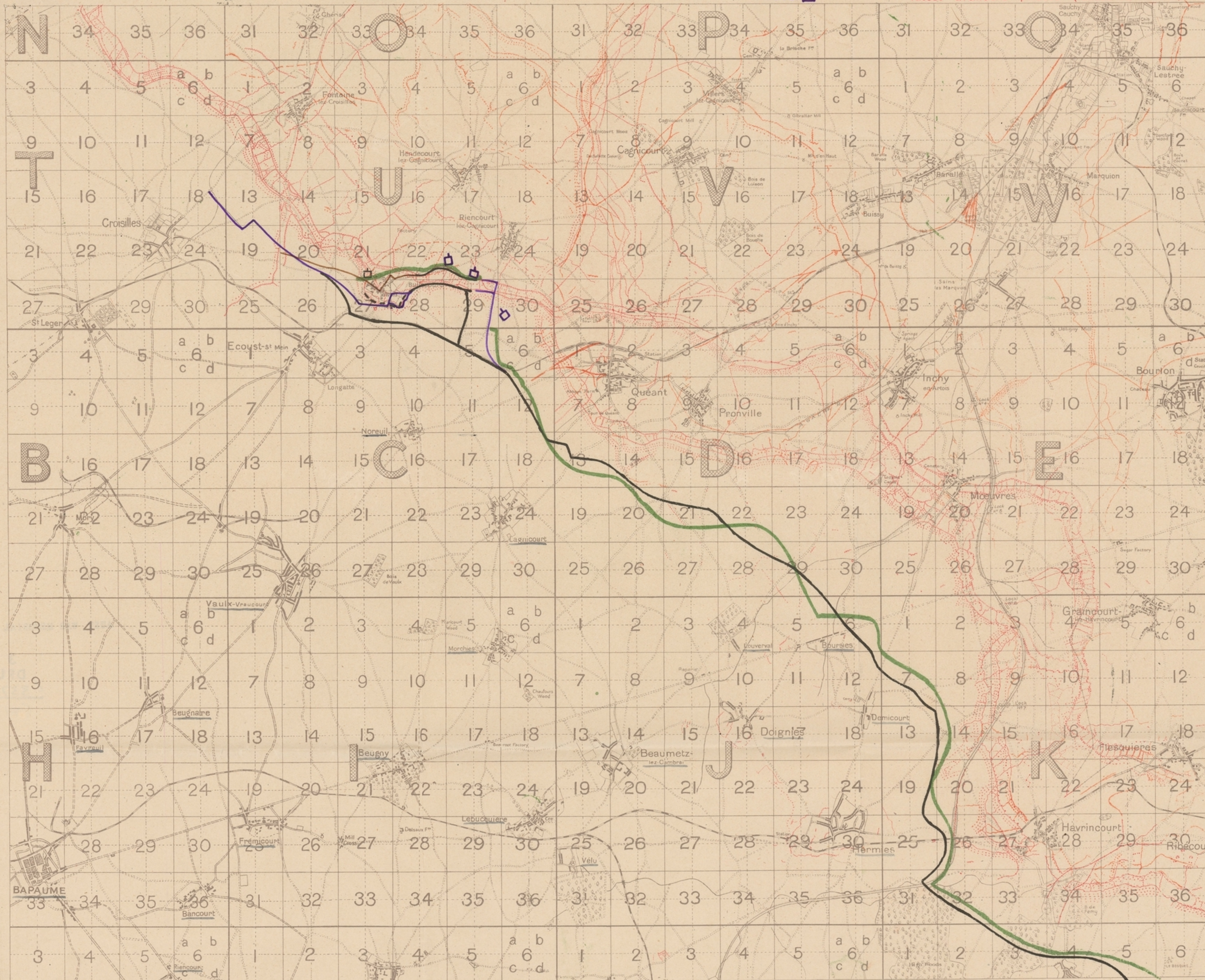
POSITION OF BRITISH FRONT LINE ON

3 MAY shewn	
7 " "	
12 " "	
17 " "	

NOTE - Front Line from C.18 Southwards given by the 11th Div^s.
Green Line is on the latest Co-ordinates.

