

CHAPTER VIII

THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE, 9-14 APRIL 1917

(See Map 7 and Sketches 37-39)

After the Somme

THE WINTER OF 1916-1917 was for the Canadian Corps a period free from major operations - a time to be used in recuperation, training and strengthening defences while continuing to hold the line.

After its relief on the Somme the Corps moved northward into Artois to take over from the 4th British Corps the right sector of the First Army's front. By the morning of 28 October General Byng was holding a ten-mile sector which extended from two miles north of Arras to the same distance north-west of Lens. Since the 4th Division had stayed at the Somme, Sir Julian was forced to keep all his three remaining divisions in the line.¹ Until their own artillery returned from the Somme towards the end of November the Canadians were allotted the heavy batteries of the 17th British Corps and the field artillery of the Lahore, 24th and 60th Divisions.²

A pattern of limited hostilities that was to continue in general throughout the winter was soon established against the opposing enemy formations, the 6th Bavarian Reserve and the 12th Reserve Divisions - a periodic exchange of mortar fire, extensive patrolling, and occasional trench raids. Parties of the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles, in all more than 400 strong, carried out a particularly successful raid on 20 December near the Corps right boundary. Assaulting from specially constructed galleries leading to craters in no man's land, the Canadians destroyed 26 enemy dug-outs and a machine-gun emplacement, and took almost 60 prisoners.³

The largest of a number of raids mounted in January 1917 was one by the 20th and 21st Battalions (4th Brigade) on the 17th. These units were represented by some 860 specially trained all ranks, assisted by sappers of the 4th Field Company. The object was to inflict casualties, take prisoners and booty, and destroy enemy dug-outs three miles east of Lens in the area of the Lens-Béthune railway. Parties of the 18th and 19th Battalions carried out demonstrations on the flank as the assault went in at 7:45 am., a time when the enemy usually relaxed his alertness following morning "stand down". Corps and divisional artillery provided adequate fire support in which Canadian machine-gun units joined,

while special Royal Engineer units laid down smoke.⁴ In one hour the attacking force, operating on an 850-yard front, blew up more than 40 dug-outs, exploded three ammunition dumps, captured two machine-guns and two trench mortars and destroyed several others, taking 100 prisoners of the 11th Reserve Division. Canadian casualties numbered about 40 killed and 135 wounded. The enemy, recording the repulse of “an extraordinarily forceful undertaking” by the Canadians, reported losses of 18 dead, 51 wounded and 61 missing.⁵

On 13 February the 10th Brigade (commanded now by Brig.-Gen. E. Hilliam) carried out a similar operation against the 5th Bavarian Reserve Division. Each of the four battalions (44th, 46th, 47th and 50th) provided a company, 200 strong, and the 10th Field Company and the 67th Pioneer Battalion between them furnished about 70 more men. The raiders inflicted an estimated 160 casualties (including the capture of more than 50 prisoners), and destroyed dug-outs, mine shafts and barbed wire; their own losses totalled approximately 150.⁶

But the most elaborately planned Canadian raid of the winter was an attack on the night of 28 February-1 March by some 1700 all ranks of the 4th Division (representing from left to right the 73rd, 72nd, 75th and 54th Battalions) to reconnoitre and inflict damage on German defences on Hill 14S (see below, p. 258). To achieve surprise the planners ruled out any preliminary bombardment or wire cutting. To aid the attackers cylinders of tear gas and chlorine had been installed along the whole divisional front, but the preliminary discharge of the former served only to alert the enemy (troops of the 16th Bavarian Infantry Division and the 79th Reserve Division), and a changing wind prevented use of the lethal chlorine - indeed the attackers themselves suffered casualties when German shells breached some of the cylinders. The venture was almost a complete failure. While the 12th Brigade parties on the left reached most of their objectives, the enemy discovered those of the 11th Brigade before they were well clear of their own wire, and brought them under withering fire. The Canadians took 37 prisoners: their own casualties numbered 687, including two battalion commanders killed. During the next two days the Germans permitted and even helped our troops to recover their dead.⁷

From 20 March onwards, in preparation for their next major operation (Vimy Ridge, 9 April), the Canadians raided the enemy lines every night. They were costly operations, resulting in some 1400 casualties in two weeks. But this was offset to a great extent by the knowledge which they gained of the enemy's strengths and weaknesses - a knowledge which enabled the Canadians to take their objectives with lighter losses than would otherwise have been possible.

Allied Plans for 1917

The year 1916 had been a costly one for both sides, but for the Entente the tide was turning. The enemy's venture at Verdun had failed and on the Somme Anglo-French forces had dealt the German Army a blow from which it

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would not recover. On the other side of Europe the Russians had added to the triumph of the Brusilov offensive by crushing a Turkish invasion of the Caucasus and penetrating 150 miles into Asia Minor. The Revolution, which began on 12 March 1917, did not immediately remove Russia from the war; on the contrary the Russians were destined to launch a further offensive in the summer. At the end of 1916 the Italian Army was pinning down 35 of Austria's 65 divisions, having made some small territorial gains in the autumn battles of the Isonzo (the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth). In Egypt, which throughout 1916 the War Office had declared a defensive theatre, the defeat in July of a Turkish force at Romani, 25 miles east of the Suez Canal, heralded a shifting over to the offensive against Palestine in 1917. The Cameroons and two ports in German East Africa were now in Allied hands.

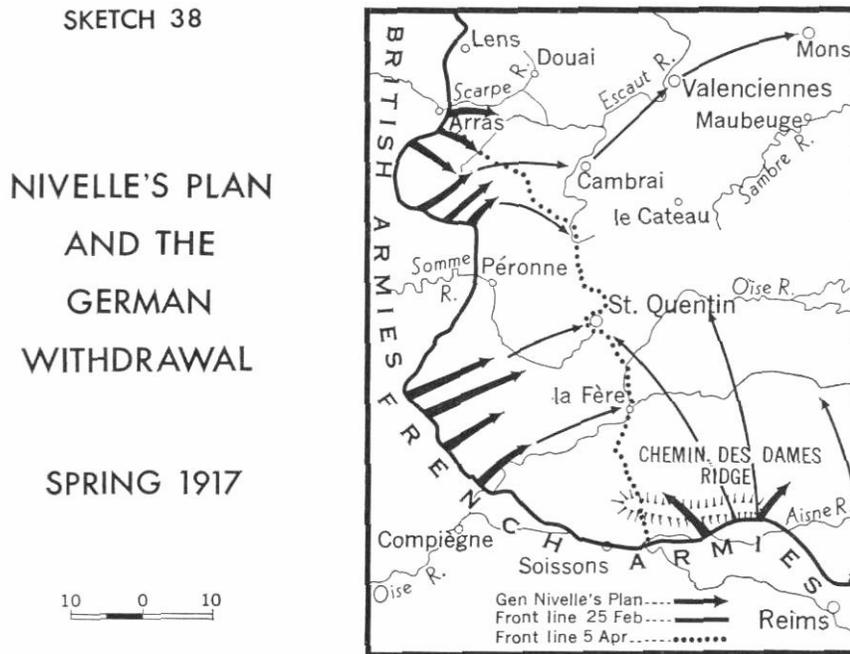
In Mesopotamia, however, Kut had fallen to the Turks (though it was to be retaken in February 1917), and there had been setbacks in the Balkans. From

the Allied “entrenched camp” about Salonika, General Sarrail had launched a Franco-Serbian offensive into western Macedonia which though achieving the recapture of Monastir had fallen short of its main objectives. Rumania had been quickly overthrown by the combined forces of all four enemy powers. As we have noted, the chief German naval activity after the Battle of Jutland had been an intensified submarine campaign. In the final quarter of 1916 U-boats sank a monthly average of well over 50,000 tons of Allied shipping in the English Channel, not counting losses inflicted by submarine-laid mines.

This submarine activity was to increase. The German General Staff was now convinced that the war in the West could not be won on land; the Kaiser’s naval advisers had long since despaired of winning it at sea, except by unrestricted submarine warfare. Accordingly, at the beginning of February 1917, all approaches to the British Isles, the French coast and the Mediterranean were proclaimed to be in a state of blockade; any vessel in these waters was liable to be sunk at sight, regardless of type or nationality. Thus Germany hoped before the next harvest - five or six months hence - to crush Britain’s will to continue fighting.

