

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE CLIMAX—AUGUST TO OCTOBER, 1918

IN the small hours of August 8th a dense fog gathered. The infantry, cavalry and tanks for the great attack were at the time going forward to their assembly positions,<sup>1</sup> with unseen aeroplanes droning above and bombing the German forward area to drown the noise of the tanks. At the boundary of the Canadian and Australian Corps, on the Amiens-Chaulnes railway skirting Villers-Bretonneux, a sharp German bombardment descended, and lasted for half an hour. Some men thought the enemy had heard the tanks, but actually the German guns were covering a raid, which, as it happened, entered some forward trenches just abandoned by the Australian infantry in straightening its line for the "jump-off". The fog was still dense when at 4.20 a.m. the secretly massed artillery opened its creeping barrage and the 18th and 58th British Divisions north of the Somme, the 2nd and 3rd Australian Divisions south of the river, and the infantry of the Canadian Corps on their right, south of the railway, advanced.

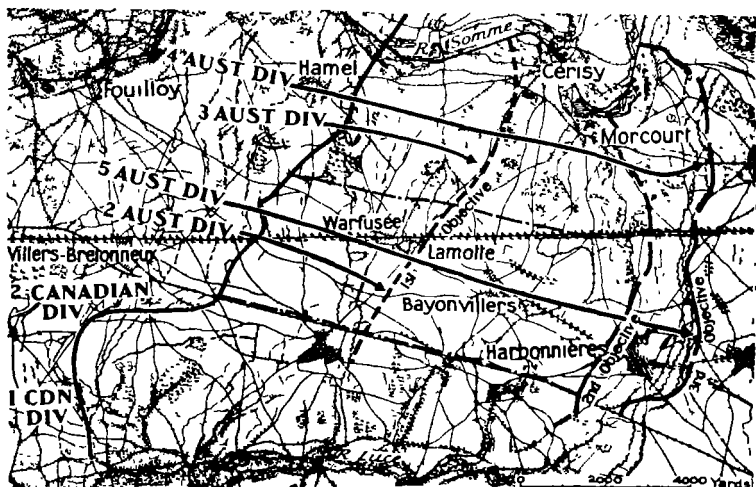
The first stage was carried out entirely in dense fog, made even denser by the inclusion of white smoke-shell in the barrage. Battalions, companies and tanks cleverly maintained for the most part their right direction, passing pockets of bewildered Germans, who sometimes fought but often surrendered at the first hint of attack from the rear. A British officer wrote in the 4th British Army's war diary that the Australian Corps had in the preceding months gained "a mastery over the enemy such as has

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<sup>1</sup> For Monash's ingenious scheme of assembly see *Vol. VI*, pp. 491-3.

probably not been gained by our troops in any previous period of the war".

In the fog this infantry had to do little more than find its way. Two or three tanks ran upon mines, but there were few mined patches and those insignificant; by 7.30 the German front system was completely broken and, for



THE ROLE OF THE AUSTRALIAN CORPS IN THE ATTACK  
OF 8th AUGUST 1918

*(The 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions made a similar advance, while the 3rd Canadian Division carried out a difficult operation in crossing the Luce. The III British Corps attacked north of the Somme.)*

the first time in Australian experience, most of the enemy's field artillery had been overrun and captured. The 2nd and 3rd Divisions dug in while the 5th and 4th came up and assembled mainly in a valley close behind them, ready to go forward to a second objective lying generally beyond another valley two miles ahead.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Each Australian division attacked with two brigades. In the case of the 2nd and 3rd these passed through their third brigades, which were holding the old front line.

The artillery positions from which the barrage had so far been thrown were now almost out of range, and a proportion of the batteries had pulled out of them; through the fog came the jingle of trace-chains as the teams brought their guns forward to help the battalions and brigades in the second and third stages. Through the mist also were heard the panting engines and creak of the tanks earmarked for those stages. At 8 o'clock the fog began to thin; and at 8.20, when the 5th and 4th Divisions, and fresh Canadian brigades south of them, took up the advance, the sun began to come through.

A little later the mist suddenly cleared, and for a moment all eyes on the battlefield took in the astonishing scene: infantry in lines of hundreds of little section-columns all moving forward—with tanks, guns, battery after battery, the teams tossing their manes (among them the famous British Chestnut Troop, fast friends of the Diggers); from far in rear streams of cavalry and transport, all steadily pouring forward along the plateau south of the Somme where the German line had lain.

The sight brought one swift change. Many of those German gunners whose batteries had not yet been reached could now see the tanks and immediately blazed at them direct. Very many of these heavy machines were put out of action, but the infantry flowed on almost without check, and soon overran most of the guns. On the left flank, however, in the broken ground north of the Somme the British III Corps could not keep up with the timetable; and German gunners firing from the dense woods there, and from Chipilly Peninsula which jutted out from the northern side in a hairpin loop of the river, now shot with impunity into the flank of the 4th Division<sup>3</sup> streaming past on the exposed slopes south of the Somme. By one of the finest feats of the day the 4th Division, with only a brief check on the left, rushed the valley at Mor-

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of this spectacle from the German side see *Vol VI*, pp. 572-3. Chipilly was just across the Somme from Cérisy.

court, on the second objective, and there, among German bivouacs, stores and canteens, captured many hundreds of the enemy's support and reserve troops; and went on in good time with the third stage of the advance, although the Germans on the northern bank now swung their guns and machine-guns round and fired into its flank and rear.

The third stage was to have been carried out by infantry transported in huge passenger-carrying (Mark V Star) tanks. Most of these failed by reason of their unwieldy bulk and the exhaustion of passengers and crew.<sup>4</sup> But the infantry unaided reached the greater part of the intended line—the old outer line of the Amiens defence system, very little short of the old Somme battlefield of 1916.

