CHAPTER XXIV

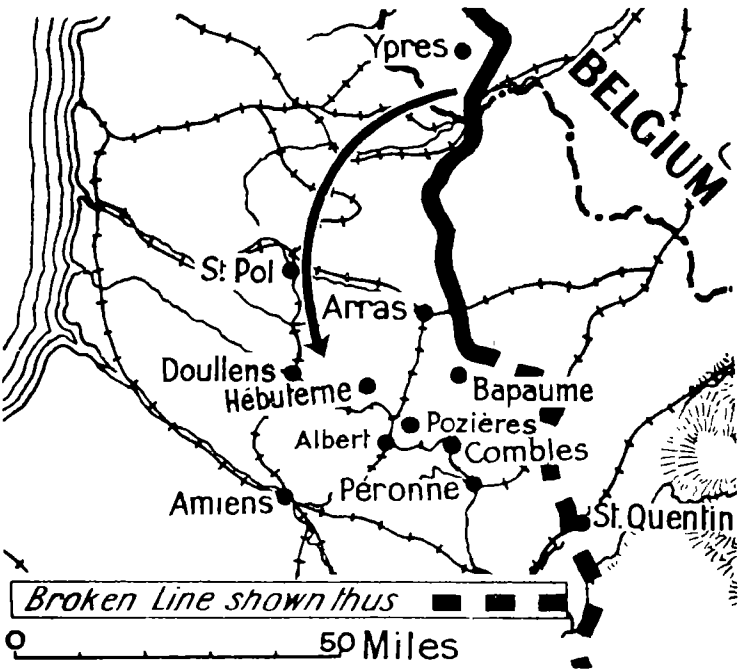
SAVING AMIENS AND HAZEBROUCK

THE crisis changed rapidly even while these first Australians were moving south. As, on March 25th, the long string of motor lorries carrying the 4th Division's leading brigade, the 4th, rolled through clouds of white dust into St Pol, thirty-four miles north of Amiens, they were turned sharply to the left, into roads leading to the countryside south-west of Arras. The otherwise clear sky ahead was smudged by a distant pillar of smoke, probably rising from Bapaume, and in the villages old people were hastily loading their furniture on farm waggons. As lorry-load after lorry-load of cheerful, dust-covered Diggers bumped past, the old folk paused. No Australian infantry had ever been stationed there, but these were immediately recognised, and calling to one another, "Les Australiens", the old people began unloading their carts. "Pas necessaire maintenant," said one, to an Australian who asked the reason. "Vous les tiendrez" ("Not necessary now—you'll hold them").

Next day, March 26th, the 4th Division was alarmed in its various villages and hurried to positions chosen for blocking a gap through which the Germans with tanks were reported to be heading; they would be only thirteen miles from the quiet old townlet of Doullens (seventeen miles north of Amiens) where at that moment, as will presently be told, there were meeting, in one of the crucial conferences of the war, the Prime Ministers and military leaders of France and Great Britain. Accordingly, the veteran 4th Brigade, marching up along roads past streams of retiring British troops and of villagers, hastened

in the direction of the reported incursion, and at dusk pushed into the ruined village of Hébuterne on the nearer edge of the old Somme battlefield.

A scattered remnant of the 19th British Division was found there, completely exhausted—some men on being



The arrow shows the movement of Australians

relieved broke down and wept. Most of the 4th Brigade saw none of them, but taking position around Hébuterne, and, driving back or capturing a few German scouts, took position beyond the village. By morning the place was firmly held. South of it was a gap in the British front, but the New Zealand Division, brought down from Flanders to Amiens, was reported to be already on the other side of this and thrusting northwards to close it. At daybreak

some skirmishers coming up over the open from the south-west proved to be New Zealanders.

The 4th Brigade eventually had to stay, apart from its division, at Hébuterne and repel several German attempts to break through; not till nearly a month later would the commander of the IV British Corps—as his messages made clear—entrust the position to the other available troops. The first of the German attacks was made as dawn broke on March 27th, disclosing to the brigade a spectacle such as it had never before seen. Around lay the Somme moorland, rumpled with old trenches like dug-out rabbit burrows in an Australian paddock, and covered with long grass on which the gusts played as on the flanks of a Shetland pony. But as the light grew the moorland eastward was seen to be alive with distant movement: German waggon lines on the distant slopes; a German battery blazing in the open. At 11 o'clock infantry came on, wave after wave. When shelled to ground by British batteries they still crept forward, by rushes from cover to cover. But neither then nor in their attempts on later days had they the least success. On the contrary, employing methods presently to be described, both Australians and New Zealanders began to bite into the German front.

Meanwhile in the exciting, fast-changing developments of the German offensive, the two other brigades of the 4th Division had not been left even for a night behind Hébuterne, in the support position to which they had been rushed. A new crisis had come into existence near Albert, a dozen miles south. Through some mistake among the senior commanders, a British division protecting Albert had been withdrawn. The 12th and 13th Australian Infantry Brigades were ordered thither at once and, after marching through the night across part of the German front, they reached at dawn some of the well-remembered villages north-west of Albert. Pozières, Mouquet Farm, Thiepval, Albert itself were in German

hands and the troops were in a rest area of 1916. The villagers had just fled and some of the tired but eager men breakfasted in the cottages on wine and poultry. In a quick march of seventeen miles not one straggler had been left behind.

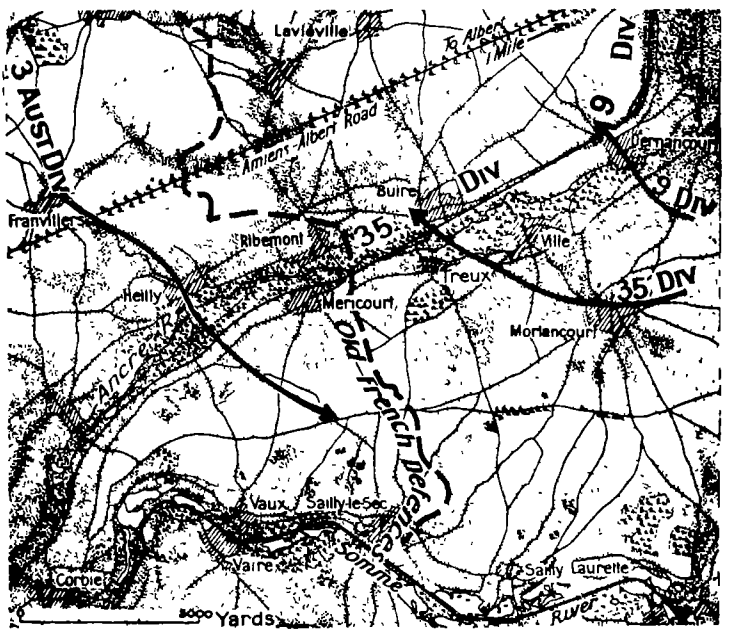
Meanwhile the division's commander, Maj.-General MacLagan, had been ordered to report to Lieut.-General Congreve of the VII British Corps, holding the southernmost sector of the 3rd Army's line. This sector began at the western outskirts of Albert, passed across the Ancre at Dernancourt, and thence extended over the high triangle of open land between the Ancre and Somme rivers, and ended at the Somme, where the 5th Army's sector began. MacLagan found Congreve at Montigny Chateau, in a bare, stately room, lit by a candle, with the chief of the VII Corps staff, Brig.-General Hore-Ruthven (afterwards Lord Gowrie, Governor-General of Australia); and Maj.-General Monash of the 3rd Australian Division receiving Congreve's orders.[1]

It appeared that the withdrawal from south of Albert could not be reversed; the main part of the British line there—composed of remnants of the 9th (Scottish) and 35th Divisions—was withdrawing from the triangle between the Somme and Ancre and already taking up a new line north of the Ancre; but an improvised screen—some cavalry and a remnant of infantry—was still across the triangle, and Monash was to place his division behind them in a line of old French trenches, barring that approach to Amiens. MacLagan was similarly to place his brigades on the high ground farther north, behind the 9th and 35th Divisions.

