

CHAPTER XX

1917 (2)—MESSINES

WHEN the Prime Minister of Britain, Mr Lloyd George, and his naval and military staff, met the Premier of France, M. Ribot, with his clever war minister, M. Painlevé, and the French service leaders on 4th May 1917 in Paris, the whole effort of the British leaders was to make sure that the French maintained their part in the joint offensive of the Allies.

That great project, which had been envisaged as the possible turning point of the war, had been seriously threatened by a sudden revolution in Russia on 8th-16th March 1917, which overturned the Czar's government. It was uncertain whether the Provisional government there would proceed with Russia's rôle in the attack. As for Italy, her leaders were now hamstrung by apprehension that the Germans were concentrating against them. In France the great stroke from which governments had hoped so much, Nivelle's offensive, had already failed. At the Paris meeting, therefore, it was the British leaders who took the initiative, and Lloyd George, who so lately had placed Haig under Nivelle, now for once energetically supported the British commander.

Painlevé had already privately decided to supersede Nivelle by Pétain. It could hardly be done before this conference with the British, who had so lately been induced to put Haig under Nivelle's orders; but, along with Nivelle, the French ministers brought to the conference Pétain, who had just been made chief of the French General Staff. All agreed with the British commanders that a series of concerted attacks should be made

by French and British. They were to be "step-by-step" offensives, that is, similar to the German attack on Verdun—a limited objective being set for each attack, and after that step, perhaps, another and another, each elaborately prepared for by the Allies' immense artillery, which now surpassed the German. The conference left it to the generals to determine the time, place and other details of the attacks. But it was understood that the main stroke would now be delivered by the British in Flanders. This had been urged by the British Admiralty, and had been agreed to by Joffre at Chantilly as one of the later phases of the great plan for 1917. The plan was cherished by Haig, but he was prepared to use his reserves earlier in a great Anglo-French attack near the Somme, suggested by Nivelle—if this eventuated. Haig doubted, however, whether Nivelle could stage it; but I Anzac, which was then expected to use only one division at Bullecourt, was to be pulled out and rested as part of the force for this attack.

As Haig apprehended, however, the French did not undertake that offensive. On May 15th Nivelle was superseded by Pétain. Though much of the truth was successfully hidden from both sides till after the war, on May 3rd there began in the French Army a series of sixteen mutinies which continued for five weeks and shook it to its foundations. Pétain, who had nursed that army during the Verdun offensive, was undoubtedly the man to restore its strength—after Nivelle's excessive demands it needed, for a time, nursing rather than leading. For many months no offensive, limited or unlimited, was launched by Pétain; the task of maintaining the initiative on the Western Front now fell solely on the British.

In this situation Haig turned at once to his plan of driving the Germans from the Belgian coast. This plan had one great merit. The Allied leaders knew that by heralding an attack with a sufficient bombardment, and

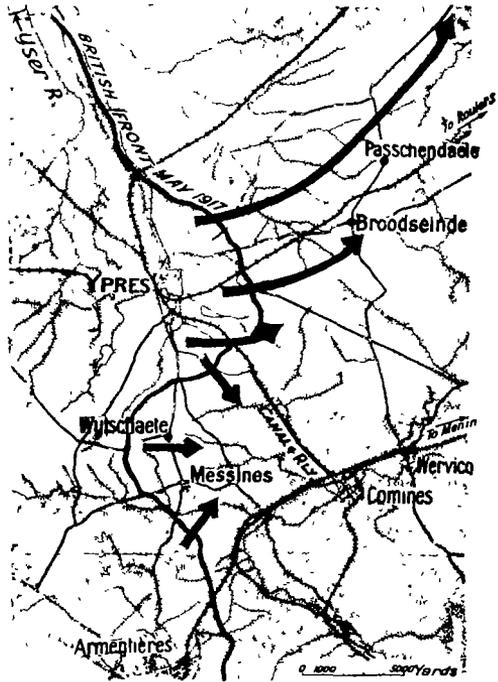
then advancing their infantry—but never allowing them to go beyond the protection of their own guns—they could at most times seize almost any part of the German front, within certain limits of breadth and depth. By then moving up their artillery and repeating the process again and again they could, provided the advances were wide enough, gradually drive the Germans back, step by step, for many miles.