By this time the cavalry had found its opening—first one brigade in the Australian sector at Harbonnières, and then two cavalry divisions on the Canadian front. They seized a considerable part of the old Amiens line, captured the 11-inch railway gun (now at Canberra) with which Amiens had so often been shelled;<sup>5</sup> and they scared the German troops at several villages beyond the objective and made many prisoners. But as they tried to scour the plateau they were quickly stopped by Germans rallying with machine-guns, and were soon held at, or forced back to, the Amiens defences. On the other hand one of the features of the day was the confusion caused by sixteen swift armoured cars which, breaking through before the infantry reached the second objective, raced eastwards along the Roman road towards Péronne and thence fanned out along side roads, firing into German headquarters, billets and transport, spreading such panic and confusion that for several hours a great part of the foremost Australian front troops looked out over an apparently empty country.

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<sup>4</sup> For this most interesting experience see *Vol VI*, pp. 588-91.

<sup>5</sup> Its huge carriage was used for technical purposes in World War II

The Canadian and French attacks had gone as well as the Australian—the co-operation of Australian and Canadian Corps being superb,<sup>6</sup> as was that with the cavalry, tanks and air force. Though the Allies' control of the air was never quite as complete as during the First Somme Battle, the German air force was for most of the day prevented from interfering or patrolling. By evening, when orders were given to continue the thrust next day, it was certain that a tremendous victory had been achieved, far beyond any previous success of the British Army in that war. For fifteen miles south of the Somme the German front had been swept away—in some parts about noon there seemed a possibility of breaking through towards Péronne. If such a chance existed the higher commanders were not aware of it till hours after it had passed—and the afternoon and night were spent in digging in.

Yet the blow struck had been a shattering one. The 4th Army had attacked with 7 infantry divisions in first line, and 3 in second, against 6 German front-line divisions, and had taken 13,000 prisoners and over 200 guns, and the French had taken 3500 prisoners.<sup>7</sup> Since Foch's stroke in the south Ludendorff had reorganised this front; two fresh divisions and some additional artillery had been put in. He had hoped to be able to hold and even to strike again somewhere. But, he says, "while still occupied with these thoughts the blow of the 8th of August fell upon me. . . . August 8th was the black day of the German Army in this war. . . . The 8th of August put the decline of that (German) fighting power beyond all doubt. . . . The war must be ended."<sup>8</sup>

The drive was next day continued to the south-east,

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<sup>6</sup> See *Vol. VI*, pp. 532-3, 552, and (for next day) p. 629.

<sup>7</sup> The Allies had 2650 guns against some 500; 450 British tanks against none, and 1900 aeroplanes against 365.

<sup>8</sup> Ludendorff, *My War Memories, 1914-1918*, Vol II, pp. 678, 679 and 684

the cavalry and Canadians, with the French farther south, making the main advance, the Australians thrusting out a northern flank for them. In three days of difficult, and badly co-ordinated, advances, supported at first only by a few batteries some of which galloped into action as in Wellington's time, and by a dwindling number of tanks which, being totally unscreened, were hit like nine-pins by German guns on Lihons heights, the southernmost Australian troops (now 1st<sup>9</sup> and 2nd Divisions) thrust to and over those heights.

As the left was hampered by slow progress of the III Corps on the north bank of the Somme, Monash's command was extended thither, a composite division known as Liaison Force being formed by the 13th Australian Infantry Brigade and the 131st American Regiment.<sup>10</sup> On the night of August 10th General Monash attempted to win ground astride the Somme by sending out along two main roads, a few miles north and south of the river, two columns, which were then to close in as pincers. A few tanks accompanied them, these being intended to scare the already shaken enemy. The northern column, moving across country while two tanks raced clattering up and down the main road on its flank, was thoroughly successful, the overstrained Germans retiring in panic through Bray, and the Australians taking the Etinehem peninsula. The southern column, however, advancing with its tanks along the cobbled Roman road towards Péronne, ran into newly posted Germans. The leading tanks were literally outlined with the sparks of machine-gun bullets, and the thrust ended in sharp loss. Here it took two more days of difficult fighting by in-

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<sup>9</sup> The 1st Division had arrived at the battlefield on August 8th, and was hurriedly thrown in on August 9th; as it arrived late Brig.-Genl Elliott, at a moment's notice, flung his 15th Brigade into the difficult task of supporting the Canadian flank (*Vol VI*, pp 621-9), the 8th gamely took Vauvillers.

<sup>10</sup> The story of the seizure of Chipilly spur there by an Australian patrol of only six men, co-operating with British and Americans, is told in *Vol. VI*, pp. 650-3.