The 3rd Division had detrained at Doullens during the vital conference there on March 26th, and in a rather tense atmosphere part of its troops had been hurriedly set to guard the town. During the following night it had

[1] With MacLagan and Monash were some of their own staff, Lieut.-Cols Lavarack, Jess, and R. E Jackson.

been carried from that area by motor-buses to the Amiens-Albert road—part of the Roman highway to Bapaume, here running along the high ground north of the Ancre. This road and every village along it were familiar places to all the Australian divisions except the 3rd, whose troops were eager to see the Somme country. Like all the



THE SITUATION BETWEEN THE ANCRE AND SOMME, ON NIGHT OF 26th MARCH 1918 AND FOLLOWING MORNING

Australian troops coming southward, they found themselves to be the only traffic heading towards the enemy. Villagers and British soldiers, including heavy artillery, streamed past, all in the other direction. "You're going the wrong way, Digger," shouted one. "Jerry'll souvenir you and your —— band too." "You Australians think

you can do anything," said an artillery brigadier to Lieut.-Colonel Lavarack, chief of MacLagan's staff, "but you haven't a chance of holding them." "Will you stay and support us if we do?" was the reply—and this the brigadier very willingly did.

Again and again the Diggers were told by passers-by, "You can't hold them!" and some Australian leaders were a little anxious as to how all this advice and the depressing sights would affect their men. They need have had no worry; it was immediately evident—as was constantly found in the coming months—that the confidence of these troops was overflowing. Each man knew that every blow now counted; this, they felt, was what they had come from Australia for—and the sight of their cheerful, grim faces and confident gait put new heart into French and British alike. "They were the first cheerful stubborn people we had met in the retreat," said a British major of artillery. In the French villages whenever during those weeks these hearty, stalwart battalions marched in they were met by striking demonstrations of affection and trust—and this, too, reacted strongly on them. "Fini retreat, Madame," said a Digger to a village woman as he sat grimly cleaning his rifle while the 3rd Division halted in Heilly on its way to the triangle between Ancre and Somme. "Fini retreat—beaucoup Australiens ici."

It is true that men and officers were shocked by some of the scenes on the roads. Like all spectators in the rear of a great retreat, they saw the worst—the panic near Hébuterne; a car with "rattled" staff officers too hastily retiring; parties of men without arms; stragglers who had lost their units; senseless looting and destruction in villages on the Ancre. What they did not know was that a great part of the withdrawing troops were labour companies and heavy artillery, which, to clear the communications, had been ordered to back areas, largely west of Doullens.

By 11 a.m. on March 27th two battalions of the 3rd

Australian Division had relieved the few completely exhausted British infantry (a few Scots at first refused to be relieved) in the triangle between the rivers; and on the other side of the Ancre, farther north and two miles farther forward, two battalions of the 4th Division were about then ordered to move up in close support of the exhausted 9th Division which held the embankment and cuttings of the Albert-Amiens railway curving round the foot of the hills, near the village of Dernancourt and the Ancre. The Australians—advancing along the open hilltop astride the straight avenue of the Amiens-Albert road, and looking down into Albert with its broken cathedral tower, and the hills by Pozières (now three miles behind the German lines)—were intensely shelled. At dusk came an order to relieve the 9th Division at the railway round the foot of the hill. Some Australian officers did not expect to find the Scots there—but they were, in niches along the top of the railway banks, exhausted, but fighting as they had fought for seven days. "Thank God!" they said. "You'll hold him"—and, waving good luck, went off in the moonlight. Two miles to the south-west, on the triangle between the rivers, the 3rd Division also found itself holding the front line, the cavalry ahead having been suddenly ordered to help the 5th Army south of that river.

The situation of the 5th Army, under General Gough, had, for a week, been the crux of one of the supreme crises of the war. It has been seen that Haig looked to Pétain to support this army while he himself supported the 3rd. Pétain gave support, but the required help quickly surpassed that previously arranged for by him and Haig, and it was needed much sooner. French divisions had to be thrown in piecemeal as they arrived, infantry sometimes without artillery—a most wasteful proceeding. On top of all, despite Haig's assurances Pétain believed that the main German attack had not yet been delivered, but would descend at any moment on his own front.

It is now known that the German staff counted on the hesitation of the French Command—and rightly. When the 5th British Army continued to retreat beyond a line on which he and Haig only a few hours before had agreed that the Allies should stand, Pétain gave up hope of saving that army—indeed, always tending to pessimism, he believed it to be now practically non-existent. Visiting Haig at midnight on the 24th he intimated that he had decided to abandon the British flank and withdraw south-west to cover Paris.

To Haig this came as a thunderstroke. The one firm basis of Allied strategy, recognised in orders drawn by Kitchener, was that, whatever happened, the British and French Armies must remain united. It is true that Haig himself was contemplating a withdrawal of the 3rd Army north-westward—actually it was this withdrawal that the VII Corps mistakenly began to carry out on March 27th south of Albert. But Haig's purpose was to give Pétain time to reach out to him at Amiens (meanwhile, if the Germans thrust at Amiens, Haig planned to strike them from the flank, and it was for this purpose that the Australians and New Zealanders had originally been rushed to 3rd Army). Haig, receiving the whole first weight of the German blow, felt—and felt rightly—that he himself could not safely reinforce the 5th Army, but that Pétain could do so.

On hearing Pétain's decision Haig thought that his colleague's nerve had given way. He therefore at once took the only step likely to save disaster—telegraphed to London asking that "Foch, or some other determined general, who would fight, should be given supreme control of the operations in France", so that Pétain should be overruled.[2] The result was several hurried meetings culminating in the conference, in the critical hours of March 26th, at Doullens, at which Foch was given

[2] The details of the incident are described in *Vol. V, pp. 256-60.*

powers that quickly developed into supreme command of the Allies on the Western Front.[8] About this time there issued an order in a tone welcomed by most of the troops—there must be "NO withdrawal" except locally, and then only due westward—"NOT" so as to separate one army from the other. It was a bitter mischance that the first sequel to this was the mistaken retirement of the 3rd Army's flank south of Albert away from 5th Army's flank.

The effect of this retirement on the use of the Australian divisions, originally brought south for Haig's possible thrust against the German flank, has been seen. The 3rd and 4th were rushed into line to make sure of the 3rd Army's southern flank. But immediately south of this the 5th Army's northern flank, resting on the Somme near Méricourt, had been left wide open with three miles of unguarded river behind it. It is true that, far from being "non-existent", the 5th Army still managed to hold an unbroken line from that point southwards to the flank of the 1st French Army, under General Debeney; but the Germans north of the Somme were now free to cross the river and post themselves behind the tired British divisions, and on March 27th they began to do so. It was to meet this threat that the 1st Cavalry Division was hastily withdrawn that night from ahead of the 3rd Australian Division, and sent south of the river.