FIFTH ARMY AREA. (B.) Posts. 

Map showing HINDENBURG LINE from latest available photos (dated 13-4-17.) (13-5-17.)



5th FIELD SURVEY CO. P.E. (1920) 21-3-17 (876)

Date of Publication 14-4-17.

Scale - 1:40,000

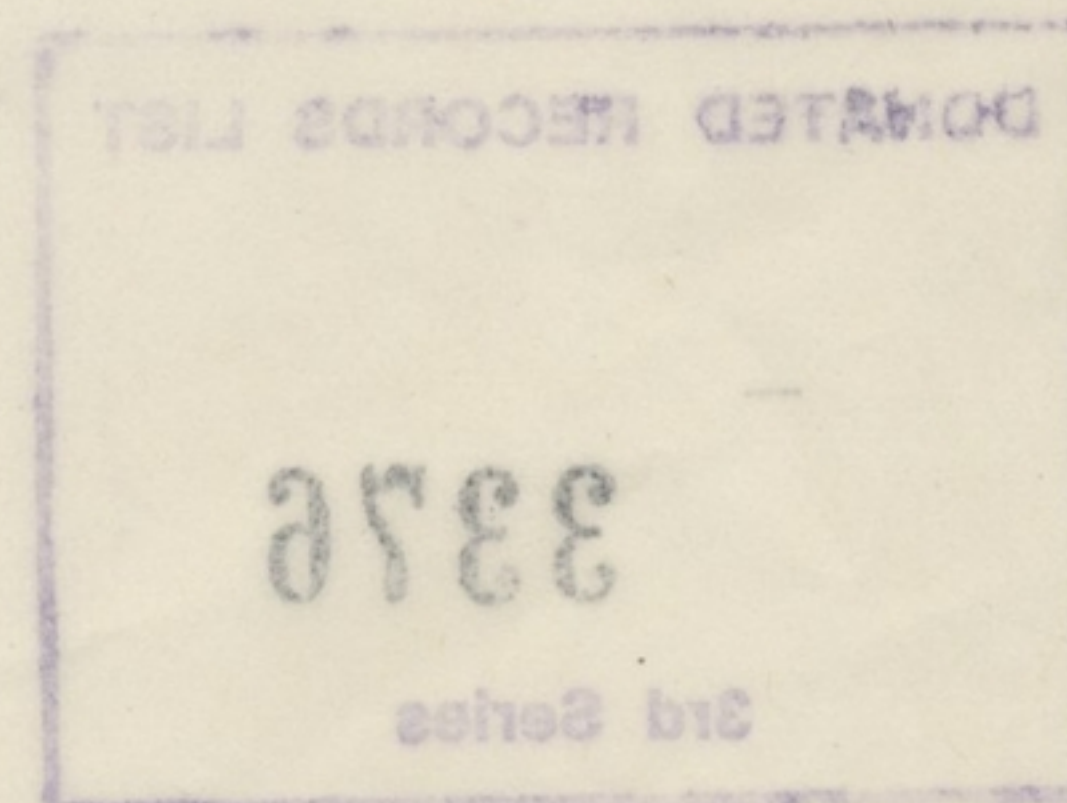
Dotted lines indicate work laid out but not then dug.

Copy of telegram dated 6/5/17.

From: Commander-in-Chief.

To : General Birdwood.

My warm congratulations to you and 1st Anzac Corps on the fine work you have done and are doing. The capture of the Hindenburg Line East of Bullecourt and the gallant manner in which it has been held by the 2nd Australian Division and the troops associated with it under General Smyth's command against such constant and desperate efforts to retake it will rank high among the great deeds of the war, and ^{are} ~~is~~ helping very appreciably in wearing out the enemy. The fine initiative shewn by all commanders down to the lowest is admirable.