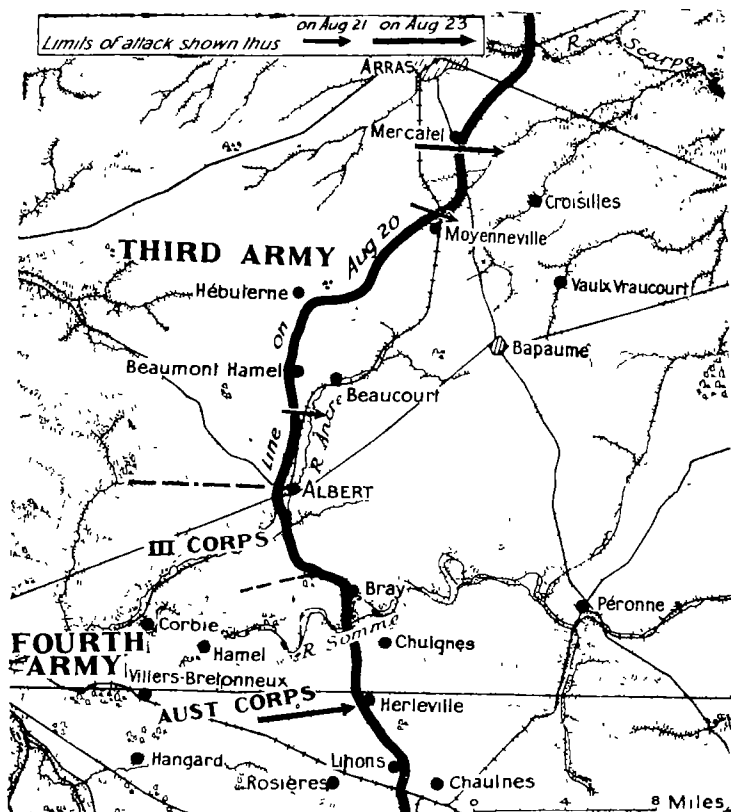
fantry, with little artillery support, to secure the intended ground about the village of Proyart.

Meanwhile the 3rd French Army, striking from the south-west on August 10th, found the Germans already pulling out of the "Michael" salient. But there was never any break-through; and, as Ludendorff rushed reserves to the Somme region, the Allies found themselves pushing against constantly increasing resistance, especially when they began to reach the trenches of the old Somme battle-field. Thrusting among these the French and Canadians approached Roye, and the Australians and Canadians Chaulnes.

Haig now resolved not to waste opportunity by butting where the enemy was strong; by his stubbornness he succeeded in converting Foch and obtained his consent to a stroke farther north. The blow previously intended by Foch, and ordered for August 15th, was accordingly cancelled. For the next week, on part of the Australian front, Peaceful Penetration along the old Somme trenches superseded the set attacks. Since the first great stroke the Australian right and the Canadians had driven—by sheer infantry fighting—another five miles, making twelve to fourteen miles in all. The casualties of the five Australian divisions in the whole offensive were 6000, mainly incurred on August 9th-12th.

The Australian Corps was now up against a strong German front, lining the woods and folds bordering another long valley running south from the Somme through the villages of Chuignes and Herleville. The Canadian Corps, at the wish of its commander, Lieut.-General Sir A. W. Currie, returned north to the region so well known to it at Arras. The 4th Army was to be stationary for a week, until after August 21st, on which day the next big stroke would be delivered by the 3rd Army south of Arras. Next day the III Corps (of 4th

Army) at Albert would join in, as would the 3rd Australian Division, which had relieved Liaison Force north of the Somme. On August 23rd the rest of the Australian Corps south of the Somme would join the attack, and capture the valley and slopes ahead.



THE BATTLE OF ALBERT, 21st-23rd AUGUST 1918

(The two short arrows mark the flanks of the first day's attack, and the longer arrows those of the third. The fight that day south of the Somme was known to Australians as the Battle of Chuignes [or Proyart].)



During the quiet week preceding these blows General Monash, on August 18th, attempted to seize the new German front at Herleville by an attack with light forces, but it was too strong for such methods. For a few days the 17th British Division—and, after this attack, the 32nd—reinforced the Australian Corps front, and for one day a Canadian division also was under Monash's command, which at this time was larger than that of some armies.

The 3rd Army's stroke on August 21st reached most of its objective (on the northern edge of the old Somme field). Next day the 3rd Australian Division duly seized its objective north of Bray. Farther north the III Corps advanced well, but in the afternoon was driven far back, leaving the 3rd Australian Division with its flank unprotected, and with the Germans far behind it. But the 3rd Division guarded its own flank and held on.

The 1st Australian Division was thus enabled to carry out its full plan on the following day (August 23rd), striking hard south of the Somme with the 32nd British Division on its southern flank attacking Herleville. A few tanks helped. Despite stubborn opposition the difficult woods and valley at Chuignes and Herleville were overrun. Of 8000 prisoners taken by the 3rd and 4th Armies that day the 1st Australian Division captured 2000, itself suffering only some 1000 casualties. (This most successful blow is perhaps best known by two minor incidents—the capture in this valley of the 14-inch German naval gun, which became a famous relic of the fight; and the most effective single feat of Peaceful Penetration. In this, after the southernmost battalion of the 32nd British Division had been repelled by the enemy, Lieutenant L. D. McCarthy, whose company of the 16th Battalion was supporting the British flank, himself—followed by his

sergeant and, later, by two British soldiers—attacked from the flank, killed a number of Germans, took forty prisoners, and handed over to the British 700 yards of captured trench.)<sup>11</sup>

Farther north the 3rd Army almost reached Bapaume, for the intended capture of which the New Zealand Division was now brought up.

Haig had decided that the time had come for commanders, in their plans, to take risks which would have been imprudent a month before. But he thought it unnecessary for the 4th Army yet to do so, since the thrust now being begun by the northern armies would automatically force the Germans on the Somme to retreat. Monash, however, felt that the capacity of the Australians for thrusting was being underrated, and (as he himself wrote) he seized on a phrase in the orders "to justify an aggressive policy". There followed a week in which, while the 3rd Army struck towards Bapaume and (on August 26th) the 1st Army farther north joined in the offensive, the Australians tried by Peaceful Penetration to force the Germans back across the old Somme field.