That night the two Australian divisions—with the remains of the 35th holding a short sector between them, astride the Ancre—became responsible for the 3rd Army's flank. Early next morning (March 28th) in the 4th Division's sector a scout of the 47th Battalion, Sergeant S. R. McDougall, posted to watch a level crossing on the railway overlooking the Ancre flats and Dernancourt village, heard through the dense mist the sound of

[8] The Belgians, however, under their Constitution, could accept only advice.

bayonet scabbards flapping on the thighs of marching troops. As he ran along the railway to alarm the nearest outpost, Germans emerged from the mist along the front as far as he could see; the nearest threw bombs over the embankment. One of these hit a Lewis-gun crew, but snatching up the gun McDougall shot the foremost Germans who were then crossing the rails, and then hosed those crouching along their side of the embankment. The attack quickly spread along the whole of the 12th Brigade's front, from Dernancourt to Albert; but after hard close fighting the Germans, whose supports could be seen pouring out from distant omnibuses, and throwing bridges over the Ancre, were completely beaten. The 50th Reserve Division, which made the attack, lost some 550 men. The few who had crossed the railway were captured by McDougall, whose actions won him the Victoria Cross.

On the same day (28th) the 3rd Division on the bare, high triangle between the Ancre and Somme was ordered to advance—Foch had been discussing with General Byng of 3rd Army a project of an offensive in this region, and more room was apparently wanted in preparation for it. Also the 5th Army, which was still ahead, south of the Somme (though with Germans behind its left flank), asked for that flank to be protected by the seizure of Sailly Laurette. Monash ordered an advance; but, on the crest, the 40th Battalion, set to advance in daylight, with little supporting artillery yet within range, soon ran into fire from distant Germans themselves advancing from the opposite direction. After costly progress, resumed after dark in drizzling rain, the 40th was stopped within close range of the Germans on the crest. On both slopes of the heights also Monash's battalions made ground, although that night on the southern slope the 44th was detected, and was caught in a deadly ambush by massed German machine-gunners as it slithered down one side of a gully to attack Sailly Laurette at the foot of the other side.

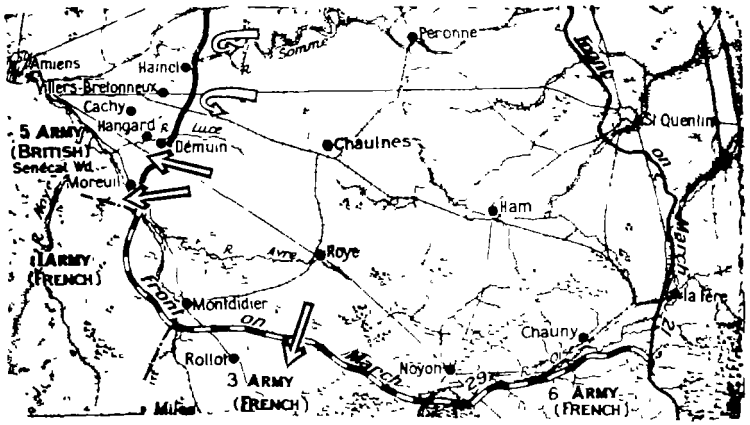
However, the 3rd Army's flank, down to the Somme, was now solidly held; but already the point of supreme interest was shifting beyond it. The Germans who on March 28th had tried in a vain, costly attack at Arras, to widen the front of their whole drive, henceforth directed their effort mainly south of the Somme, where the French were now hurrying to support and relieve the right of Gough's 5th Army. The harassed divisions of that army were till the night of the 27th still holding the line Foch had ordered them to hold on the 26th. But, with the Germans behind their left, Foch had to allow their withdrawal. The half-surrounded left managed to get clear, part of the 16th (Irish) Division actually crossing and recrossing the Somme behind the German lines, rushing the German picquets.

On March 28th the withdrawal was brought to a stop, largely by the 1st Cavalry Division, at the old French defence line, which ran in front of Hamel village on the Somme and two miles ahead of Villers-Bretonneux on the crest—a southerly continuation of the old trench-line held by the 3rd Division north of the Somme. Farther south, near the junction with the 1st French Army, this line was lost, and the 3rd Division's reserve brigade, the 9th, was next day hurried thither as a reserve for the 5th Army, which now comprised only one corps.

By this time the French were counter-attacking, the 3rd French Army (farther south than the 1st) having passed to the offensive. Only the spearhead of Ludendorff's armies, south of the Somme, was still advancing; and on March 30th it attacked here on a wide front, hoping to split the British from the French. On the extreme northern flank of this attack, north of the Somme, a fresh division tried to drive back the 3rd Australian, but suffered (as one of its regimental histories states) the "worst miscarriage" in its experience. The Germans could not take Hamel but the extreme point of

the attack, now at the junction of French and British near the River Luce, drove closer to Amiens.

This was not far from where the 9th Australian Infantry Brigade lay in reserve, and, while British cavalry were used at the actual junction, on the hills just north of it the British commander threw in a battalion of the Australian brigade under Lieut.-Colonel Morshead. Without artillery, but with the help of the 12th Lancers, it was to re-establish the badly shaken line. Except for the 29th Division in Gallipoli, the British cavalry, whom the Australians watched with admiration throughout this campaign, were almost the only troops of the old pre-



GERMAN ATTACKS ON 30th MARCH 1918
(The attacks are shown by white arrows)

war British Army with whom the war brought them into contact, and the co-operation never failed to be enthusiastic. On this occasion, though most of the desired ground beyond "Lancer Wood" was not gained, the aggressiveness of the cavalry and Australians—like that of the French then attacking much farther south—helped to call the final halt to the German offensive.

We now know that a week earlier, by March 23rd, Ludendorff had already seen that his original plan—to swing north-west and crush the British armies—was likely to fail, and he had therefore changed it to strike west and south-west, where progress was easiest. By the end of March he knew—and his opponents believed—that the offensive had failed; in crossing the desolation of the old Somme battlefield the Germans had outrun their communications. Guns and shells could not be brought up in the quantities necessary for breaking down the new Allied line, drawn around the wide salient made by this thrust.

But, though it had failed to divide French from British, Ludendorff's drive had come within a few miles of the end of the plateau south of the Somme. From the actual edge of that plateau, about Villers-Bretonneux, his artillery could have overlooked the flats of the Somme, Avre and Noye; and Amiens, with all its vital road and railway junctions, just beyond the junction of those rivers. Ludendorff had come too close to Amiens to give up without further trial the hope of either reaching it, or at least bringing it under artillery fire. A few days' pause was necessary. But by April 4th sixty railway construction companies and other troops had restored the communications sufficiently to allow of a bombardment on the same lines as that preceding the great offensive, though shorter and less formidable. The stroke was to be towards Amiens and the railways south of it; but, if successful, it would be followed by a chain of attacks between the Somme and Arras also.

In the four days since March 30th the British 5th Army had time to readjust its front. The remnants of divisions, and the improvised forces, till then holding its front, were relieved. Its centre ahead of Villers-Bretonneux was temporarily taken over by one widely extended Australian battalion, the 35th, of the 9th Brigade, and the flanks to north and south, in front of

Hamel and of Lancer Wood, by two tired British divisions. These had previously been engaged farther south, but had been relieved by the French, whose armies now held the front up to Hangard village, north of the Luce River, two miles south-west of Lancer Wood. The other three battalions of the 9th Brigade were behind Villers-Bretonneux in close reserve.