On 15-16 November Allied commanders met at Chantilly to approve a plan of action which had as its object “the endowment of the campaigns of 1917 with a decisive character”.⁸ It was decided that the Armies of the Coalition should carry on such operations as climatic conditions on each front allowed, and would be ready from the first week in February 1917 to undertake coordinated general offensives “with all the means at their disposal”. The conference recognized France and Belgium as the principal front. Operations here would take the form of simultaneous French and British attacks -delivered between Lens and the Oise. These would be followed by a secondary French offensive on the Aisne. The whole project was, in effect, a continuation of the Battle of the Somme on a wider front. But within a month of the conference the principal author of these plans, General Joffre, had been supplanted. As Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies he had been the target for parliamentary criticism of Allied reverses (the lack of preparation for the defence of Verdun, the losses at the Somme, and even the defeat of Rumania were cited). On 13 December Premier Briand made him “technical adviser” to the Government, and in his place General Robert Nivelle, who had commanded the Second French Army with conspicuous success at Verdun, was promoted (over the heads of Pétain and Foch) to be General-in-Chief of the French Armies of the North and North-East.⁹

Nivelle immediately produced a new plan, which instead of attrition called for the complete destruction of the enemy’s forces. The British and French offensives between the Oise and Lens already proposed would be only preliminary operations designed to pin down the maximum number of Germans. The French would then launch a surprise assault along the Aisne, to secure a break-through between Reims and Soissons. This sudden rupture of the enemy’s defences would be accomplished by the same shock tactics (though on a very much larger scale) which Nivelle had employed in capturing Fort Douaumont at Verdun - the exploit which had won him his rapid advancement. Nivelle then



visualized a decisive battle in which an Allied “mass of manoeuvre” (or main striking force) would overcome “without chance of failure” all reserves that the enemy might muster. French and British armies would join in “an extremely vigorous exploitation . . . with all the resources at their disposal”. Nivelle put the necessary strength of his “mass of manoeuvre” at three armies totalling 27 divisions. To enable him to form a concentration of this size he called for the British to extend their front twenty miles southward to the Amiens-Roye road, thus freeing seven or eight French divisions.¹⁰

To this plan, which represented a radical change from what had been agreed on at Chantilly, Haig gave general assent. Until he could be sure that the War Office would provide all the necessary additional troops, he undertook to extend his front by no farther than the Amiens-St. Quentin road, a dozen miles short of what Nivelle had asked. He laid down one other condition. The British Admiralty had long urged the capture of Ostend and Zeebrugge, from which German submarines and destroyers were harrying Allied shipping in the Channel; and after the Chantilly Conference Haig had won Joffre’s backing for the main Allied offensives to be followed by an Anglo-Belgian advance from the Ypres Salient to clear the whole Belgian coast.¹¹ Haig now stipulated that should Nivelle’s planned operations fail to compel the enemy to abandon the Belgian coast, he would ask for the return of the British divisions which he had supplied on the French left, in order that he might carry out his northern offensive.¹²

It says much for the persuasive powers of General Nivelle that he was able to win the support of Mr. Lloyd George (who on 6 December had succeeded Mr. Asquith as Prime Minister). In the prolonged controversy as to where the

enemy should be attacked, the former Secretary of State for War had always been a determined “Easterner”, and hence a vigorous opponent of Haig’s plans. At an inter-Allied conference in Rome early in January 1917, without consulting his military leaders he had advocated a strong spring offensive on the Austrian front for which the British Government would lend the Italians 250 or 300 heavy guns, with the French being invited to give similar support.¹² But the British Prime Minister’s venture into Allied strategy met little support from General Cadorna, and strong opposition from the French delegation, who were ardently backing the Nivelle plan. On Lloyd George’s invitation Nivelle came to London in mid-January and gained the War Committee’s full support for his project. The attack would be launched not later than 1 April, and Field-Marshal Haig* was instructed to relieve French troops as far as the Amiens-Roye road by 1 March.¹⁵

Though Haig is on record in his diary as thinking “We are right to comply with the French Governments request”, he could not refrain from observing that the conclusions which Nivelle presented for the Conference’s approval were but “hastily considered by the War Committee”.¹⁶ Neither Haig nor Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, had a high opinion of “our civilian War Committee”, and six weeks later the episode of the Calais Conference confirmed Haig’s distrust of the British Prime Minister and considerably impaired relations between the British and French Headquarters. The meeting at Calais on 26 February was held ostensibly to deal with the urgent need for improved railway facilities on the British front. But discussion of transportation problems was quickly shelved to allow consideration of a proposal - formulated by Nivelle, Briand and Lloyd George (who had kept it secret from Robertson and Haig)-for the organization of an Allied G.H.Q. in France, commanded by a French Generalissimo (Nivelle). A British Chief of Staff at this headquarters would provide liaison with the British War Committee and would transmit the Generalissimo’s operational orders to the British Commander-in-Chief, whose functions would be reduced virtually to those of an Adjutant General - as Haig put it, to “administer the discipline and look after reinforcements”¹⁷

Both Robertson and Haig were thunderstruck at the proposal and “thoroughly disgusted with our Government and the Politicians”. They agreed privately that they “would rather be tried by Court Martial than betray the Army by agreeing to its being placed under the French”.¹⁸ After an interview on the 27th with the French War Minister (General Lyautey) and Nivelle, they decided on a compromise. Haig would be subordinate to Nivelle only for the period of the coming offensive, and would have the right of appeal to the British Cabinet against any orders which he considered might endanger the security of his forces. In signing the “Calais Agreement” on 27 February, Sir Douglas made a marginal reservation on his copy: “Signed by me as a correct statement but not as approving the arrangement.”

* Haig’s promotion to Field Marshal had been made by the King “as a New Year’s gift from myself and the country”.¹⁴

Having come to terms with the British, General Nivelle was now to run into unexpected trouble at home. The Briand government fell, and the new Minister of War, Paul Painlevé, was hostile to Nivelle and his scheme. There were postponements of the scheduled start of operations, much to the dismay of Field-Marshal Haig, who regarded the forthcoming offensive on the Aisne only as a prelude to his own long-cherished Third Battle of Ypres, which must be launched early in the summer before the rains came to muddy the Flanders plain.

Meanwhile the enemy had been making his own preparations.

The Enemy's New Defensive Tactics

German experience on the Somme had shown that a policy of rigidly defending a fixed line could no longer be relied on, for hostile artillery could not only batter the front trenches out of existence, but could neutralize the entire forward area to a depth of a mile or more. During the 1916 battles, as we have seen, the German First Army's Chief of Staff, Colonel Fritz von Lossberg, had begun moving front line troops into no man's land so as to avoid the opening barrage, which was almost invariably directed on the forward trench lines. Already he had in mind an alternative to fighting in or ahead of the front line, said to be inspired by a French Fifth Army instruction (captured in the summer of 1915), which suggested fighting the main defensive battle at some distance to the rear.¹⁹

In December 1916 German troops were instructed in a new method of defence described in a booklet, *Principles for the Conduct of Operations in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare*, written largely by two officers on General Ludendorff's staff.²⁰ In it the inflexible system of never yielding a foot of ground was abandoned. "In sharp contrast to the form of defence hitherto employed", declared Ludendorff later,

... a new system was devised, which, by distribution in depth and the adoption of a loose formation, enabled a more active defence to be maintained.²¹

Instead of conducting a static defence in a succession of trench lines, the defending infantry would fight an elastic defence in a series of zones. Defences were to be laid out with an outpost zone forward of the front trench system or Main Line of Resistance, behind which was a battle zone extending 1500 to 2500 yards back to a Second Line or "artillery protective" position. The less defensible the terrain, or the weaker the defending force, the deeper would be the outpost zone, so as to put the front trench system and the battle zone out of effective range of the attackers' field batteries. Each zone would have numerous strongpoints, with an infantry battalion being responsible for its share of the regimental sector all the way back to the Second Line. Counter-attacks in the battle zone would be delivered by battalions billeted three or four miles to the rear in regimental reserve. If these failed, the leading battalions of counter-attack divisions held in army reserve would be committed from behind the battle zone.

Normally such divisions would be stationed several miles behind the front, but the new doctrine provided that prior to an offensive their leading units should be assembled "close behind the Second Line".²²

With small garrisons in the fortified area too widely dispersed for effective control by battalion or even company commanders, responsibility was decentralized down to the leader of the "group", which (comparable to the British infantry section) consisted of eleven men commanded by an N.C.O. This would be the infantry's tactical unit, and its leader had the right "within certain limits, to retire in any direction before strong enemy fire." No longer, as Ludendorff pointed out in the introduction to his text-book, would the infantryman in the forward positions have to say to himself: "Here I must stand or fall." Under attack the front line would stand firm at some points and yield at others, denying to the enemy the advantage of a uniform rate of advance with constant artillery support. The attacker would thus be able to exploit local successes only by continuing forward without the help of his artillery, and with open flanks. The main battle would follow as counter-attacks were delivered on ground of the defenders' own choice, out of range and view of the attackers' artillery.