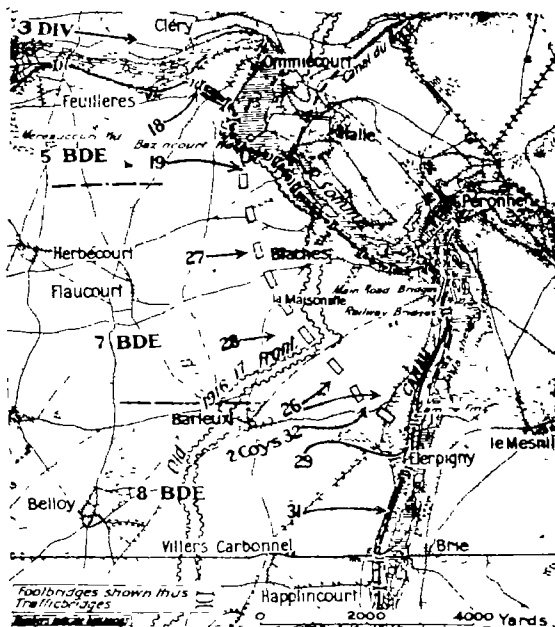
The 1st Division had been relieved by the 2nd and 5th when, early on August 29th, the Germans retired. The two divisions followed them, fast and hitting hard, right to the Somme where, near Péronne, the river comes in sharply with a right-angled bend from the south, forming with its stream and marshes an obstacle to the Australian advance. The Germans had been ordered to hold a line across the right-angle bend of the river but the 2nd Division rushed them off it and seized the whole of the western bank—a circumstance to which Ludendorff ascribes the events that followed. Meanwhile the 3rd Divi-

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<sup>11</sup> See Vol VI, pp. 742-3. McCarthy received the Victoria Cross.

sion day after day had forced its way along the slopes and valleys north of the river, seizing Bray, Susanne and Curlu.

The staff of the 38th Battalion, after seventy-one hours' continuous work was just settling to sleep when Brig.-General W. R. McNicoll arrived with the order to push on immediately to Cléry, at the actual river bend; after dark on the 29th, at the end of eighty-nine hours of almost continuous effort,<sup>12</sup> the battalion reached the eastern edge of that village.



THE ADVANCE IN THE SOMME BEND,  
29th AUGUST 1918

(The broken white line shows the German position across the angle. Mont St Quentin is at the north-east corner of the map.)

Monash was thus enabled to make one of the few effective manoeuvres within Australian experience on the Western Front. He conceived that he might surprise the enemy by transferring his main strength to the northern side of the Somme, and then rushing the height of Mont St Quentin which, rising two miles beyond the river bend, and looking down on the old turreted, ram-

<sup>12</sup> For details of this feat of endurance see Vol VI, pp 791-5

parted and moated city of Péronne at its southern foot, was the recognised key of that position. He was at this time deliberately pressing his divisions to the limit of their endurance.

Rawlinson laughingly gave him leave to attempt the capture of the Mount, and changed the direction of the army's advance to conform with Monash's plan. Working at high speed the Australian engineers built several bridges over the Somme and repaired others. During August 29th and 30th, by difficult fighting on the hills north of the river, the 3rd Division thrust the enemy from most of his positions covering the river bend. One party of the 37th Battalion, in particular, under Captain Towl, helped to oust and hold back all day an astonishing number of the enemy<sup>18</sup> until, towards evening on the 30th, the first men of the 2nd Division from south of the river were seen passing close around the bend. The 5th Division was taking over most of the 2nd Division's front on the south side, opposite Péronne, and these were men of the 2nd Division's leading brigade (the 5th) who next morning were to attempt the capture of Mont St Quentin. If they succeeded, the 5th Division opposite Péronne was to try to cross the bridges on its front and work round the north and east of the city.

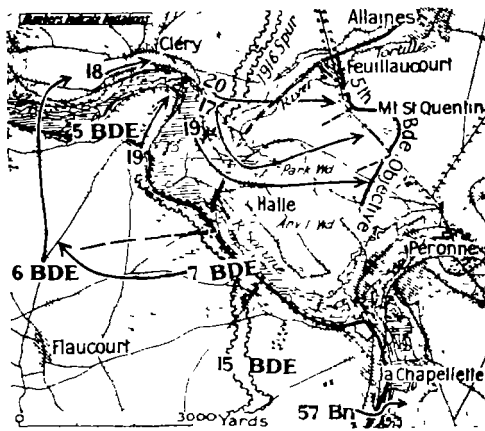
The 3rd Division drove the last Germans out of Cléry just in time to let the 2nd Division pass. But Germans in strength were holding the lower knuckle immediately beyond, from which tomorrow's attack was to be launched. With all their skill, the leading companies of the 20th Battalion (5th Brigade) after dark had to clear these trenches for a mile in depth, using bombs and rifles alone, before they could reach the starting point for next day. It was well into the night when, after capturing 120 prisoners and 11 machine-guns and routing out many more, they reached the starting line. A mile beyond the

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<sup>18</sup> See *Vol. VI*, pp 797-802. At some previous stages, as often in March 1917, the 15th L.H. Regt (Aust. Corps Cavalry) had been used to keep touch.

intervening flats lay the famous Mount to be attacked at dawn.

The troops, who had now been fighting for twelve hours and moving for the greater part of two days and nights, were, this time, given an issue of rum before action—the usual Australian practice was to issue it after action. Their number was few, most Australian battalions at this time having only 300 men available for action. The attack was to be made by two battalions (17th and 20th) going straight for the hill and ignoring on their right the woods and strong fortress of Péronne (the two other battalions following in close support and reserve). The troops being so few, the



*Plan for capture of Mont  
St Quentin.*

company leaders decided that the best chance lay in making a noise as they attacked, "yelling", as Captain E. T. Manefield urged, "like a lot of bushrangers".