The second of the two incoming British divisions, the 14th, had just taken over the front at Hamel from the cavalry when, at dawn on April 4th, the German bombardment descended—not equally on the whole front, but with particular force in certain sectors—including that of the 14th Division. The Germans struck with fifteen divisions on a front of twenty-one miles, two-thirds of it facing the French and one-third the British. On the 5th Army's northern flank they drove through the 14th Division, captured Hamel, and forced the 35th Australian Battalion to swing back to avoid being enveloped. The 18th British Division on the south stood fast, and the northern thrust was eventually stopped by again calling on the cavalry, together with the 33rd Australian Battalion. The Somme bridges on those flats were then being guarded by the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade, under Brig.-General "Pompey" Elliott—and some of its officers and men crossing the river helped to rally the British infantry and complete the line to the Somme.

The German advance on the 5th Army's front thus seemed to have been held, when in the mid-afternoon the Germans, attacking again, drove back part of the 18th Division, south of the Australians. This time the 9th Brigade's southern flank had to be swung back. The whole line retired; the Germans reached the Monument (of the 1870 war) on the outskirts of Villers-Bretonneux; and the fate of the township appeared to be sealed.

But at that crucial moment the 36th Battalion, till then waiting in a hollow beside the town, dashed forward in a spectacular charge. A handful of British infantry

joined on its right, some of the 35th on its left, some Londoners in support—and, a little later, the cavalry farther left, beyond the Amiens-Péronne road. At the sight of the eager, swiftly approaching line with its flashing bayonets the Germans, then advancing from Monument Wood, first hesitated and then ran back to old trenches more than a mile from the town. On the left the 15th Brigade was brought across the Somme to hold, together with the cavalry, the vital heights (Hill 104) north of the town, and there the line stayed.[4]

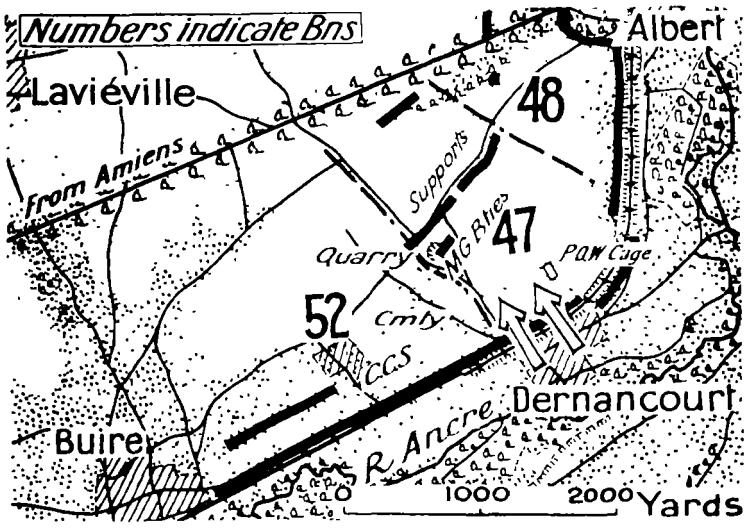
But south of Villers-Bretonneux the Germans had seized Hangard Wood. Farther south they had captured Moreuil, and, between these places, had driven the French two miles beyond the Avre to Sénécat Wood, from which Amiens was visible. The German Command, hoping that the Allied front south of the Somme would crumble, had arranged also to strike next day at a number of points north of the Somme. One of these was south of Hébuterne. Here two German divisions attacking the New Zealanders and 4th Australian Brigade were, as before, thoroughly beaten. The Germans also attempted a farther advance just south of the Somme, which dwindled to a mere patrol action, described in a later chapter.

For the A.I.F., however, much the hardest fighting of April 5th fell on the 4th Division on the railway embankment and cuttings in the Dernancourt sector. Its 13th Brigade (Glasgow) had relieved the British 35th Division between Buire and Dernancourt, and the 12th Brigade (Gellibrand) held the left between Dernancourt and Albert. During the evening and night of April 4th word arrived that prisoners had disclosed that the Germans

[4] This charge is described in *Vol. V, pp. 338-48* The 9th Brigade was commanded by Brig.-Genl Rosenthal, but as he was held, by order, far behind the front, he gave the control of the forward troops this day to Lieut.-Col. H. A. Goddard (35th) in Villers-Bretonneux. It was Goddard who gave Lieut-Col. Milne (36th) the order to charge.

were about to attack Amiens from this direction; but the front was quiet until after daylight on the 5th when artillery and trench-mortar fire suddenly fell on the 12th Brigade's outposts along most of the three-mile curve of the railway line between Dernancourt and Albert, and on the high, bare hill held by the supports behind them.

The fire on the outposts increased in intensity especially at the bridge in the high railway embankment immediately west of Dernancourt—the point where the



The arrows show the point of German penetration.

13th and 12th Brigades joined. After a fierce fight in the morning mist Germans forced their way under the bridge and took in flank and rear the neighbouring posts, which were lining the top of the embankment. In the supports and at headquarters the position was not known until the enemy had pushed far on up the hill from this point, attacking and outflanking the 12th Brigade's supports half-way to the top, and also establishing himself, with

a field-gun, behind the outpost line of the 48th Battalion, which lined the railway farther north.

The 48th had been ordered to hold the front line at all costs; and not till shortly after noon, when the alternative was certainly complete envelopment, did the senior officer on the spot, Captain F. Anderson, give the order to withdraw. Then, as at Bullecourt, almost precisely a year before, that battalion came calmly and successfully out of an impossible position. At one of its posts that was cut off the men of the German infantry themselves erected two rough wooden crosses marked in pencil: "Here lies a brave English fighter" (one of these can be seen today in the Australian War Memorial at Canberra). The Germans had also surrounded and had captured part of the 12th Brigade's supports. Even some of the 4th Division's field batteries were thought at one time to be endangered, but stood fast. At last, at 5.15 p.m., the reserves of the 12th and 13th Brigades made a determined advance over the brow of the hill. They were met by intense fire but drove the Germans part of the way down the hillside, and there the front remained.

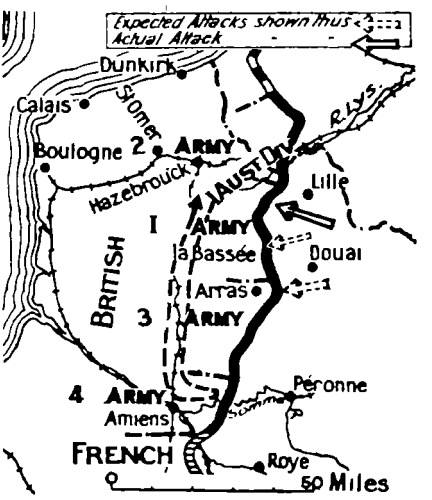
This was the strongest attack made against Australian troops in that war. The fight at Villers-Bretonneux on the previous day had cost the 9th Brigade (3rd Division) 660 casualties, and this battle at Dernancourt cost the 12th and 13th Brigades (4th Division) about 1100, and the three German attacking divisions perhaps half as many again.[5] The 4th Division was quickly relieved by the 2nd, just arrived from Messines.