When considering these principles of defence, some senior officers expressed concern that the young and half-trained recruits who were replacing the heavy losses at the Somme and Verdun might find an excuse to abandon their posts too readily. In a memorandum, "Experiences of the First Army in the Somme Battles", issued at the end of January 1917, Colonel von Lossberg emphasized the need for a steadfast resistance in every outpost and strongpoint of the forward area.²³ Though this document challenged many of Ludendorff's tactical conceptions, the General authorized its circulation, and incorporated it in a new Manual of Infantry Training, which he referred to as "completing" his own text-book.²⁴ Some conflicting views on detail persisted, but in the main the German Army was to adopt the principle of fighting an elastic defensive battle in depth rather than rigidly holding successive lines of trenches.

While the new doctrine of defence was being demonstrated at special schools of instruction for German staff officers and commanders down to battalion level, the first of five powerful rear positions authorized by Hindenburg and Ludendorff in the previous autumn was nearing completion. This was the Siegfried-Stellung, which ran south-east from Arras through St. Quentin to meet the Aisne east of Soissons. It cut a chord across the wide arc of the Noyon salient, and when occupied along its ninety-mile length it would shorten the front between Arras and the Aisne by nearly twenty-five miles. A German withdrawal to the new line would thus effect a considerable economy in manpower, but Ludendorff was at pains to emphasize that no immediate retirement was contemplated. As his instruction issued in November put it, "Just as in time of peace we build fortresses, so we are now building rearward defences. Just as we have kept clear of our fortresses, so we shall keep at a distance from these rearward defences."²⁵ He opposed suggestions for a withdrawal made by Crown Prince Rupprecht, whose Group of Armies (Sixth, First, Second and Seventh) was holding the 170 miles from the Lys to the Reims area, which included the

whole of the sector concerned.

From the end of September more than 65,000 men (including 50,000 prisoners of war, mainly Russian) laboured at building the Siegfried position, or the Hindenburg Line, as it was more popularly called by both the Germans and the Allies. It consisted of two trenches about 200 yards apart, the front one for small sentry garrisons and the second as the main line of defence. Early in February an inspection in the First Army's sector (centred on Cambrai) revealed serious defects in siting, and the Army Commander, General Fritz von Below, and his Chief of Staff, Colonel von Lossberg, gained permission to construct additional defences in accordance with General Ludendorff's doctrine of defence in depth. A new double line of trenches, 200 yards apart, where possible sited on a reverse slope to give concealment from enemy guns, was laid out from 2000 to 3000 yards in front of the original system, which became the support or "artillery-protection" position, known thereafter as the Second Hindenburg Line. Farther north, however, the Sixth Army headquarters failed to take such precautions.²⁶

The Withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line

Between 10 January and 22 February the British Fifth Army, in a series of minor but none the less hard-fought engagements preparatory to larger operations, pushed the enemy five miles up the Ancre valley on a four-mile front; and on the night of 22-23 February the Germans fell back three more miles across a front of fifteen miles. The inability of his forces to withstand British pressure in their present positions strengthened Crown Prince Rupprechts argument for a general retirement to the Hindenburg Line at an early date. On 30 January Ludendorff agreed, not only because the consequent shortening of the front would release thirteen divisions and many artillery units for the projected offensive in Italy, but also because a general retirement could be expected to upset French and British campaign plans. It was in the German interest to delay as long as possible any struggle on the Western Front, in order to allow time for results from the campaign of unrestricted warfare by submarine and cruiser which had begun on 1 February. The deciding factor, however, appears to have been the need for time to replenish supplies of guns and shells, deliveries of which had fallen far short of von Hindenburg's orders and expectations.²⁷

On 4 February the High Command issued an order over the Kaiser's signature for a withdrawal of the Seventh Army's right wing, the Second and First Armies, and the left wing of the Sixth Army to the Hindenburg Line between 15 and 18 March. This operation was aptly code-named "Alberich", after the malicious dwarf of the Nibelungen saga,²⁸ for it called for the devastation of the whole area to be abandoned - nearly 100 miles of front between Soissons and Arras, averaging almost 20 miles in depth. Under this "scorched earth" policy all military installations and useful war material were removed from the existing forward zone, townspeople and villagers were

evacuated and their communities razed, livestock were carried away or destroyed, and all wells were either filled in or polluted. To delay an Allied advance the retreating Germans felled trees across the roads, blew large craters at main intersections, and everywhere beset the pursuers' path with ingeniously laid booby-traps. Well organized rearguards covered the German withdrawal, though these received orders not to counter-attack. The skill of the Germans in concealing their plans from the Allies and the success of their delaying tactics helped prevent any effective follow-up. By the morning of 19 March, 29 divisions had completed the withdrawal with a minimum of Allied interference.²⁹ Four Allied armies found themselves out of contact - from north to south, the right wing of the British Third Army about Arras, the Fifth and Fourth Armies to across the Somme valley, and the left wing of the French between Roye and the Aisne. It took until 5 April to drive in the German outposts and establish a new Allied line in front of the Hindenburg Position.*

The enemy's retirement did not greatly affect the plan of Nivelle's main offensive, which was to be made east of Soissons. But it seriously upset the preliminary offensive in the north, for the Germans in the salient which converging British and French thrusts were to have pinched out had now escaped containment. Time was lacking in which to build new communications across the devastated area, particularly on the French left, where the retreat had been farthest. Accordingly, the northern attack became an all-British operation, the principal aim of which was to outflank the Hindenburg Line from the north and advance towards Cambrai. General Nivelle was forcibly told by Painlevé and Pétain and other high French officers that his scheme was no longer practicable. Army group commanders opposed the plan as a reversion to the discredited pre-war and 1914 overemphasis on offensive action for its own sake. There were also strategic and political objections. Neither the Russians nor the Italians would be able to mount offensives in time to render assistance; and the prospect of America's early entry into the war seemed another good reason for postponing a major French offensive. At one point Nivelle offered his resignation; but this being refused, he continued with his preparations. After various delays the assault on the Aisne was ordered to open on 16 April, the British offensive a week earlier.

The Nivelle Offensive Fails

Although the Nivelle offensive (or the Second Battle of the Aisne as it was named) began later than the British effort, it ended earlier; and since it was the main Allied effort and its outcome greatly affected British operations it will be described first.

* Taking part in the Fourth Army's advance was the Canadian Cavalry Brigade. On 27 March, Lieut. F.M.W. Harvey, Lord Strathcona's Horse, ran into a wired trench and captured a machine-gun, for which daring act he was awarded the V.C.

As we have seen, Joffre had intended to launch his offensive in mid-February. The delays which attended the change of command and the adoption of a new plan, aggravated by unusually cold weather and a crisis in rail transportation, had unfortunate consequences. Nivelle missed a great opportunity to catch the Germans in their withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line; and when he did strike, surprise had been lost. Besides observing the usual signs of an impending attack, the enemy had in mid-February gained possession of the outline plan for the offensive and early in April had captured a French divisional operation order. General Nivelle, knowing this, nevertheless persisted in his plan; the only changes were further postponements of 24 and 48 hours because of bad weather.

By the time the offensive opened on 16 April the enemy had increased his forces in the area from 18 to 42 divisions - fourteen of them made available by the shortening of the front. The French too had benefited by the German withdrawal, which had enabled Nivelle to add eleven infantry and two cavalry divisions to his reserve. The addition of 550 heavy guns gave him a total gun strength of 3800 against the enemy's 2450. Furthermore, he could now attack the Germans north of the Aisne in flank as well as frontally, and enfilade their positions with artillery fire.³⁰

The Second Battle of the Aisne brought the French only limited success. Nivelle had hoped to break through the German defences along the Chemin des Dames ridge* in the first two days and then destroy the enemy's reserves in the open. This would have meant advancing more than ten miles in the centre, where the defences were the shallowest. But it quickly became apparent that the artillery preparation had failed to crush the German resistance, the enemy, aware of French plans, had evacuated the forward areas and so escaped bombardment. There were strong counter-attacks, and after a month of fighting the foremost French elements had not moved more than four miles beyond the enemy's front line, while for a twelve-mile stretch north and east of Reims the front remained virtually unchanged.³¹ French casualties were enormous; Nivelle reported losses for the first ten days of the battle numbering 96,125, a total which official French sources later raised to 134,000.³² The German official figures for their own losses for the entire battle were 163,000.³³ Yet, as General Edmonds points out, had the Germans "gained as much ground as Nivelle's Armies did . . . they would have broadcast the battle to the world as a colossal victory".³⁴ The French Government, disappointed at the failure to achieve a major break-through and dissatisfied with the Commander-in-Chief, did not minimize the seriousness of what they recognized as a defeat, and even allowed the press to exaggerate the losses. On 15 May 1917 Nivelle was transferred to North Africa, and was succeeded by General Pétain.