At 5 a.m. on August 31st, as the grey sky began to show behind the Mount, which was dimly visible across a gentle dip, the Australian field artillery laid its fire on certain targets ahead, in the first place along 2500 yards of one of the old trench-lines which, with their belts of rusty wire, seamed the depression and the up-slope beyond.<sup>14</sup> The cheering platoons at once ran

<sup>14</sup> The unfinished Nord Canal had not yet been dug across most of this sector.

into crowds of Germans, who seemed bewildered and quickly surrendered—indeed in many cases they were simply pushed to the rear with their hands up, leaving their machine-guns lying on the ground. They were from one of the best divisions of the German Army, the 2nd Guard, which had just been sent up to relieve the overstrained garrison. "It all happened like lightning," says the history of the Guard Alexander Regiment, "and before we had fired a shot we were taken unawares."

The Australians charged on and, by the time they reached the main trench-line in the dip, the face of the Mount ahead of them was covered with Germans fleeing over both shoulders of the hill. The Australians swept on up the slope and over the summit, routing the German supports and reserves there. Captain H. T. Allan seeing that the woods on the open right flank, which were garrisoned, constituted an extreme danger, turned his company thither and thrust half-way to Péronne. In rear, the 19th Battalion crossed the Somme by Cléry bridge, which Australian engineers had saved and had repaired despite barrages that raised geysers from the marshes. And General Rawlinson, as he shaved that morning, received the astonishing news that the Mount had been captured.

The thin 5th Brigade could not keep its full gains; part of the 2nd German Guard Division in reserve drove back the scattered troops from Mont St Quentin village on the crest. The history of the Guard Alexander Regiment cites one of its actions this day as proof "that even good Australian troops were by no means invincible if strongly attacked". But the Australians held on just below the summit. The 3rd Division had advanced near Bouchavesnes farther north. Next day (September 1st) the 6th Brigade, passing through the 5th, seized, at a second attempt, the summit; and the 14th Brigade (5th Division) which also had been brought round through Cléry, captured the woods north of Péronne and, pressing on during a short-lived German panic, crossed the moat

and took the main part of the town. An attempt to pass around the north of Péronne was stopped by withering fire from the ramparts. But on September 2nd the 7th Brigade (2nd Division) drove beyond the Mount, the 15th (5th Division) seized the rest of Péronne, and the 3rd Division made ground on the northern flank.

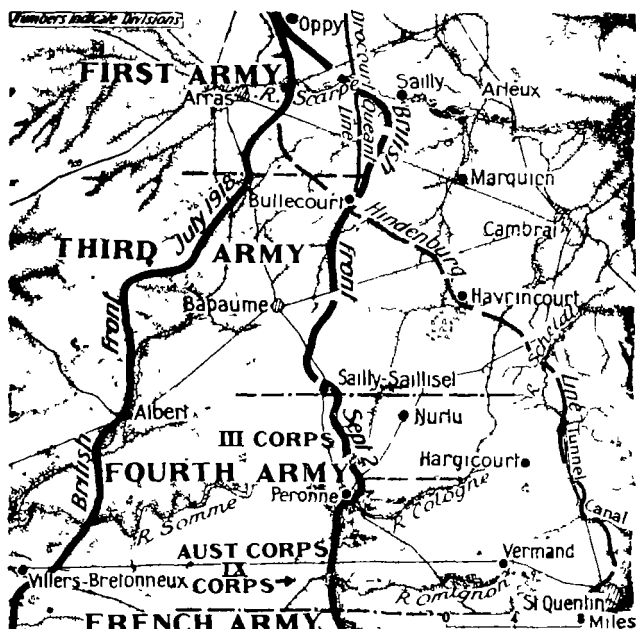
This brilliant action, in which, without tanks or creeping barrage,<sup>15</sup> the Australians at a cost of 3000 casualties dealt a stunning blow to five German divisions, coincided in time with a thrust by 3rd Army and the Canadians towards Cambrai, and gave Ludendorff additional cause for retiring from the line of the Somme below Péronne, where he had previously intended to hold on. He could now only retreat to the Hindenburg Line, which, however, also had been pierced by the British northern thrust (not far from Bullecourt). The 4th Army followed across the Somme, keeping an eye open for the usual booby traps. A new British Corps headquarters, of the IX Corps, now took over the southern part of the Australian line held by the 32nd British Division.

The German Command had decided to hold not only the Hindenburg Line but the three lines formerly constructed by the British to face it and captured by the Germans on 21st March 1918. By September 11th the Australians had won the first of these lines by Peaceful Penetration; but the second and third of the old British lines were too strong, and on September 13th Rawlinson obtained leave to prepare a full-dress attack on them. The British War Cabinet—owing to the London police strike and similar unrest—was anxious lest Haig might increase its troubles by incurring heavy loss in attacking the Hindenburg Line without success, and Haig had been warned of this. But he himself felt that now, if ever, was the time to overcome this

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<sup>15</sup> The artillery laid down heavy bombardment on points well ahead of the attack, and boldly thrust forward some of its batteries.

great obstacle. The coming action against the old British lines would test the German Army's morale and help to decide whether the true Hindenburg Line, beyond them, could be wisely attacked.



THE BRITISH FRONT AT THE START OF  
THE ADVANCE TO THE HINDENBURG LINE,  
5th SEPTEMBER 1918

(The old British lines, five miles deep, ran past  
Vermand and Hargicourt)

Very few tanks were available, but Monash had some dummy ones built by the pioneers and dragged to points where they could be seen. Over the first and second stages there would be a strong creeping barrage thickened with smoke-shell. But the infantry was asked to exploit any German disorganisation by thrusting farther and seizing the so-called "outpost" line of the actual Hindenburg



defences—a very strongly wired line, constructed a mile west of the St Quentin Canal behind which the three main lines lay. This final task would involve, on the Australian right, a further advance of a mile, assisted only by a few detached guns. Monash doubted whether his troops could succeed in it but asked their commanders to make an “honest” attempt.