On those two days, here and farther north and south, Ludendorff's primary and greatest offensive of 1918 really ended. But, as mentioned above, he had already given orders for the next blow. Most astutely, he would strike this time south of Armentières, using there the

[5] For certain very interesting experiences of prisoners this day see *Vol V, footnote on pp 395-7.*

preparations which had originally misled the British into expecting a triple offensive. The chances there were particularly favourable, since part of that front was held by the Portuguese Corps, which had been brought to France to help Portugal's allies, though most of its troops were conscious of no reason why they should be fighting the Germans. Indeed thirty of them, in the absence of their officer, had signalled to the Germans to come over, and then told them they were tired of the war.[6] Fear that the Portuguese would shortly be taken out of the line caused Ludendorff to hurry forward this offensive, and on April 9th he struck—just in time, for signs of the imminence of his attack had been noted, and the Portuguese were to have been replaced by British next day.

The Portuguese melted—why they should have been expected to fight so formidable an enemy in a cause of which they knew little is a question on which military and political leaders might well have pondered. They fled almost to the coast; fortunately, on the southern flank a stubborn North-English division, the 55th, completely defeated that wing of the attack; and though the British division north of the Portuguese was outflanked, the British reserves—two half-exhausted divisions who had been coming up from the Somme to relieve the



[6] For details see *Vol V. pp. 422-5.*

Portuguese—together with a few cyclists and cavalry were able at least to check the advance.

However the Germans had outflanked Armentieres, and when, next day, their offensive was extended by a blow north of that town, towards Messines, the whole northern front of the Allies was endangered. The 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions had in the last week been sent from Messines to the Somme, their places being taken by half-exhausted divisions just relieved from the Somme battle, including the 9th (Scottish) from Dernancourt. All these were at low strength, and even short of Lewis guns. The Germans, at first with greater ease than they themselves expected, drove through part of them, over the defences so carefully constructed in the winter at Messines. Armentieres was passed on both sides, and the Germans drove towards Hazebrouck twenty miles beyond—a railway centre almost as vital to the northern British front as Amiens was to the whole.

Upon Ludendorff's striking this second series of hammer blows against the British, Haig appealed to Foch, who was now accumulating his cherished reserve. But Foch was determined to use this precious force, if possible, for an Allied counter-stroke, and though he gradually moved two of his French reserve armies up to and north of Amiens, Haig still had to rely mainly on what divisions he could squeeze from his own front. At the moment the 1st Australian Division, from Messines, had just reached Amiens and was marching forward to the Australian Corps. Haig ordered that it should turn round and entrain for the north "to cover Hazebrouck". It was bombed and shelled while re-entraining at Amiens, but reached Hazebrouck on April 12th just in time to reinforce and relieve, that night and next day, part of the British troops, including the 4th Guards Brigade, driven far back and completely

exhausted but with their line unbroken after the most intense fighting.[7]

The line was then (April 13th) some five miles east of Hazebrouck. As they had done near Amiens and Hébuterne, the Germans started boldly to continue their advance next day, but met on this sector—and farther south on that of the 5th British Division (just brought back from Italy)—such powerful blows that, in spite of personal urgings from Hindenburg and the Kaiser, Crown Prince Rupprecht, commander of the German armies facing the British, postponed the next punch in this offensive until he could support it with strong artillery bombardment.

Meanwhile a detachment of the French Army had been obtained from Foch, and came in north of the 1st Australian Division. It failed to drive the Germans back; but when, on April 17th, Crown Prince Rupprecht made, after bombardment, his postponed attack, the storms of rifle, machine-gun and artillery fire that met every visible movement caused the Germans finally to abandon their present attempt to reach Hazebrouck, and to confine their effort to seizing the chain of heights west of Messines, beginning with Mount Kemmel.

Deeply though the Germans had now driven into Flanders no high Allied Commander believed this to be a main offensive. Haig believed the principal blow would again be struck towards Amiens, and to make sure in that case of holding the northern gatepost, the Arras position, which the Germans must try to break, he constantly maintained there the Canadian Corps and the

[7] *See Vol V, pp. 453-63.* With the British about Messines had been fighting several Australian units including the heavy batteries, and heavy trench-mortar company and, south of Armentières, some tunnellers under a heroic leader, Lieut Neil Campbell, and the 12th Aust Field Artillery Brigade, which, like its capable leader, Lieut-Col H W. Lloyd, succeeded in making an exciting escape from the German infantry (*see Vol. V, pp 439-42*). The XXII Corps cavalry (partly 4th L H) fought near Kemmel

Guards division, the forces that he most trusted for counter-attack.

By April 18th signs of a coming attack on Amiens were evident. The Australian dispositions there had changed considerably since the recent attacks on Villers-Bretonneux and Dernancourt. The 2nd Division had relieved the 4th opposite Dernancourt, with the 3rd next to it on the south, between Ancre and Somme, and the 5th brought in south of that again, astride the Somme. But in each case the reserve brigade of the division was detached and sent farther south to string out or support the imperilled line previously held by 5th Army—these extensions reaching as far as the boundary of the French Army.[8] On April 7th the southernmost of the brigades, 5th, was hastily ordered to retake the lost portion of Hangard Wood, but failed after a very gallant effort.

At this stage the whole of the 4th Army's line, from Hangard to the Somme and thence to Albert—about seventeen miles of front—was held by Australians. the southern half being temporarily under the staff of the III British Corps, the northern half under Birdwood and Australian Corps who had relieved the VII Corps. The Australians under III Corps were presently relieved by battle-worn British divisions, for which boy-recruits were now being poured across the Channel by Lloyd George's government which had previously withheld them. Haig directed that the Australian Corps should safeguard the Somme position by continuing to maintain its flank astride of that river, and should also keep one division in support near Corbie to retake Villers-Bretonneux if the Germans captured it.

On April 17th and 18th, the expected activity by the Germans at Villers-Bretonneux began, the enemy drenching with mustard gas the woods and gullies behind

[8] It will be recalled that the 4th Division, also, had its 4th Brigade detached at Hébuterne.

that township, thus putting out of action over 1000 Australian and other reserves. It was at this stage that the most famous German airman of the war, Captain Richthofen, was killed by a shot from the ground[9] while chasing a British airman low over the Australian positions near Corbie. At this stage also two battle-worn British divisions relieved the Australians, as arranged, on the III Corps front, from Villers-Bretonneux to the flank of the French at Hangard.

This change had just been made when, in the mist of dawn on April 24th, the Germans attacked with tanks—for the first time in the war, so far as was then known.[10] The attacking force had thirteen of these monsters, clumsier but, it is believed, a little faster than the British tanks. At two points—at Villers-Bretonneux and half a mile farther south—these suddenly bore down in the fog upon the young British infantry and broke through wherever they struck. The German infantry came out of the fog close behind them, and, though met by fire, followed the tanks through, and then rolled up the line to right and left. Before the III Corps staff heard of the attack, Villers-Bretonneux and the dense Abbey Wood behind it were lost, as were Hangard Wood and village, south-west of which the Germans reached the junction of the Avre and Luce.