C O P I E S .

CABLEGRAM from Rt.Hon W.M.HUGHES, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia to Gen.Birdwood.

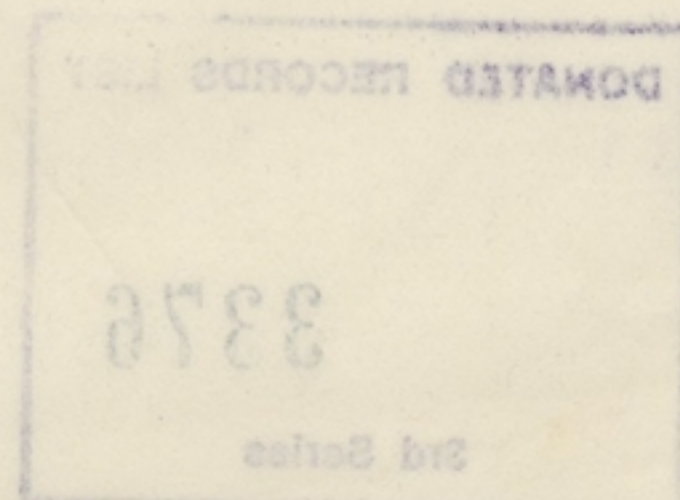
Received 28.9.17 -----

The Commonwealth Government is proud of the ~~SUCCESS~~ splendid success of the Australian Troops under your command in the battle now being fought, and conveys its hearty congratulations on the further progress which has been made by the British forces in Flanders. This is very gratifying, and we look forward confidently to a final and decisive defeat of the enemy as the result of a succession of similar victories in which the Australian soldiers will play their full part. HUGHES.

CABLEGRAM from General Birdwood to the Rt.Hon.W.M.HUGHES, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Despatched 6.10.17 -----

I have not answered your telegram before now as I have waited for third phase of the battle now being fought, and I am glad to be able to tell you Australian Troops have again distinguished themselves greatly in completely successful operations yesterday. Bearing of the troops has been magnificent, and never have our men held their heads higher. Generous congratulations and good wishes of Commonwealth Government are most fully appreciated by all of us here. Our casualties are not excessive but naturally considerable, and we look with confidence to Australia to send men to maintain our numbers, and finish all that is before us. BIRDWOOD.



AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.

Headquarters, A.I.F.,
Att'd. 1st. Anzac Corps
8th. October, 1917.

COPY OF CABLEGRAM RECEIVED FROM MINISTER, DEFENCE, on 6.10.1917.

"WX.642. Desire to send hearty congratulations to General Birdwood and the troops under his command on their achievement in the recent heavy fighting. Delighted to learn that our casualties were not severe."

REPLY sent on 7.10.1917.

"Many thanks from us all for your generous congratulations. Our men have indeed done magnificently and are in great heart. General Birdwood".

U

Copies of cablegrams which have passed between the
High Commissioner for Australia, London, and the
G.O.C., A.I.F.

Telegram from High Commissioner, dated 11.10.1917.

"I am desired by Prime Minister, Mr. Hughes, to convey to you the following message - begins - Large enthusiastic meeting Bendigo citizens October 9th. unanimously resolved that General Birdwood be communicated with and informed of the pride and delight with which news of achievements of Australian Divisions in the recent heavy fighting has been received in Australia - ends - May I add my-expression my own congratulations and admiration".

Reply sent on 12.10.1917.

"Very much appreciate your most kind congratulations Our men have indeed done admirably and deserve all praise Please decode the following telegram and transmit the same to Mr. Hughes - begins - On behalf of the Australian Imperial Force I thank you for your message transmitting the generous resolution passed at meeting of the citizens of Bendigo. Our men have indeed fought magnificently Australia may well be proud of the achievement of her troops and the men know that behind them the people of Australia in grateful remembrance stand resolved and united General Birdwood".