By this time the French forces, demoralized by heavy casualties, defeatist propaganda and deplorably bad administration, were almost in a state of mutiny. During the summer, particularly in May and June, more than a hundred

* This historic ridge, which had been frequently fought over from the time of Julius Caesar, owned its name to the route travelled by ladies of nobility and the nuns of the Abbey of Soissons.

of what the French Official History calls “acts of collective indiscipline” occurred in 54 divisions-infantry units refusing to go into the line, demonstrations against continuing the war, and acts of sabotage and violence. Courts martial convicted 23,385 individuals, but of 412 sentenced to death only 55 men faced the firing squad. The new Commander-in-Chief set about remedying the soldiers’ grievances, and by July the situation was largely restored.³⁵ Meanwhile, thanks to the efforts of more steadfast infantry formations and the artillery - whose fire never slackened-the enemy was kept in the dark. Escaped German prisoners who reported the French mutinies were simply not believed. Had the German High Command realized the gravity of the troubles, it seems probable that in March 1918 Hindenburg might well have attacked the French instead of the British.

Haig’s Northern Offensive

Meanwhile the British First and Third Armies had all but completed their offensive about Arras. Though these operations had been ordered by General Nivelle as a diversion to his own effort, changed circumstances were to deprive them of any great strategic significance. Their chief importance now would lie in the extent to which they could subject the enemy to attrition.

The British operations which began on 9 April are known collectively as the Battles of Arras. The opening phase (9-14 April) consisted of the First Battle of the Scarpe - an attack astride that river by the Third Army on an eight-mile front - and the Battle of Vimy Ridge, a simultaneous attack on the adjoining four miles of front by the Canadian Corps and certain formations of the First Army.

While the task of the Canadian Corps was primarily to form a strong defensive flank for the Third Army’s effort,³⁶ the Vimy operation was significant in its own right. The high ground between the Scarpe and the smaller Souchez River, of which the Ridge was the dominant feature, formed a nine-mile barrier across the western edge of the Douai plain. Overlooking Lens to the north, Douai to the east and Arras to the South, Vimy Ridge was tactically one of the most important features on the entire Western Front. In the words of one Canadian observer, from the Lorette spur, north of the Souchez, “more of the war could be seen than from any other place in France”.³⁷ The Ridge was the keystone of the defences linking the new Hindenburg system to the main German lines leading north from Hill 70 to the Belgian coast. Five miles to the east construction of the new *Wotan-Stellung* (known by the British as the Drocourt-Quéant Line) was not yet completed. The Vimy Ridge was therefore a position that the German High Command would not be likely to relinquish without a determined fight.

Together with the Lorette spur, north of the Souchez, the Ridge had fallen to the Germans in October 1914, giving them a secure hold on the industrial area of Lille and the Lens coalfields. During the “race to the sea” the Vimy front became static, but in 1915 French forces recaptured most of the Lorette feature and gained a small, temporary footing on Vimy Ridge. On the whole, however, the enemy not only maintained his position but improved it, and

from it his sappers extensively undermined the French positions at the foot of the western slopes. When British forces took over the Vimy sector in March 1916, tunnelling companies of the Royal Engineers forced the Germans to abandon their mining operations. But above ground the enemy still held the upper hand, and in the latter part of May he seized 1500 yards of British front-line and support trenches.³⁸

Now the Ridge was to change hands for the last time.

Following a conference of corps commanders held at First Army Headquarters on 21 November, the Canadian Corps drew up plans for a two-corps operation to recapture the whole enemy position from the Arras-Lens road to the Souchez River.³⁹ The assumption then (December, 1916) was that the Canadians would be assigned the assault on the left, northward from Vimy village.⁴⁰ On 19 January 1917, however, the First Army notified General Byng that he would be responsible for capturing the whole of the main crest. His objectives would not include an independent height of 120 metres at the north end of the Ridge, known as "The Pimple", which with the Bois en Hache across the Souchez would be assaulted later by another corps. Active preparations were put in hand for the southern attack, which General Byng would make with his four Canadian Divisions, supplemented by the 5th British Division of the 1st Corps and with Canadian and British heavy artillery in support.

Along the whole German front line it would have been difficult to find terrain better suited to defence, combining the advantages of observation and concealment. The crest of the Ridge was formed by two heights, Hill 135 (measured in metres), immediately north of the village of Thélus, and Hill 145, two miles farther north-west. The western slopes facing the Allied lines rose gradually over open ground which afforded excellent fields of fire for small arms and artillery. (German histories complain, however, that their positions on the narrow forward slope of the Ridge were fully visible to the Canadians.)⁴¹ The reverse slope dropped sharply into the Douai plain, its thick woods providing adequate cover for the enemy's guns. Opposite the Canadian right there was a gradual descent from Hill 135 to the headwaters of the Scarpe, north-west of Arras, with only a few villages and copses breaking the wide expanse of open fields. At its other extremity the Ridge extended beyond Hill 145 to "The Pimple", west of Givenchy*, whence the ground fell quickly to the valley of the Souchez.

The frontage assigned to the Canadians was determined by the objectives requiring early capture. From Hill 135 and Thélus the enemy had unrestricted observation over the area to the south where the Third Army's attack would be made. But the approaches to these objectives were in turn overlooked by Hill 145 and, south-east of it, La Folie Farm, both of which must first be secured. The Canadian attack would therefore be made on a front of 7000 yards, the centre

* Givenchy-en-Gohelle, not to be confused with Givenchy-lez-la-Bassée, scene of the 1st Canadian Division's fighting in June 1915.

being opposite the village of Vimy, which lay on the east side of the Ridge. To enable General Byng to concentrate his forces for this task, early in March the 24th Division of the 1st Corps took over his left from Givenchy-en-Gohelle to Loos, thus setting free the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions.

For nearly two years the defenders had been busy constructing fortifications to add to the natural strength of the Ridge. These had been designed in accordance with the old doctrine of a rigid defence, and though the end of 1916 had brought plans for reconstruction on the principles of General Ludendorff's textbook, little had been accomplished by April 1917 to provide the new defence in depth.⁴² There were three main defensive lines opposite the Canadian Corps. The advanced field works, five to seven hundred yards deep, consisted of three lines of trench, with deep dug-outs for the foremost garrisons. This forward zone was interspersed by a network of concrete machine-gun emplacements woven about with barbed wire, the whole system being linked by a maze of communication trenches and connecting tunnels.

The German Second Line lay east of the Ridge. On the Canadian left it was a mile to the rear, but because the opposing front lines ran almost due north and south, while the Ridge angled to the south-east, there was a divergence of two miles on the right. It too was well protected by deep belts of wire. Its dug-outs were vast fortified underground chambers, some capable of sheltering entire battalions from hostile shells. From this second position a single-trench Intermediate Line (*Zwischen-Stellung*) reached southward from the village of Vimy through the western edge of Thélus, paralleling the Arras-Lens road. An extension of this line, called by the Germans the *Vimy-Riegel* and by us the Vimy-Lens line, ran north from Vimy to cover the west side of Lens. Still farther east the Third Line snaked its way southward from Lens over the plain, passing in front of the villages of Méricourt and Oppy to join the *Monchy Riegel* east of Arras. In between the First and Third Lines, which at their widest points of separation were more than five miles apart, the Germans had many heavily fortified positions, such as those at Farbus on the east side of the Ridge (2000 yards south of Vimy), and on the western slope Thélus, La Folie Farm (midway between Hills 135 and 145) and the adjacent École Commune. Finally, as noted above, a fourth position—the partly constructed Drocourt-Quéant Line—was intended to contain any Allied success in the Vimy-Lens area.⁴³