The attack was launched by 4th Army and part of the 3rd at dawn on September 18th. Heavy rain fell while the divisions were marching to their starting tapes, and dense fog arose. The rain caused intense anxiety to some of the headquarters staff, yet the attack was an overwhelming success. As on August 8th, in the first stage many Germans were passed and cut off in the fog; the main difficulty of the attacking infantry was to keep direction, but they were by now highly skilled in this; for such troops the fog was actually an assistance. In the second stage of the advance, which was covered by barrage and smoke-shell, but not by fog, the 1st Division, on the left, carried, in the rush of its well-handled groups, not only the second objective but the third. On the right, the infantry of the 4th Division, during most of that sunny day, worked its way across the open valleys up to the dense wire protecting the Hindenburg “Outpost” Line. The left of this division then worked round through the trenches captured by the 1st Division, and gradually bombed its way into its objective.

On the southern flank the 46th Battalion had been stopped by dense wire in front of a strongly held position. It was to resume the attack covered by a barrage at 11 p.m. Immediately before the barrage, a short, heavy rainstorm broke out. With this double assistance the two attacking companies of the 46th—160 men—got through the wire and seized their third objective, capturing 550 Germans and routing hundreds more. At the same time the 14th Battalion struck down these trenches from farther north. Dawn of the 19th found a great part of the Australian

line looking down on the St Quentin Canal and on the Hindenburg Line beyond.

The attack had generally succeeded. The ten assaulting divisions had taken 12,000 prisoners and over 100 guns. But of these the two Australian divisions captured 4300 prisoners and 76 guns at a cost of 1260 casualties to themselves, and they had thrust far beyond either of the corps on their flanks. In reporting the battle to Haig, Rawlinson mentioned that captured German officers had said that their men would not now face the Australians.

The battle completely achieved one object—it showed the German soldiers' morale as exceedingly low, certainly inadequate to resist a vigorous attack by skilful troops. The 6800 Australian infantry engaged took 4300 prisoners. The attack on the Hindenburg Line was therefore authorised. The time had now come for those concerted allied offensives which Foch had envisaged for the autumn. The Americans had already, on September 12th, eliminated the acute St Mihiel salient, near Verdun. The 1st American and 4th French Armies 100 miles south-east of the Australians would now strike towards Sedan; the 2nd British Army and Belgians, 70 miles to the north, would drive towards Ghent; and the 4th, 3rd and 1st British Armies, followed by the 1st French Army, would attack between St Quentin and Douai. These hammer-blows would begin on September 26th and follow daily, the 4th Army's attack on the Hindenburg Line near St Quentin coming last, on September 29th.

In the 4th Army's attempt the Australian Corps would be charged with what Haig called the "main attack", that is, with thrusting through the Hindenburg Line at the point where the St Quentin Canal ran in a tunnel beneath the hills between Bellicourt and Vendhuille, and therefore offered no obstacle (except possibly as a deep shelter for reserves). The land here, in effect, formed a bridge, three and a half miles wide, over the canal

obstacle, and here the Germans naturally expected attack, and had thickened their defences. As the certainty of their expectation ruled out most elements of surprise, a two days' bombardment to destroy the defences before attacking them could safely be planned.

But two difficulties remained. Most of the tunnel sector, to which the Australian Corps was to be transferred, lay farther north than the advantageous "jumping-off" position seized by the Australians on September 18th. The Hindenburg Outpost Line had not yet been captured there by the British III Corps; though many efforts had been made since September 18th,<sup>16</sup> the northern half of the British front there lay half a mile short of the intended starting line.

The second difficulty was that most of the Australian divisions were recognised as having, since March 1918, been worked to the limit. As already mentioned, many battalions after leaving behind their "nucleus" (a quota that had to be left out of every battle, to assist, if necessary, in reconstructing the unit) could put only 300 men into action. Monash had told his generals before Mont St Quentin that he intended so to work them, and he realised that he now had only two divisions—the 3rd and 5th—fit for action, with the 2nd perhaps becoming available a week later. Also, the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Hughes, feeling that it was inadvisable to allow the Australian Army to be whittled away before the peace settlement, had adopted for Australian ends a decision of Imperial War Cabinet, and insisted that, before Australian divisions were used in any important offensive, he must be consulted. Sir Henry Wilson apparently knew of his decision, but—probably for reasons of secrecy—it was ignored before August 8th. Hughes, however,

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<sup>16</sup> One of these attempts, for which an Australian battalion, about to be relieved, was put back into the fight, occasioned in one company the only serious mutiny before action that occurred in the A.I.F. The rest of the battalion went in and carried out the battalion's whole part.

then intimated to Monash that he held him personally responsible for having the corps withdrawn to rest before the weather broke, at latest by October 15th.

The Australian strength had also suddenly been diminished by the "Anzac Leave" which Mr Hughes had managed at this stage to obtain for the original Gallipoli troops—two months' furlough in Australia. The shipping, on which this had been conditional, had been suddenly found by the British shipping control, and Birdwood insisted that the chance must not be missed. At the same time came another order from Birdwood that the battalion strength must be increased by breaking up a battalion in each of eight brigades to reinforce the sister battalions. This—which was an ordinary incident in the British Army, whose battalions in the field were associated with regiments at home—meant, for the A.I.F. battalions, extinction; throughout their services the men had lived for their battalions, and they now refused to disband.