In most parts of the Western Front the Germans could be thrust back a dozen miles without suffering great disadvantage. But as their front neared the Belgian coast such an advance by the Allies would place the German garrison on the coast in danger of being smashed or cut off. In that region, therefore, the Germans must stand and take whatever battering the Allies' artillery could inflict. Yet, by using the step-by-step method against them, in spite of all their efforts they might be gradually driven back until they must consider abandoning the coast. Thus the offensive was designed both to wear the Germans down, and to bring a strategic success which might help Britain's defence against submarines and would at least cause great discouragement to the German nation. It now served the additional purpose of maintaining the Allied offensive in the west, partly relieving the French, and at least giving them time to recover.

The part of the German line at which Haig intended to strike was that which lay on or west of the low ridge around the battered Belgian town of Ypres. This ridge was sickle shaped; the handle, a few miles south of Ypres, was formed by the Messines-Wytschaete heights, held by the Germans; and the blade, curving around east of Ypres, formed part of the site of the original Ypres Salient. As already explained, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde, on that ridge four miles east of Ypres, had been lost by the British in the first German gas offensive in April-May 1915, and the salient had since been much

smaller, the front running through Hooge and along low rises and flats two to three miles from the city. Haig meant to recapture the original salient and then push along the ridge northwards and north-eastwards through Passchendaele and down towards Roulers and Thourout. But first he must make safe his right flank by capturing the "handle", the Messines-Wytschaete ridge.

The preparations to capture Messines had begun, as we have seen, early in 1916. The whole front concerned was that of 2nd Army, and the main plans were those of the white-haired, cautious veteran, General Plumer, and his chief-of-staff, Maj-General C. H. Harrington. The deep mines, already well advanced when I Anzac had prepared to attack there in July 1916, were now complete; Plumer's provisional plan had been secretly issued in March 1917. The ridge was to be taken by three army corps, and of these the southernmost, which would capture Messines itself and then advance over the hill to the flats beyond, would be II Anzac. That corps, under General Godley,



Intended attacks in Flanders, 1917.