At the beginning of April 1917 the front from north of Cambrai to north of Lille was the responsibility of General von Falkenhausen's Sixth Army, with 20 divisions forward and the equivalent of six to eight in reserve. In the sector facing the Canadian Corps were the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division, holding Thélus and Bailleul, the 79th Reserve Division, responsible for the Vimy sector, and the 16th Bavarian Infantry Division opposite Souchez.⁴⁴ Except for a brief participation in the Somme battles, the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division had been in the Arras area since October 1914. The 79th Reserve Division, raised in Prussia in the first winter of the war, had fought for two years on the Russian front; it was transferred to the Western Front at the end of 1916 and appeared in the Vimy sector at the end of February. The 16th Bavarian Infantry Division,

formed in January 1917 from existing Bavarian formations, had so far opposed only Canadian troops - whose raids it had experienced at some cost during February and March.⁴⁵

These divisions had among them only five regiments on the Ridge; and many of their rifle companies were left with only about 75 men each. Each regiment held its portion of the First and Second Lines with its forward battalions and had a second battalion in the Third Line, or immediately to the rear as close support; the third battalions were billeted in rear villages about two hours' march from the battlefield. General von Falkenhausen's five reserve divisions were from ten to twenty-five miles behind the front-as we shall see, too far away to carry out their role of counter-attack. Altogether seven German front-line divisions faced the First and Third Armies, which were preparing to attack with a total of fourteen divisions forward and five in close reserve.⁴⁶

Canadian Plans and Preparations

On 5 March Sir Julian Byng sent General Sir Henry Horne a copy of his "Scheme of Operations", which, with certain amendments made at the direction of the Army Commander, became the plan for the Canadian Corps' attack. The operation would be carried out in four stages dictated by the German zones of defence, the objectives for each being indicated by a coloured line on the map. Each stage would be synchronized with a corresponding advance by the Third Army's 17th Corps, which was attacking on the right of the Canadians.

Attainment of the first objective, the Black Line, at an average distance of 750 yards from the Canadian front trenches, would mean the capture of the German forward defence zone. The Red Line ran north along the *Zwischen-Stellung* on the Canadian right, turning north-westward beyond the crest of the Ridge to include La Folie Farm and Hill 145. It represented the final objective of the formations attacking on the Corps left. On the right, however, two more bounds would be required. The first of these would be to the Blue Line, which included Thélus, Hill 135 and the woods (Bois de Bonval and Count's Wood) overlooking the village of Vimy. The final objective, the Brown Line, covered the German Second Line, running through Farbus Wood, the Bois de la Ville and the southern part of the Bois de Bonval.

A strict time-table governed each stage of the advance. The four divisions of the Canadian Corps, arranged in numerical order from right to left, would assault simultaneously at 5:30 a.m., each with two brigades. They were allowed 35 minutes to gain the Black Line, an advance which on the northern flank should place the 4th Canadian Division on the summit of Hill 145. There would then be a 40-minute pause to allow the troops to re-form, for the Army Commander intended "to guard against the possibility of the barrage running away from the infantry."⁴⁷ A further period of twenty minutes was allowed for reaching the Red Line, the final objective of the 3rd and 4th Divisions, whose assaulting units should thus be positioned on the far side of the Ridge by 7:05.

The 1st and 2nd Divisions, assisted by the British 13th Infantry Brigade brought in on the left, would then employ their reserve brigades against the remaining objectives. After a pause of two and a half hours on the Red Line they would advance some 1200 yards to the Blue Line, securing the enemy's intermediate position and the village of Thélus and breaching his second-line defences. Finally, after a further halt of 96 minutes, the same brigades would carry the advance beyond the Ridge to their final objectives on the Brown Line.

If this schedule could be maintained, the whole of the eastern escarpment would be in Canadian hands by 1:18 p.m., after an incursion 4000 yards deep into the German defences.⁴⁸ While patrols pushed forward a further 500 yards or more to the embankment of the Lens-Arras railway, the final position all along the Corps front would be consolidated against counter-attack by setting up a line of machine-gun posts among the woods on the eastern slope. For this purpose each assaulting battalion would have attached to it two machine-guns, under a machine-gun officer, ready to move forward and participate in the defence of successive objectives. The final outpost line would be backed by a support line just east of the crest and by a main line of resistance, provided with deep dug-outs, 100 yards down the western slope.⁴⁹ The plan of operations called for eight tanks to support the 2nd Division's assault on Thélus and its subsequent objectives. Much was not looked for from the use of these new weapons, and infantry and artillery arrangements did not take them into consideration. This was just as well, since in the actual battle the tanks could not negotiate the heavily shelled ground and none got beyond the German support trenches.

Before the infantry attacked, the German defences were to be destroyed by a carefully applied bombardment. The Somme had shown the necessity of thorough artillery preparation against strong positions, and the general principle that "the artillery conquers and the infantry occupies" was held to be particularly significant in the case of the thus far impregnable positions on Vimy Ridge. To this end the First Army strongly reinforced its heavy artillery, making available to the Canadian Corps (in addition to the 1st and 2nd Canadian Heavy Artillery Groups) nine British heavy groups.⁵⁰ In all, 245 heavy guns and howitzers were concentrated for the operation. The supporting field artillery, which included seven divisional artilleries and eight independent field artillery brigades, numbered 480 eighteen-pounders and 138 4.5-inch howitzers. Also available to support the Canadians, though at the disposal of the 1st British Corps, were 132 more heavies and 102 field pieces. In addition, a few heavy guns were held under the command of the First Army.⁵¹ The provision of all this fire power gave a density of one heavy gun for every 20 yards of frontage and one field gun for every ten yards.*

The artillery preparation and support was under the direction of Brig.-Gen. E. W. B. Morrison, the Corps G.O.C. Royal Artillery. The preliminary

* In the artillery preparation at the Somme the proportion had been one heavy gun to 57 yards, and one field gun to 20.

bombardment would last two weeks. By day the programme called for observed fire on the enemy's trenches, dug-outs, concrete machine-gun emplacements and other strongpoints, and on his ammunition and supply dumps, on road junctions and other key-points in his communications. Both by day and night there would be harassing fire on all known approaches; and machine-guns would engage targets previously dealt with by the artillery in order to prevent or hinder reconstruction. Particular attention was paid to cutting the German wire in the forward areas, in which process a new fuse (No. 106), specially designed for use with high explosive shell where splinter effect was required above ground, was to prove highly satisfactory.⁵² On the day of the attack field guns would put down a rolling barrage in front of the infantry in average lifts of 100 yards, while ahead of this a series of standing barrages would be established on known defensive systems by 18-pounders and medium and heavy howitzers. The allotment of artillery ammunition for each of the two corps (the Canadian assaulting, the 1st Corps supporting) was more than 42,500 tons in "bulk", in addition to a daily quota of nearly 2500 tons.⁵³

A number of heavy guns detailed for counter-battery work would engage the principal active enemy batteries. The concept of Counter Battery in the British Army was derived from the French, and was initially developed on the Somme by the 5th British Corps from whom the Canadian Corps took it over. The object was to protect the infantry from hostile artillery during critical periods by bringing accurate and effective concentrations on the enemy batteries. Under perfect conditions the task was difficult enough, and required a high state of technical efficiency, good liaison between the artillery and the assaulting troops, and sound intelligence about the enemy. In bad weather each of these factors became critically important. The intelligence organization evolved by the Canadian artillery was an intricate and highly efficient system which could function under practically any conditions. It drew its information from aerial observation and photographs, ground observers, survey and sound ranging sections, and liaison officers. Wireless interceptions, captured documents and the interrogation of prisoners of war made an important contribution. Information from all these sources was rapidly collated and quickly transferred to the gun positions by an elaborate communication system.⁵⁴

Dumps for storing the vast amount of ammunition required for the operation and routes for transporting it and other stores were among the many concerns of the British and Canadian sappers. Within the Canadian forward area more than 25 miles of road had to be repaired and maintained; the construction of new routes included three miles of plank road. A system of twenty miles of tramway in the Corps area was reconditioned and extended. Over these rails light trains drawn by gasoline engines, or more often by mules, hauled forward daily 800 tons or more of ammunition, rations and engineer stores; and there were some 300 push trucks for evacuating wounded. The sudden concentration of 50,000 horses within a restricted area where very little water existed necessitated the large-scale construction of reservoirs, pumping installations and 45 miles of pipelines in order to meet the daily requirement of 600,000 gallons. In order to ensure good communications in the Canadian zone, signallers added to existing

circuits twenty-one miles of cable, burying it seven feet deep to withstand enemy shelling, and sixty-six miles of unburied wire. As the area was in full view of the enemy, most of this work had to be done at night.