All the morning the III Corps tried to organise a counter-attack with its British reserves; but except for an advanced battery, which hit back boldly, the most effective strokes were made by tanks. In the first duel that ever took place between these monsters, three British tanks came out and fought with three German ones, causing their final withdrawal from the field.[11] Shortly

[9] A summary of evidence which placed this disputed point beyond all reasonable doubt is given in *Vol. V, pp. 693-701.*

[10] As already mentioned a few had been used on March 21st in mopping up surrounded troops

[11] *See Vol V, pp. 564-5.* Two German tanks broke down and were later captured One is now in Brisbane.

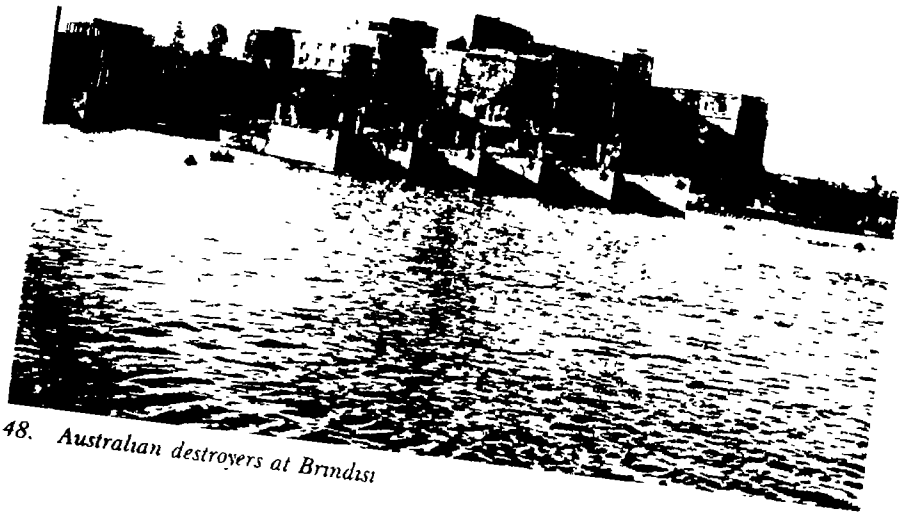
afterwards a charge of whippet tanks across the plateau also scattered some German infantry. Brig.-General "Pompey" Elliott's 15th Infantry Brigade, on the flats behind Villers-Bretonneux, stood ready all day to counter-attack, its tempestuous commander fuming and petitioning to be allowed to strike.

But till mid-afternoon no other vigorous step appeared to have been taken, though the Germans were digging in on the precious heights overlooking Amiens and through the difficult Abbey Wood. Then it became known that the III Corps would drive past either side of the township, but with two borrowed brigades—the 13th Brigade (4th Australian Division) under General Glasgow, hurried from north of the Somme, forming the southern pincer, and Elliott's 15th Australian Brigade the northern one. The two brigades would act under the commander and staff of the 8th British Division. On the southern flank a British composite brigade would retake the lost part of Hangard Wood, and British troops would also follow the Australians to mop up.

On the arrival of the Australian brigadiers the British divisional commander told Glasgow that the III Corps commander (Lieut.-General Butler) wished the attack to be made by daylight and from the south northwards; but fortunately Glasgow, like Elliott, was a very strong man.[12] "If God Almighty gave the order, we couldn't do it by daylight," he said; he insisted also that he must strike eastwards, not across the German front. He wished to attack by surprise, without previous bombardment, at 10.30 p.m. After the matter had been several times referred to the Corps Commander, Glasgow agreed to strike at 10.

That hour was too early. As the 13th Brigade assembled south of the woods, it was seen and fired on from

12 For this remarkable episode (and the photographs of these leaders) see *Vol. V, pp. 572-7.*



48. *Australian destroyers at Brindisi*

EN 161

49. *H.M.A.S* Australia *returning through the Suez Canal, 1919.*

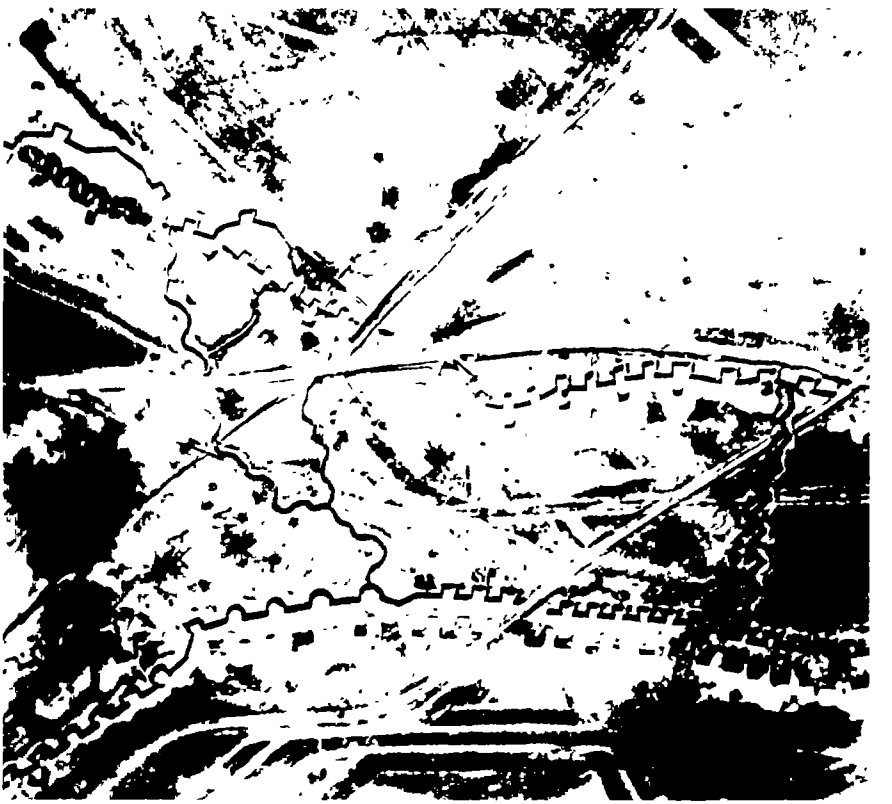
B 3031

50. Christmas parcels on board H M.A.S. Melbourne *at sea, December 1916* EN 439

51. Mess on board H.M.A.S Sydney, *Portsmouth, January 1919.* EN 176

52. *The 8th Infantry Brigade moving through Bapaume, 17th March 1917, on the heels of the withdrawing Germans.* E 371

53. *Aerial photograph of the Hindenburg Line at the north-east corner of Bullecourt, 3rd April 1917. At the bottom of the picture are the thick angular belts of wire. Above these, in front of the first trench, is a line of excavations for concrete shelters originally planned by the Germans but abandoned.* A 1121



54. Men of the 13th Infantry Brigade studying a raised plan of Messines on 6th June 1917, the day before the battle. E 632

55. The British barrage at Messines at about 3 p.m. on 7th June 1917 (the hour for the attack by the 4th Australian and other divisions in the second phase). J 272