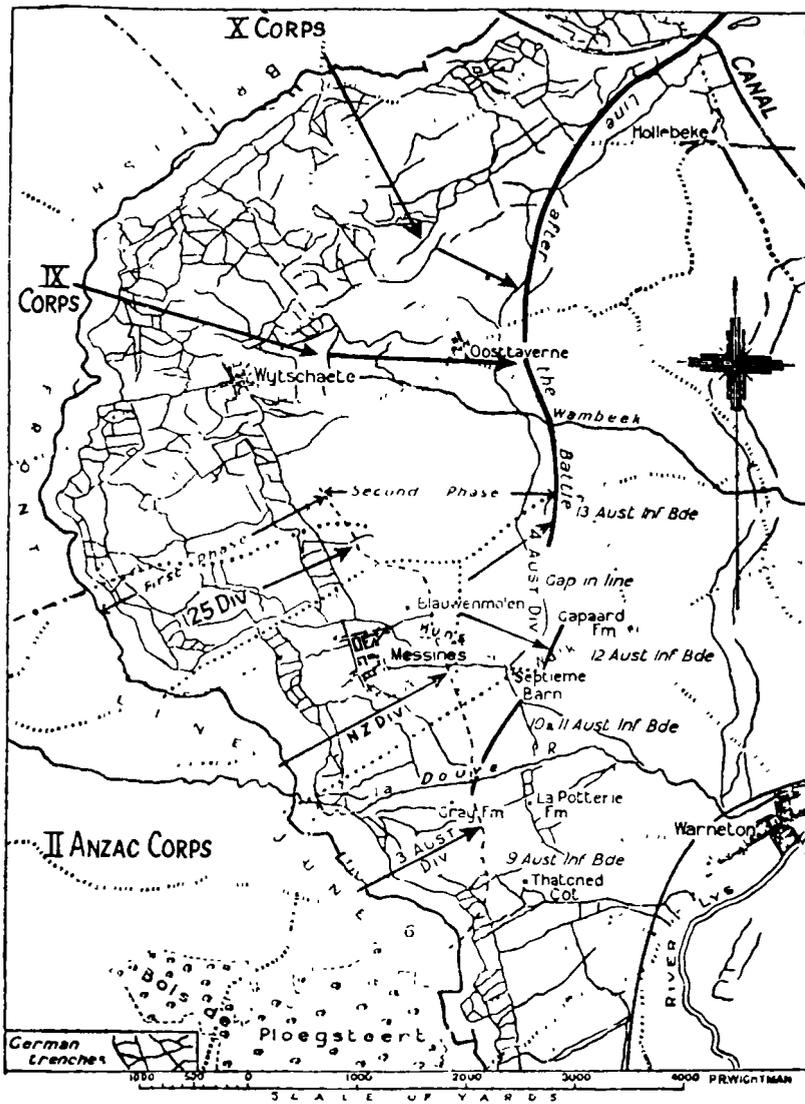
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had held the Armentières front throughout the winter, with three divisions—the New Zealand Division (back from the Somme); the 3rd Australian Division, which in December 1916 arrived from England under General Monash; and a British division. The 3rd Division had gained experience in a series of carefully planned and generally successful raids. The corps, including the 25th British Division, had already sideslipped gradually to the Messines front by April 27th; but the plans had been perfecting since March 18th.

Never had a big British operation been prepared in such detail; in the 3rd Division, in particular, Monash issued thirty-six successive circulars, one of them in seven parts. Points to be bombarded by artillery were carefully listed; 2nd Army staff designed an immense creeping barrage of artillery and machine-gun fire—to move in five tiers, nearly half a mile deep, ahead of the infantry. Huge models of the ground were built behind the lines and studied by the troops, especially in Monash's division.

On May 16th the three divisions of II Anzac were reinforced by the 4th Australian, which had been rested for nearly a month since its attack with tanks near Bullecourt. It was to carry out the final part of II Anzac's duty—the thrust to the plain after the 3rd, New Zealand and 25th Divisions (side by side, in that order from right to left) had captured (in two stages) the section of the summit facing that army corps.

To the 4th Division this transfer to Flanders while its sister divisions in the south were resting, came as a shock; but Australians had learnt by now to take philosophically their fate in war. The battle orders of its commander, General Holmes, were as short as those of Monash were long. The 4th Division now came among men of the 3rd, whom the rest of the A.I.F. had been waiting to see. The 4th was perhaps the toughest of all Australian divisions, the 3rd, without Gallipoli experi-



THE BATTLEFIELD OF MESSINES

This shows the plan of attack, and the line seized on 7th June 1917.

Adapted from map in "The Empire at War".

ence,¹ the most "handled" and tractable, and there was keen interest to see how it shaped in and out of battle.

On May 31st the seven days' bombardment began. The area behind the British lines teemed with batteries and dumps, concentrated there in the past few weeks. The Germans had perceived all this, from ground and air, and under their heavy shelling several dumps and an ammunition train exploded. But they were completely unaware that nineteen immense mines had been tunnelled deep below their front trenches to be attacked. In the two years' tussle underground between the British and German tunnelling companies the British miners had outmanoeuvred and outfought their opponents.

At the oldest of these mines, at Hill 60² (at the southern end of the British "bulge" at Ypres, just where the German "bulge" round Messines began) the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company had been responsible for the workings since November 1916. Two deep galleries dug by British and Canadians had then already been driven below—and far behind—the German line, and filled with immense charges (50 and 70 thousand pounds of ammonal). The Australians had since driven a third gallery, lately at a rate of fourteen feet daily, but the offensive came too soon for its completion. Their main work was the tense fighting, explosion and counter-explosion in the network of tunnels at three different levels, to keep the enemy away from the deep mines.