The protective tunnelling constructed preparatory to the Battle of Arras, and especially Vimy Ridge, represented one of the great engineering achievements of the war. Tunnelling companies excavated or extended eleven subways of a total length of almost four miles, leading to the Canadian front line. In these electrically lit subways, 25 feet or more underground, telephone cables and water mains found protection from enemy shelling. The subways provided a covered approach for troops moving up for the assault, or in relief, and they allowed a safe and speedy evacuation of the wounded. Chambers cut into their walls housed brigade and battalion headquarters, ammunition stores, and dressing stations; while included in this underground accommodation were several deep caverns, left from chalk quarrying operations of an earlier day, the largest of which - Zivy cave - had room for an entire battalion.⁵⁵

Unhampered by false notions of security - only the time of the attack was kept secret - Canadian commanders at all levels freely briefed their subordinates and exercised them in their forthcoming role. Under General Byng's personal direction a full-scale replica of the battle area was laid out in a field to the rear, constructed and kept up to date by air photographs supplemented by reports of aerial observers. German trenches were represented by broad white tapes, and flags of various colours identified strongpoints and other special features. While units and formations were in reserve they rehearsed repeatedly on this model from platoon to divisional level, every care being taken to make the exercises realistic. A rolling barrage was simulated by mounted officers with flags moving forward at the appropriate pace. Officers and men carried exactly what they would carry in the attack, and thus loaded practised getting rapidly out of jumping-off trenches, advancing over broken ground, and dealing with various forms of enemy resistance. By the day of the attack all ranks knew just where they would have to go and what to do when they got there.⁵⁶

This emphasis on detailed rehearsals, and indeed the whole nature of the tactics to be used at Vimy, reflect the influence of General Nivelle's successful counter-offensive near Verdun in December 1916. Here eight French divisions, assaulting in two waves on a six-mile front with exceedingly strong artillery support, had recovered ground lost in previous enemy attacks and inflicted very heavy casualties on five German divisions. In preparation for Vimy and Arras, early in January a group of British officers went to Verdun to study the French operation. General Currie was a member of the party, and on his return he delivered at Corps and divisional headquarters a series of profitable lectures on the lessons of Verdun.⁵⁷

The preparatory bombardment began on 20 March; but for the first thirteen days, in order to conceal the full extent of the artillery support, about half the batteries remained silent. Guns of the adjacent 1st Corps on the left and the 17th Corps on the right cooperated in dealing with targets on the Canadian

flanks. Then on 2 April the intensive phase started, as from the heavy artillery drawn up in a great arc extending 22,000 yards from Bully Grenay (north-west of Lens) to the outskirts of Arras a crushing bombardment fell on the German positions. One Canadian observer records that the shells poured “over our heads like water from a hose, thousands and thousands a day”.⁵⁸ Aptly the enemy named this period “the week of suffering”.⁵⁹ More than a million rounds of heavy and field ammunition, with a total weight of 50,000 tons, battered the limited area on which they fell into a pock-marked wilderness of mud-filled craters. The villages of Thélus, Farbus and Givenchy were systematically destroyed so as to deny them to the enemy. At many points trenches were completely demolished. German ration parties, which had formerly reached the front line in fifteen minutes, now often took six hours to get forward along the broken and shell-swept communication trenches. Rations arrived cold and spoiled, and many of the front companies were without fresh food for two or three days at a time. German accounts afterwards cited this breakdown in the food supply as a major cause of weakness in the defence.⁶⁰

In order to gain accurate information about possible changes in the German dispositions there were nightly raids into the enemy’s lines during the bombardment. These varied in size from small patrols to the 600 all ranks sent out by the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade on 31 March to investigate the defences in front of the Pimple.⁶¹ The artillery depended increasingly upon the Royal Flying Corps to seek out hostile gun positions and perform registration and spotting duties for our batteries. In carrying out these tasks No. 16 Squadron, attached to the Canadian Corps, had to contend with bad flying weather and determined opposition from German fighter pilots. Although outnumbered on the Vimy-Arras front, the enemy had the advantage in both speed and fire-power.* Despite heavy losses the R.F.C. continued its reconnaissance programme and undertook limited bombing operations against German airfields and railway installations. Of an estimated 212 guns opposite the Canadian Corps, 83 per cent were located by various means, including aerial observation.⁶³

While much of the air fighting took place over the German lines, Canadian troops noticed and were impressed with the skill and audacity of one of the enemy pilots, identified as Lieut. Baron Manfred von Richthofen.⁶⁴ Towards the end of 1916 Richthofen had painted his machine red, a colour later adopted by his entire squadron.⁶⁵ In the spring of 1917 gaudy colour schemes became quite common among German fighter units.⁶⁶

It was recognized that the enemy’s main defensive strength on Vimy Ridge lay in the immunity of his forward dug-outs to shellfire, even though these shelters were designed and sited according to principles that had become

* Germany’s 115 m.p.h. Albatros biplane fighter carried two machine-guns. In general, British and French fighters of this period were some fifteen miles an hour slower, though more manoeuvrable, and were armed with a single Vickers or Lewis gun.⁶²

obsolete. French attacks of 1915 had failed partly because of the speed with which the Germans emerged from such shelters after the opening bombardment, and it was here that the Canadians expected the greatest resistance. General Byng's planners therefore sought to achieve a measure of tactical surprise. In the circumstances the only hope of doing this was to keep the enemy in doubt as to the time of the attack. Accordingly, as zero hour drew near the artillery slackened its fire, and the customary final bombardment just before the assault was dispensed with.

Six months earlier General Foch had declared that a "sufficiently accurate and adequate artillery preparation" would be necessary for the capture of the Ridge. By the evening of 8 April, Easter Sunday, this requirement seemed to have been fulfilled. As the firing died down the gunners made final adjustments for the morrow. Ammunition was carefully stacked, shells were fused, and wherever possible barrels of water were made available to cool overheated guns. Fifteen thousand Canadians*, the first wave, waiting to move up for the assault, were confident in the knowledge that everything possible had been done to ensure success.

For once the weather was propitious. A sharp frost on the previous evening had hardened the mud. The day had been fine and clear, but now, as night fell, the barometer was dropping and the air was turning much colder.

The Attack Goes In, 9 April

As darkness gathered, the infantry battalions began moving forward to their assembly areas, guided by stakes marked with luminous paint. Some used the newly completed subways to reach the front lines; others, forced to cross open ground, suffered casualties from the enemy's usual machine-gun and artillery harassing fire. At first the night was bright with a moon just past the full, but the sky clouded later, cloaking the movements of the assembling troops. Through lanes cut in the Canadian wire the forward companies filed into no man's land to occupy the shell-holes and narrow ditches from which they would assault. All ranks had been cautioned to observe strict silence, and the assembly was completed, in some cases to within a hundred yards of the enemy's outposts, with only a few local alarms being given. Enemy signal centres in forward and back areas were special targets in the later phase of the preliminary bombardment. The destruction of most of the German telephone lines by shellfire meant that such reports had to be relayed by runner; and none would reach the rear in time for a general alarm to be raised. All units were in position by 4:00 am., every man having received a rum ration and a hot meal.⁶⁸

Shortly before dawn there was a further drop in the temperature and a driving north-west wind swept the countryside with snow and sleet.

* The attachment of the British 5th Division (in corps reserve) and British artillery, engineer and labour units, had brought the Canadian Corps to a strength of approximately 170,000 all ranks, of whom 97,184 were Canadians.⁶⁷

Consequently a bombing programme by the Royal Flying Corps had to be abandoned. Physically discomfiting as the storm was to the waiting troops, it gave them the advantage of assaulting with the wind at their backs and in the defenders' faces. It also had the effect of prolonging the darkness beyond zero hour, which had been set to coincide with first light; but so well had the attackers rehearsed their roles that the continued darkness was no serious handicap.

Promptly at 5:30 on the morning of Easter Monday, 9 April, the attack on Vimy Ridge opened with the thunderous roar of the 983 guns and mortars supporting the Canadians. The main field artillery barrage was provided by one gun to every 25 yards of front. These guns, opening at zero hour, fired for three minutes on the enemy's foremost trenches at three rounds a minute, and then lifted 100 yards every three minutes, slowing their rate of fire to two rounds per minute. This was supplemented by 18-pounder standing barrages, 4.5-inch howitzer concentrations, barrages by heavy guns and howitzers, and the continuous fire of 150 machine-guns,* creating a bullet-swept zone 400 yards ahead. This employment of machine-guns for barrage and supporting fire was on a scale unprecedented in military history. Other guns and mortars bombarded German battery positions and ammunition dumps with high explosive and gas shells, while some mortars laid smoke in front of Thélus and Hill 135. This great volume of fire neutralized a large proportion of the enemy's guns, and the response of the remainder to the frantic S.O.S. rocket signals from the German front lines was weak and ineffective, the ill-directed counter-barrage falling well behind the attacking troops.