There followed an extraordinary episode in which their officers left them but the N.C.O.'s and men for several days carried on, with specially strict discipline, the functions of their battalions in camp—except disbandment. They asked to go into the next fight, then impending, in their old units, and Monash obtained Rawlinson's agreement to this. One battalion, the 60th, had answered the appeal of its beloved brigadier, "Pompey" Elliott, and disbanded.<sup>17</sup>

In any case, with only two divisions comparatively fresh, the corps was much too weak for so formidable a task as the breaking of the Hindenburg Line. But at this stage Rawlinson asked Monash whether he would undertake it if reinforced by two American divisions—27th and 30th—the only two which Foch and Pershing had now left in the British zone. Monash realised that

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<sup>17</sup> The others were disbanded a fortnight later when the divisions were at rest. For the whole incident see *Vol. VI*, pp. 935-40.

these divisions were only recently trained; but he knew the Americans to be keen troops, and their divisions were probably at least three times as strong in infantry as his own.<sup>18</sup> Their numbers and vigour would, he believed, make up for their lack of experience, and he gladly accepted the offer. Maj.-General G. W. Read, commanding the II American Corps, of which these were the infantry, most generously agreed to Monash's taking, for the time being, the active command.

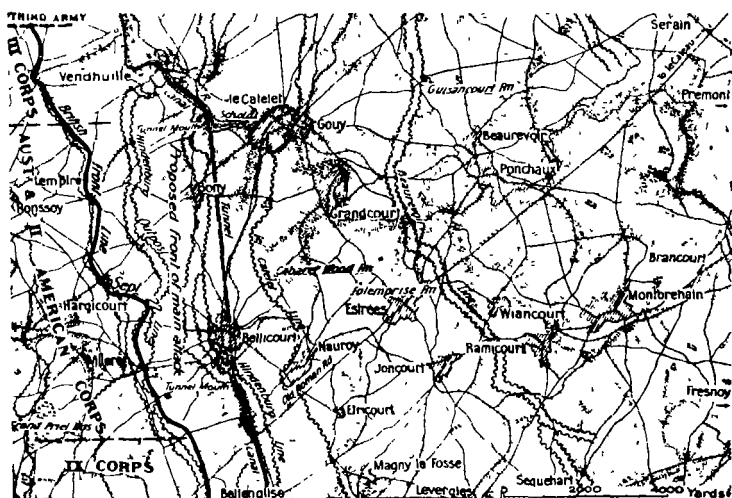
The 27th (New York) Division accordingly took over most of the British III Corps front (which now became the left sector of Australian Corps) and the 30th American Division took over the right sector. Two "missions" composed of experienced soldiers from the 1st and 4th Australian Divisions, 210 officers and men in all, were attached to assist them. Monash, in the most elaborate plan of his career—which at conferences he explained with the care and lucidity for which he was outstanding among leaders—arranged for them to attack both the main Hindenburg Line on the ground above the tunnel and the second, or le Catelet, line a mile beyond. There, after the usual pause for bringing up part of the artillery, the 5th and 3rd Australian divisions would pass through them. Monash counted on the skill of his own troops to carry the attack without creeping barrage another two or two and a half miles, through the third (or Beaurevoir) line of these defences—which was also the last complete German line (though the Hermann Line through Valenciennes and Le Cateau and an Antwerp-Meuse Line through Sedan were in preparation).

Tanks would support each division's thrust at each stage. The barrage would be thickened with smoke, especially on the flanks, so that troops and guns might safely pass over the tunnel sector, when it was captured,

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<sup>18</sup> One American company sent up to train with the 24th Bn at Villers Bretonneux in July had more men in the line than the whole Australian battalion (*Vol. VI, p. 510*)

and then fan out to seize the canal north and south of it. The southern corps (IX) would attempt to cross the canal, but Monash had not asked for this, and did not expect it to succeed. In the preliminary bombardment there would be used the first consignment of British mustard-gas shells to reach France—30,000 rounds.



THE HINDENBURG LINE SYSTEM AT BELLICOURT BEFORE  
THE ATTACKS OF 27th AND 29th SEPTEMBER 1918  
*Showing the position of the British (and American) line.*

The 27th American Division on arriving at the front was put to seize the intended starting line which the British had been unable to capture. In a preliminary attack on September 27th a regiment of this division managed in parts to reach this line but could not hold it. The usual reports—from air and ground—that many of its troops were still ahead, made its commanders reluctant to throw upon this ground the creeping barrage for the coming offensive. Consequently it was arranged that just before the main attack the 27th Division's infantry, without barrage but with the help of extra tanks, should try

to reach the starting line—half a mile distant—in time to go on thence with the other divisions.

With this immense disadvantage, and in thick mist increased by smoke, the two American divisions attacked at dawn on September 29th. For years afterwards—until the histories of the 27th Division and of the Germans facing it were written—what then happened was unknown. Early reports said that an American battalion had been seen entering Gouy, a mile beyond the tunnel. But the Australian divisions, coming up at 9 a.m. to carry on the second stage, ran into German machine-guns firing through the fog—on the left this happened before even the Hindenburg Outpost Line was reached; on the right, just beyond Bellicourt. As the Americans were erroneously supposed to be somewhere beyond, the support of artillery was not at first allowed; and with Lewis guns and bombs the Diggers in three days' hard fighting had to make good the first stage of the advance.