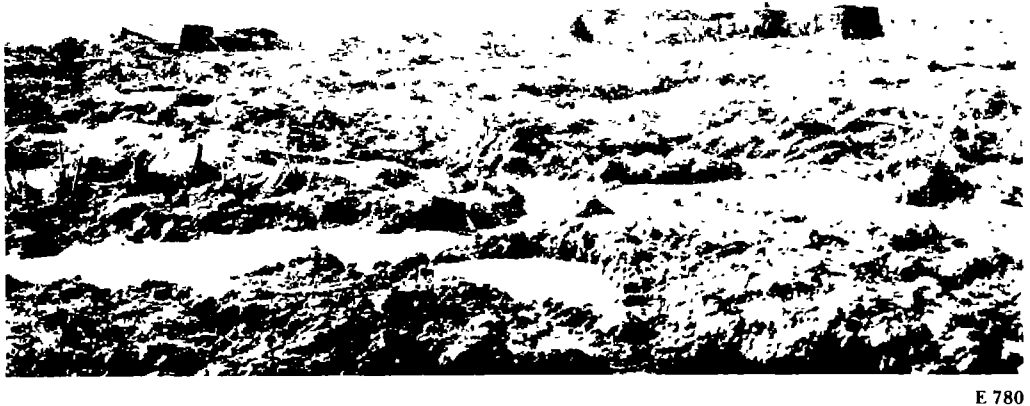
E 711

56. *Wounded Australians returning down the Menin Road during the battle of 20th September 1917. The scene shows the forward loading post at "The Culvert" where seriously wounded men, brought there by stretcher bearers, were picked up by motor ambulances and carried to the advance dressing station. A temporary delay had occurred.*

E 737

57 *Australian "details" following up the attack through Glencorse Wood, east of Ypres, under shellfire.*

58. *Battle of the Menin Road—some of the captured "pill-boxes" at Nonne Bosschen.*



E 780

E 1187

59. *Near "Idiot Corner" on one of the plank roads laid by Australian pioneers in the third battle of Ypres.*

A 36

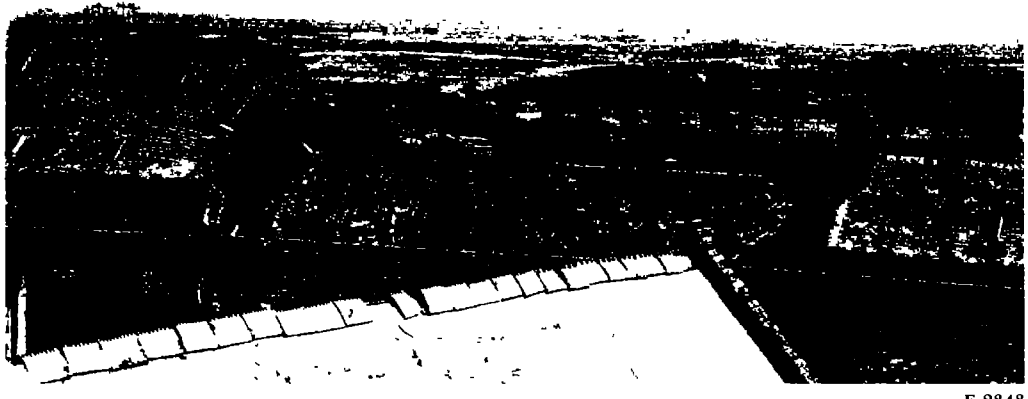
60. *Light Horsemen digging trenches near the Wadi Ghuzze, a few kilometres from Gaza.*

61. *Light Horsemen in the attack on the Atawineh Redoubt, second battle of Gaza, 19th April 1917.*

H 223

B 3558

62. *A bombing formation of No. 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, taking off from a desert aerodrome, November 1917.*



E 2343

63 *Villers-Bretonneux, looking south-east over the plateau across which the Germans attacked. Monument Wood is on the left, with Lancer Wood in the centre, on the horizon.*

64. *Shells falling on Borre, near Hazebrouck, during a German attack on 17th April 1918.*

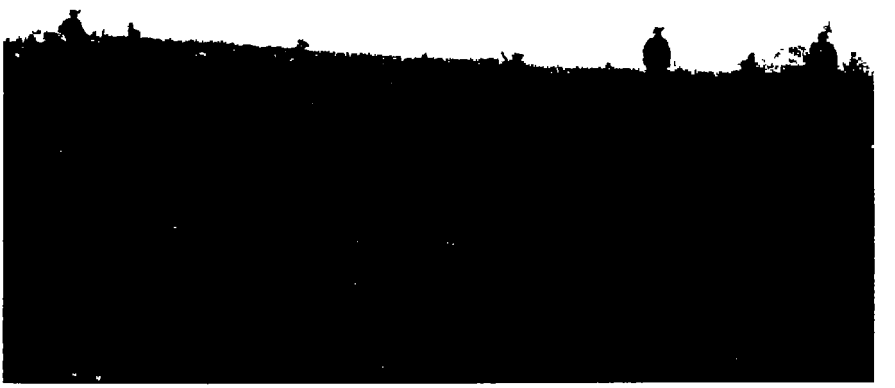
E 2088

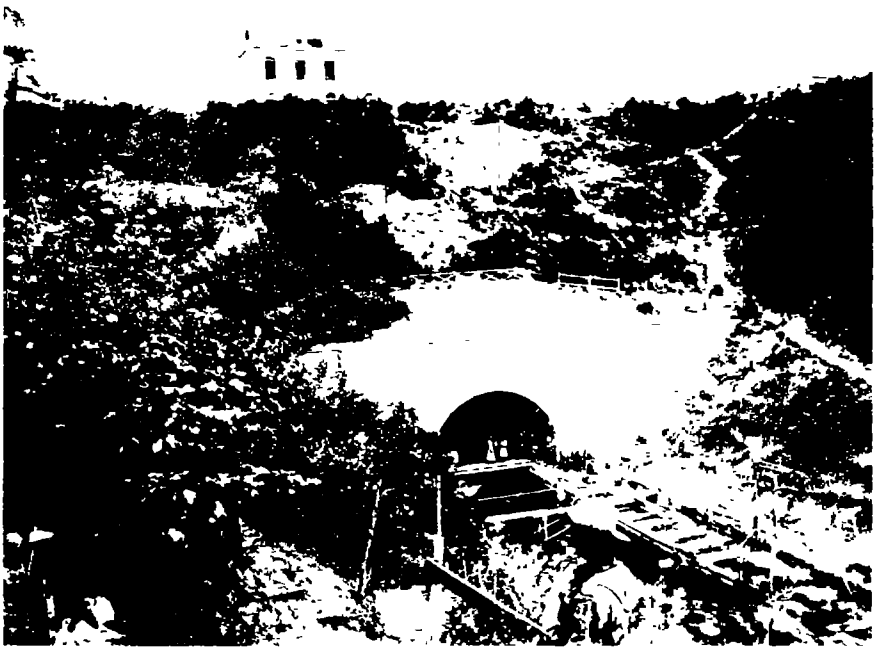
E 3138

65. *Men of 24th Battalion waiting for the artillery barrage to lift, just before the attack on Mont St Quentin, 1st September 1918.*

66. *The battle of Amiens, 8th August 1918. Part of the 5th Australian Division, with passenger-carrying tank and guns, waiting just before 8 a.m. to pass through and launch the second phase.* E 3883

67. *The battle of the Hindenburg Outpost Line, 18th September 1918. Men of the 45th Battalion firing at Germans running back between the smoke shells of the barrage. It was across this valley that the 14th and 46th Battalions attacked in the third phase.* E 3259