The ground over which the Canadians had to advance was peculiarly difficult. The heavily laden infantry had to pick their way between deep shell-holes and negotiate a maze of shattered trenches and the torn remnants of wire entanglements. In some places great mine craters from former operations presented insuperable obstacles that had to be by-passed, and everywhere the continuous shelling had pulverized the earth into vast puddles of clammy mud. Nevertheless the long line of twenty-one battalions pushed forward in good order, keeping well up to the barrage. On the right the 1st Division, commanded by Major-General Currie, attacked on a frontage of more than a mile with six assaulting battalions - from right to left the 5th, 7th and 10th Battalions of the 2nd Brigade (Brig.-Gen. F. O. W. Loomis), and the 15th, 14th and 16th Battalions of the 3rd Brigade (Brig.-Gen. G. S. Tuxford). Crossing the devastation of no man's land, the forward companies reached what was left of the enemy's foremost trench while most of the surviving defenders were still in their deep dug-outs. Quickly overpowering the sentries, the leading troops left parties to guard dug-out and tunnel exits until the mopping-up wave arrived. Even at the second trench some of the garrison were caught still underground. As the Canadians pushed on they engaged in some hand-to-hand fighting, but the main opposition came from snipers firing at point-blank range and resolute machine-

* The total number of machine-guns under the Canadian Corps for the operation was 358. Each Of the sixteen Canadian MG. Companies and the four companies of the British 5th Division had 16 Vickers and the 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade had 38. These figures do not include the "liberal" supply of Lewis guns with the infantry battalions.⁶⁹

gun crews manning their strongly-emplaced weapons to the last. About 100 yards beyond the now unrecognizable Arras-Lens road lay the *Zwölfer-Graben*, which marked the southern end of the Black Line objective in the Canadian sector. Here both brigades ran into fire from well-sited machine-guns, and losses were heavy. One by one these enemy strongpoints were attacked with grenade and bayonet and the guns silenced.⁷⁰ Among that day's many deeds of heroism was that of Private W. J. Milne, of the 16th Battalion, who when his company was held up by a machine-gun, crawled on hands and knees to within bombing distance, putting all the crew out of action and capturing the gun. He was awarded the Victoria Cross-posthumously, for he was killed later in the day.⁷¹

In the right centre of the Corps attack, Major-General Burstall's 2nd Division, advancing on a 1400-yard front with four battalions forward (the 18th and 19th Battalions of the 4th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. R. Rennie) and the 24th and 26th Battalions of the 5th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. A. H. Macdonell), had much the same experience. Walking, running and occasionally jumping across no man's land, the men followed closely the whitish-grey puffs that marked the exploding shrapnel of the barrage. Cooperating aeroplanes swooped low sounding their klaxon horns and endeavouring to mark the progress of the troops in the driving snowstorm. As we have seen, the eight tanks attached to the Division had been unable to negotiate the gripless mud and the deep shell craters and were left behind early in the battle.⁷² Opposition stiffened at the second German line, and, as on other sectors of the front, only timely acts of individual daring and initiative kept the advance moving.

Such was the exploit of Lance-Sergeant E. W. Sifton, of the 18th Battalion. Spotting a hidden machine-gun that was causing casualties to his battalion, he leapt into the German trench and overthrew the gun, bayoneting every one of the crew. Then as a party of Germans advanced on him down the trench, he held them off with bayonet and clubbed rifle until his comrades arrived to end the unequal fight. Sifton won the V.C., but like Private Milne he never learned of the award; he was shot down by one of the Germans he had wounded.⁷³

Both the 1st and 2nd Divisions were reported at the Black Line by 6:15 - forty-five minutes after zero.⁷⁴ The 3rd Division's advance encountered only light opposition in the first phase, so completely had the heavy artillery destroyed the enemy's defences. Major-General Lipsett attacked on the right, opposite Bois de la Folie, with Brig.-Gen. J. H. Elmsley's 8th Brigade (1st, 2nd and 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles); on the left, headed for the *École Commune*, were the assaulting battalions of the 7th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. A. C. Macdonell) - The Royal Canadian Regiment, P.P.C.L.I., and the 42nd Battalion. The first large bag of prisoners was taken by the 2nd C.M.R., who from a tunnel behind the second trench line captured 150 surprised Saxons of a battalion of the 263rd Reserve Regiment (79th Reserve Division).⁷⁵ With German trenches obliterated, there were some instances of troops failing to recognize landmarks and running into their own barrage, but in general the attack went like clockwork, and by 6:25 the capture of the Black Line by both brigades had been confirmed.⁷⁶ The 4th Division, as we

shall see, encountered trouble and could not complete the first phase of its attack for some hours.

After the planned pause, during which it consolidated its first objective, the 1st Division resumed the advance at 6:45, the original rear companies of the forward battalions taking the lead. It was now light enough for them to see the next objective, the enemy's Intermediate Line, which lay 700 yards ahead, along the far edge of a wide, saucer-like depression. The wind had turned, driving snow across the front and carrying smoke southward from Thélus. Thus the Bavarians could not see the attack coming until it was almost upon them. Those who were not captured fled as fast as they could through the hampering mud; within the first five minutes, what appeared to be a full battalion was seen retreating over the sky-line towards Farbus Wood.⁷⁷ By shortly after seven o'clock the Division had taken the left half of its second objective, the Red Line, which coincided with the *Zwischen-Stellung*, except for 500 yards on the right where the German trenches turned sharply to the south-east. To capture these a new attack would be mounted by the 1st Brigade (Brig.-Gen. W. A. Griesbach), brought forward from reserve.

In the 2nd Division's sector the Red Line ran just east of the Lens road and included the battered hamlets of Les Tilleuls, immediately west of Thélus. The supporting battalions of the 4th and 5th Brigades had come forward—the 21st Battalion to attack and pass through Les Tilleuls, the 25th to occupy the Turko-Graben, which reached northward behind the road. On the way to its objective the 21st Battalion found in a large cave under the shell-torn ruins of the village two German battalion headquarters, and sent 106 prisoners to the rear. At that stage of the advance its own casualties numbered 215.⁷⁸ The 25th Battalion quickly seized the Turko-Graben, capturing two 77-mm. guns and eight machine-guns, and with the aid of mop-up parties from the 22nd Battalion took close to 400 prisoners. Its casualty list of more than 250 testified to the strength of the opposition it had encountered.⁷⁹ By eight o'clock the 1st and 2nd Divisions were reported on the Red Line, the halfway mark in their advance to the crest at their end of the ridge.⁸⁰

Meanwhile the 3rd Division had reached the crest at 7:30 and occupied the western edge of the Bois de la Folie. The value of sending Vickers machine-guns forward with the assaulting battalions had been amply demonstrated. On the right of the divisional front, two detachments of the 8th Machine Gun Company had reached the Arras-Lens road ahead of the infantry (1st C.M.R.) which they were supporting; between them the two guns inflicted an estimated 100 casualties. One detachment caught an enemy battalion headquarters withdrawing towards the Bois de Bonval. Pursued by the fire of this troublesome gun, reads a German account, the battalion commander, his staff, and twenty men went back along the communication trench, knee-deep in mud, towards the second-line position; but most of the staff and all the men were killed or wounded before reaching it.⁸¹ At the same time the 8th Brigade's centre battalion, still the 2nd C.M.R., had found La Folie Farm a mass of rubble and overrun it without opposition. In the orchards to the north, however, the 7th Brigade was heavily

engaged; here the enemy withdrew from his dug-outs and broken trenches only to launch ineffective local counter-attacks against The Royal Canadian Regiment and its point of junction with the 4th C.M.R. Consolidation began on the east side of the Ridge as engineer detachments arrived and carrying parties of the reserve battalion from each brigade brought forward tools and wire. At about nine o'clock, when it was learned that the 4th Division on the left had not yet captured Hill 145, the 7th Brigade was called on to establish a defensive flank from the Bois de la Folie, through the former German third trench, to the original front line. The P.P.C.L.I. took over part of the front of the 42nd Battalion, which in turn extended to the left to cover the new flank. For the rest of the day both units were harassed by small-arms fire from the top of the hill.⁸²

Leaving the 3rd Division on its second and final objective, and before dealing with the 4th Division's operations on the left flank, let us once more follow the fortunes of the 1st and 2nd Divisions as they completed their assigned tasks on the Corps right.