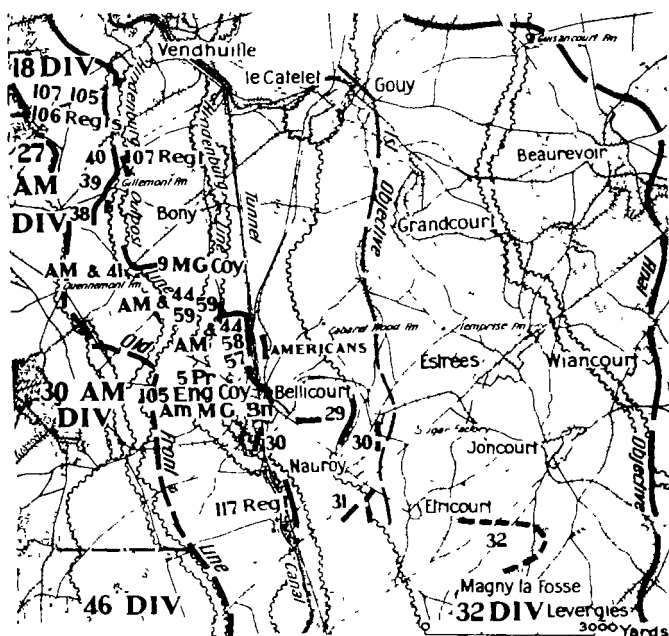
It is now known that what happened on both September 27th and 29th was that many American companies, very strong in men but with half their officers detached at schools of instruction, could not find their way through the fog.<sup>19</sup> Some of the tanks, then and later, ran upon an old British minefield of which they should have been warned. Most of the all-too-few American officers were quickly killed or wounded; and the troops after having penetrated parts of the front enemy line—and in some cases on September 29th having gone well beyond it—were driven back or isolated and pinned down by German counter-attacks.

On the right, at Bellicourt, in the main offensive on September 29th, the 30th American Division seized the southern entrance of the tunnel, Bellicourt village, and

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<sup>19</sup> Incidentally it should be stated that the previous capture of plans of the Hindenburg Line—a fine feat by a British armoured car commander on August 8th—had no recognisable influence on the result of this fight: the legend that it did so, which led to his reward by Lady Houston, was due to a "stunt" by a popular newspaper.

part of the Hindenburg Line and of the canal, but was then stopped. The right of the 5th Australian Division, pressing through with some of the tanks, struck out for miles to the south-east, meeting part of the IX British



THE BATTLE OF THE HINDENBURG LINE,  
29th SEPTEMBER 1918—POSITION AT 3 p.m.

*The Australian battalions had then taken  
up the attack through the Americans.*

*(Where "Regt", "Regts", or "Eng. Coy" is printed, the  
units are American. Nos 29 to 59, standing alone, indicate  
Australian battalions.)*

Corps, which had brilliantly succeeded in crossing the canal and was pressing on to its distant objective.

By October 1st the Australian infantry in tough piece-meal fighting had completed the capture of all but the



third system of the Hindenburg Line on its front. The American infantry, parts of which had fought among the Australians, had by that night been relieved; and now the 2nd Australian Division took the place of the 3rd and 5th, and on October 3rd broke through part of the third Hindenburg Line from Beaurevoir southwards—a feat already achieved by the British IX Corps at one point farther south. There being one Australian brigade, the 6th, still almost fresh, Monash put it in on October 5th to capture Montbrehain, a most brilliant but expensive, isolated action<sup>20</sup>—the last fought by Australian infantry in that war. That night the Australian infantry handed over the line to the II American Corps, now brought in again under its own commander, and was withdrawn almost to the sea coast for a rest which no one in France who knew its record begrudged.

While the infantry had thus throughout the year been building a great reputation, the Australian flying squadrons, few though they were, had done the same. After machine-gunning and bombing the German divisions while these advanced and consolidated in the Somme and Lys offensives, and later specialising for a time in attacks on German balloons, the two fighter squadrons had both been chosen for "circus" work—that is, offensive flying by groups of picked squadrons. In July 1918 the two squadrons—No. 2 flying S.E.5's and No. 4 Camels—joined the 80th Wing, which included also two British squadrons, at Reclinghem, and thenceforward played a prominent part in the British offensive. For a few days after the great attack of August 8th the two Australian squadrons were detached to fight over their fellow Australians in the 4th Army, where the corps squadron (No. 3) worked continuously with the Australian Corps. Nos. 2 and 4 then returned to their wing, and led it in two famous raids on August 16th and 17th with some sixty-five

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<sup>20</sup> Some astonishing deeds were done, but many splendid leaders killed  
*See Vol VI, pp 1033-43.*

machines against the German aerodromes at Lomme and Haubourdin, on the outskirts of Lille. The British squadrons kept guard while the Australian squadrons went in to attack, Captain A. H. Cobby leading No. 4, and Captain A. Murray Jones No. 2, the British wing-commander, Lieut.-Colonel L. A. Strange, one of the original air force in France, flying with No. 4. The hangars and workshops were wrecked and fifty-four German machines were reported to have been destroyed on the ground. Colonel Strange, in *Recollections of an Airman*, wrote of these two squadrons:

Their records show that they were the finest material as an attacking force in the air, just as their infantry divisions on the ground were the best that the war produced on either side. It became the practice for our Australian squadrons to lead the 80th Wing's bombing raids. When later in the year over a hundred machines set out on one of them, the spearpoint was always formed of Australian airmen led by an Australian.<sup>21</sup>

Such was the reputation attained after two and a half years of intense warfare on the Western Front by the force whose first trial was in the equally intense struggle on Gallipoli. There is no question—although their own home folk in Australia at first found this difficult to believe—that the spirit and skill of the Australian Imperial Force, and particularly of the infantry, in this final year's fighting in France materially affected the course of the campaign there, as did that of the other Dominion forces. And far away in the Middle East there broke out in September a short, swift campaign (to which this narrative must now turn) in which the two divisions of Anzac cavalry—and the notable 1st Squadron of the A.F.C.—were equally prominent.

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<sup>21</sup> This is the statement of a partial, but candid, English friend. For others, see *Vol. III*, p. 183n; *Vol. IV*, p. 711n; *Vol. VIII*, p. 146n.