How complicated was this contest may be judged from the experience of an Australian miner on duty "listening" on 24th April 1917, in a tunnel of the middle-deep system, when footsteps approached from the German direction. Thinking that the Germans must have dug through into the same tunnel farther on, the listener

¹ Except for some men who had re-enlisted in Australia. For a comparison of the troops see *Vol IV*, pp. 560-3, and 579-80.

² Hill 60 was a low rise beside the Ypres-Comines Canal, its summit being heightened by part of the spoil from the canal.

blew out his light and prepared to act. The steps came very close—and then suddenly passed six feet overhead. The German miner was in some old German gallery, previously unknown to the Australians. They soon afterwards destroyed it.³ Far above, on the surface, on 9th April 1917, a German raiding party discovered, in a British trench, clay of a kind which they knew must come from deep mines. They began to probe for them, and were very close to the “deeps” when Zero day and Zero hour (or “Z day” and “Z hour”), 3.10 a.m. on 7th June 1917, arrived.

The Germans had heard through a spy on April 29th that the British would strike at Messines a fortnight after ending the Arras offensive. Also, in all these huge “battles of material” it was impossible to hide preparations. The “Catacombs”, a vast system of tunnels for housing two complete battalions in the bowels of Hill 63, opposite to Messines, had been dug by the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company in 1916. Roads, railways, dumps, assembly trenches had since to be made, hospitals set up, aerodromes prepared, artillery (at this stage of the war) ranged on to its targets. The Germans knew Messines would be attacked; and General von Kuhl (chief of Crown Prince Rupprecht’s staff) suggested withdrawing to their third line through Oosttaverne village on the flats—the very line that the British intended to reach in the last phase of the attack. But the commanders of the German forward troops stoutly objected, and as a result their existing front was strongly held. As the day of battle obviously approached, the German artillery on several nights gassed with phosgene shell the ground through which British attacking troops might be approaching.

Thus all through the night of June 6th a rain of gas shells, with their shrill whine and low “pat”, showered on Ploegsteert Wood through which the battalions of

³ For the full story of these underground battles see *Vol. IV, Appendix I* (p. 949).

the 3rd Australian Division, southernmost of the British attacking force, were then actually filing up, and also on the New Zealanders on Hill 63 north of them, looking out across the Douve valley at Messines hill. The approach of the 3rd Division through the gas-saturated wood was a task of nightmarish difficulty⁴—500 men were put temporarily out of action. Yet before dawn began to show behind that hill, this fine division was ready in its place—as were eight others north of it along the rest of the seven and a half mile front of attack. At 3.10 the hitherto intermittent artillery fire increased with a run; and then the trenches rocked, as nineteen great explosions tore immense craters at as many points of the front, and the powerful barrage thundered down, and the infantry went over.

The working out of 2nd Army's great plan was as smooth as that of previous British offensives had been confused. The explosion of the mines shattered German troops and morale in the forward area. Farther back there were tough fights about a few farm ruins and concrete block-houses—built like low boxes and about this time becoming known as "pillboxes". But the platoons could now outflank and capture these, under cover from their own Lewis gunners and rifle grenadiers. With well-trained, determined troops—such as the New Zealanders were and those of the 3rd Division now proved themselves to be—the advance went with a swing. The troops followed the barrage through both its first stages, and by 5.30 a.m. Messines had been captured by the New Zealand Division with the 3rd and 25th in their correct positions on its flanks.