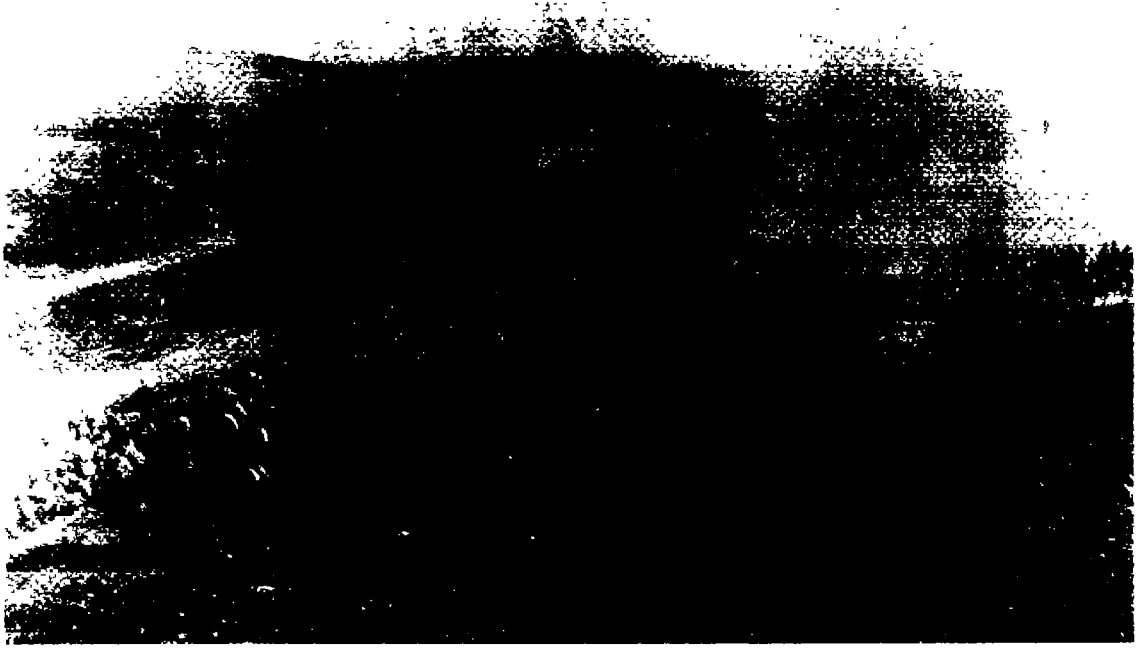




68. *The battle of the Hindenburg Line, 29th September 1918. Part of the St Quentin Canal and Bellicourt Tunnel attacked by the Americans and Australians* E 3515

69. *The battle of the Hindenburg Line, 29th September 1918. Troops of the 11th Infantry Brigade and accompanying tanks moving into the fight near Bellicourt.* K 114

70. *Australian Light Horsemen and Turkish prisoners near Megiddo, 22nd September 1918.*



B 256

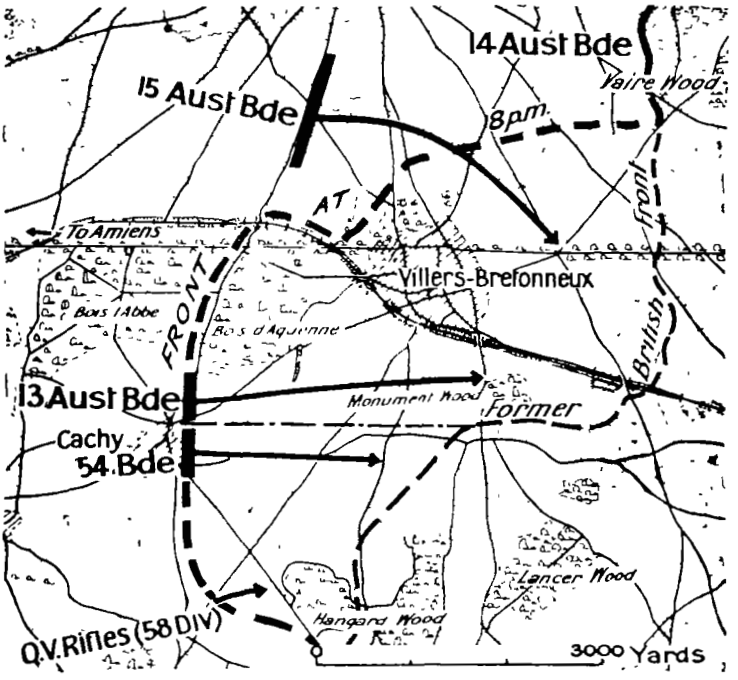
C 4337

71 *Washing day for Australian sisters, 60th British General Hospital, near Salonika, 1918.*

72. *No. 9 Wireless Station crossing the mountains on return from Zenjan, Persia, 26th October 1918.*

J 2071

them; and as its advance swept past the woods there was a crucial moment when, in the open under intense fire from many machine-guns in the wood, its flank was stopped. Next to the wood a sergeant, "Charlie" Stokes, crawling to his platoon commander Lieutenant C. W. K. Sadlier, urged him to deviate from the strict plan by



THE COUNTER-ATTACK AT VILLERS-BRETONNEUX, 24th APRIL 1918

entering the wood and bombing the machine-guns out. Sadlier sent word to his commander and then carried this out, most audaciously destroying six machine-gun posts of the 4th German Guard Division,[18] and so quickly that

[18] Sadlier was given the Victoria Cross and Stokes, who also led, the D.C.M.

the whole southern pincer was able to sweep forward in time. North of the township Elliott's pincer, attacking in the same manner though an hour late, swept with wild cheering in a swift onrush around the north of the town, a bright moon and a burning chateau in the township enabling both brigades to find their way, though the 13th had never visited the ground before. Reaching some German guns north of Monument Wood the 13th Brigade could not find the 15th east of the town and had to pull back slightly, leaving a gap, through which ran the railway cutting south of the town, an exit by which part of the Germans eventually escaped. After dawn the town was cleared by Australians entering it from the east and British from the north and west. The gap was gradually closed; and the Allied armies learnt with relief that a dangerous situation had been remedied.

Foch, ever since his appointment as generalissimo, had prudently accumulated French reserves behind the junction of the Allies, and had steadily reinforced Haig, who since March 21st had temporarily lost 9 of his 60 divisions, withdrawn unfit for service. The French now took over the British line almost to the southern edge of Villers-Bretonneux, using for this extension their most famous colonial divisions. On April 26th the Moroccan Division, perhaps the best in the French Army, attempted to recapture Hangard and Hangard Wood by advancing through the Australians in daylight across the plateau. The arrangements of the two allies as to guides and locations, however, were difficult to co-ordinate, and the advance was stopped with heavy loss, as was an Australian attack on May 3rd on Monument Wood.[14] Haig for his part—in order to ensure a firm junction with the French and make sure of Villers-Bretonneux—now caused the Australians and III Corps to change places, the Australians taking over the 4th Army's southern sector (which

[14] Here a German officer allowed a formal truce for picking up the wounded, see *Vol. V, p 653.*

actually their troops now held) from Villers-Bretonneux to the Ancre, while III Corps took over north of the Ancre at Dernancourt.

The Australian infantry—except the 1st Division—was thus, at last, concentrated again under its own corps, now on the right of the British line in France. The troops were bursting with confidence, but—as anticipated—three brigades had, through losses, to be reduced like the British ones to three-battalion strength. Three battalions, formed in 1916 but long since famous—36th, 47th and 52nd—were disbanded to maintain their sister units.