The main heights had been taken along the whole battlefield—only in the extreme north, near Ypres, was there any serious hitch. The front line troops had been ordered to make sure of the objective thus far gained;

⁴ See Vol IV, pp. 589-91.

the Germans, under their system of holding special divisions ready for counter-attack, were sure to attempt its recapture. Against this certainty the troops quickly entrenched themselves. Meanwhile the forces for Plumer's afternoon attack were to move up. The long pause that now began was necessary because the central British Corps, the IX, had to come much farther than the two others (II Anzac and X), and had also to advance its artillery. Owing to the delay on the northern flank, the afternoon attack was at the last moment postponed by General Plumer from 1 to 3 p.m.

On the II Anzac front the afternoon attack was to be made by two brigades of the 4th Australian Division moving through the front taken by the 25th and New Zealand Divisions—the 3rd Division, farthest south, would merely use one of its own battalions (37th) to swing up the division's extreme left flank in conjunction with the advance of the 4th. Farther north fresh British troops would advance through the front reached by the IX and X Corps.

On the II Anzac front half the troops for the afternoon attack did not learn of the postponement until they had moved forward to assemble; the other half moved about 2 p.m. Each, passing Messines, was faced by a heavy barrage, which raised a pall of dust, but each went through this, though with casualties, including many leaders hit. Part of this fire was the bombardment preceding a counter-attack attempted by the German division held ready for that purpose opposite this sector. The tremendous British barrage descending broke up the movement of these Germans at the Oosttaverne Line; and, the time for the British afternoon attack now arriving, the guns simply passed to their duty of laying the barrage for it.

The infantry advanced; but here occurred the only serious hitch in the programme. While allotted troops of the southern and northern corps, II Anzac and X, started

immediately, those of the centre corps were nowhere to be seen. Their orders had been late, and the march on that sweltering day had been too long for the allotted troops (33rd Brigade) to arrive in time. An Australian patrol found British troops of another brigade half a mile to the north. Seeing that a wide gap existed, the young officer now in charge of the Australian left flank company, Captain Arthur Maxwell,⁵ at once led his company north-eastwards. Fortunately the Germans there had fled and the Australians occupied, though very thinly, the whole of the British brigade's objective in the Oostaverne Line as well as their own. Later they found some tanks and a few British troops who helped to secure and extend this foothold.

The southern (12th) brigade of the 4th Division also, well assisted by a few tanks, had reached a section of the Oostaverne Line; and so had part of the 37th Battalion, greatly helped by the bravery of Captain R. C. Grieve, who, throwing bombs ahead of him, managed, in successive rushes covered by the dust cloud and commotion, to reach and capture singlehanded an obstructing pillbox (he was awarded the Victoria Cross). The foothold here was temporarily lost through their own barrage falling on the troops, but despite German counter-attacks it was regained. A more serious difficulty was that, through the extension of the 4th Division's left flank (exactly half the battlefield being then held by Australian troops), a gap opened in the centre. The Oostaverne Line here was not completely taken until after four days and nights of tense fighting.

Nevertheless, by the evening of the first day Plumer's army had scored an immense success. Confidence in his leadership became very high. A stunning blow had been struck, and the German salient south of Ypres eliminated. The way was open for the more important offensive from

⁵ Like his brother (of the Mouquet Farm fight) he subsequently fought in Malaya with the 2nd A.I.F.

Ypres, now planned to be delivered in July. The losses of the two sides at Messines were practically equal. Of the 26,000 British casualties II Anzac (including the 25th British Division) suffered 13,900.

It was not intended to push deeply at Messines, but during the next six weeks the front there was gradually advanced, from farm to farm, towards the Warneton Line—the old third reserve line of the Germans, which had now become their front. On this ground east of Messines a new system of defences was dug by the 11th Brigade⁶ in eighteen strenuous, dangerous days. IX Corps made similar efforts. During this time the fine leader of the 4th Division, General Holmes, while taking the Premier of New South Wales, Mr Holman, by a normally safe route to see the battlefield, was mortally wounded by a chance salvo.

⁶The other brigades (9th and 10th) of the 3rd Division also dug successive defence-lines in rear, but for the 11th and its fine engineer company the task was as dangerous as a battle—the loss included the whole staff of the 41st Battalion.