The Advance to the Blue and Brown Lines

By half-past nine reserve brigades had moved up to the Red Line, and were ready to advance on the Blue Line objective. In General Currie's sector the 1st Brigade had deployed the 1st, 3rd and 4th Battalions. Because of the 2nd Division's widening front, the 13th Brigade (of the British 5th Division) was brought in on the left of Brig.-Gen. Ketchen's 6th Brigade, which attacked with the 31st, 28th and 29th Battalions.

On the extreme right the 1st Battalion ran into spirited resistance at the *Zwischen-Stellung* before capturing the position and taking 125 prisoners. Elsewhere the leading waves, advancing as if on parade, met remarkably little opposition, and casualties came mainly from shellfire. Capture of the Blue Line was reported by the 1st Division shortly after eleven o'clock, and a little later by the 2nd Division. While the 29th Battalion overran Thélus Trench north of the village and took the south end of Hill 135, the 28th and 31st Battalions, carrying out the attack "in precisely the same manner as it had been worked out on the practice fields", cleared the ruins of Thélus and moved on to the high ground beyond.⁸³ On the divisional left two battalions of the British brigade advanced around the northern slopes of Hill 135 to occupy Count's Wood, the Bois de Bonval and the Bois de Goulot.⁸⁴

As the men of the 1st and 2nd Divisions neared their third objective, there was an unexpected break in the stormclouds and spring sunshine flooded the air. The enemy was given a sudden view of the high ground about Thélus covered with Canadian troops, some advancing steadily over the Ridge while others worked methodically at consolidating their positions. "Thus for a fleeting moment was revealed the final issue of the day: the Germans saw that the Ridge was lost, the Canadians knew that it was won."⁸⁵ Then the weather worsened.

Early in the afternoon the sleet began again, and the day closed with intermittent snow flurries driven before a gusty westerly breeze.

After a halt of ninety minutes, during which machine-guns were brought forward, the two divisions began advancing on their final objective, Brig.-Gen. Griesbach keeping his 3rd and 4th Battalions forward, and the 6th Brigade employing the 27th Battalion and a company of the 29th. As we have seen, the Brown Line covered the German Second Position on the eastern slope of the Ridge, and its generally south-easterly direction meant that the 1st Division still had 3000 yards to cover on the right flank, though opposite the 13th Brigade on the left the distance tapered off to nothing. As the British brigade prepared to sweep south-eastward through the still uncaptured portion of the northerly woods, the 1st and 6th Canadian Brigades began wheeling half-left in order to attack their objectives frontally. Of the field artillery maintaining the barrage, the rear batteries were out of range; only the advanced batteries could now be utilized. By firing their barrages in successive lifts from right to left, these gave the troops on the right the additional time required to reach their part of the German wire.⁸⁶ The men of the 27th Battalion made sure of receiving due credit for the captured Germans they sent to the rear by displaying their unit designation in green paint on the backs of their prisoners.⁸⁷

Since it had been foreseen that the artillery fire would not have sufficiently reduced the wire on the right, each forward company of the 1st and 3rd Battalions had been issued 24 pairs of wire-cutters, and a number of wire-breakers to be attached to rifles. By this means the men of the 1st Brigade were able to get through both belts of wire without losing the barrage. Beyond the crest they had an excellent view of the Douai plain, and from above Farbus Wood the Brigade's machine-gunners effectively engaged enemy transport on the Willerval-Vimy road. Moving rapidly down the reverse slope the Canadians overran the German batteries, from which the crews had hastily withdrawn. Patrols, crossing the enemy's Second Line trench, set up observation posts on the far edge of the wood. At mid-afternoon Griesbach was called on to throw back his right flank so as to maintain contact with the 51st Division, whose attack at the left of the Third Army front had only partly succeeded.

Farther north the 6th Brigade's final attack was resisted by the enemy in the Bois de la Ville both with machine-guns and with field guns firing point-blank. But the attackers knocked out the machine-guns with rifle grenades, and a downhill bayonet charge by troops of both battalions overran the German gun-pits and trenches.⁸⁸ Among the 250 captured were the commander of the 3rd Bavarian Reserve Regiment and his staff. Meanwhile the 13th British Brigade had cleared the Bois du Goulot from north to south. Its capture of nine guns and howitzers brought to a total of 31 the number of pieces taken by the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions in the day's fighting.

Earlier in the afternoon, at 2:40, as soon as the capture of the Brown Line seemed assured, General Byng had telephoned the First Army pointing out the possibility of using a cavalry regiment to exploit the success of his two right-

hand divisions.⁸⁹ Employment of the 1st Cavalry Division to push forward and secure important rail and canal crossings in the Douai plain had been included in an appreciation issued by General Horne twelve days before the battle.⁹⁰ Yet in spite of the C.-in-C.'s known predilection for cavalry operations the emphasis had been upon treating Vimy Ridge as a limited objective, and the rigid timetable required for effectively coordinating artillery and infantry in the attack had resulted in the exclusion from the Canadian Corps' scheme and the First Army's artillery plan of any participation by the cavalry.⁹¹ On 5 April an order placing the 1st Cavalry Division under General Horne was cancelled,⁹² so that on the afternoon of the battle G.H.Q.'s permission had to be obtained before complying with General Byng's request.⁹³ A reply was slow in coming; and in any event opportunity had gone by, for (as the British Official Historian points out) "Only by immediate exploitation of the situation on the ridge at 7:15 a.m. could such action on the part of the cavalry have been brought within the realms of possibility".⁹⁴ In the late afternoon the 9th Cavalry Brigade was placed at the disposal of the First Army, with one squadron being detailed to reinforce the Canadian Light Horse, which had already seen action.⁹⁵

Shortly after two o'clock the Corps Commander had ordered a Canadian squadron to "push on to Willerval". At 4:20 p.m. two mounted patrols, totalling some twenty men, set out from Farbus for Willerval, a scant mile to the east. One patrol captured ten Germans in the village, but was in turn engaged by a machine-gun and lost half its men and horses; the other was all but wiped out by rifle fire. The main body of the squadron was shelled and half its horses were killed.⁹⁶ Nevertheless the action, though costly and unsuccessful, was not without effect on the enemy: German reports that "a strong force of English cavalry had broken through into Willerval" led to orders being issued for a three-battalion counterattack on the village.⁹⁷ Scarcely had the remnants of the Canadian Light Horse patrols returned, when observers on the Ridge reported "enemy advancing in three waves" towards Farbus.⁹⁸ The threatened counter-attacks, however, failed to develop.*

With the capture of the Brown Line the three divisions on the Canadian Corps right had taken their objectives on schedule. It is time now to turn back to zero hour and see what had been happening in the 4th Division's sector on the Corps left.

The Fight for Hill 145, 9-10 April

Hill 145, the 4th Division's principal objective, was the highest and most important feature of the whole of Vimy Ridge. As long as it remained in German hands, enemy watchers could observe all movement in the valley of the Souchez

* These were troops of three reserve battalions rushed in from Lille to reinforce the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division and given orders to recapture the southern half of Hill 135 while the 79th Reserve Division counter-attacked from the north. But, according to German sources, regimental commanders unaware of these instructions, held the new arrivals to fill gaps in their defences.⁹⁹

and its southern offshoot, Zouave Valley, which ran behind the 4th Division's front. Once taken, however, Hill 145 would afford its captors a commanding view of the German rearward defences in the Douai plain and on the Ridge itself. It was thus a valuable prize, though the task of attaining it was formidable.

As might be expected, the defences on Hill 145 were particularly strong. The German First Line here consisted of two trenches; the rounded summit of the hill itself was ringed with two more. Though these had suffered severely from the preliminary bombardment, the garrison had comparative immunity in deep mine workings; and on the reverse slope a system of deep dug-outs (the *Hangstellung*) housed the reserve companies. Major-General Watson hoped to overrun the forward slope position by surprise, and by means of artillery and machine-gun barrages to stop any counter-attacks from the *Hangstellung* or from Givenchy during consolidation. But under the enemy's scrutiny surprise was more difficult to achieve here than anywhere else on the Vimy front. The assembly trenches, for instance, had to be dug well forward in order to shorten the distance of the assault; yet any activity in Zouave Valley invited a heavy barrage. Fortunately the enemy was more interested in concealing certain offensive intentions of his own. It was learned later that the 16th Bavarian Division had planned an attack to capture part of the 4th Canadian Division's front-line trenches, with a view to gaining complete command of Zouave Valley. But the operation was based on the use of gas shell, and a persistently unfavourable wind as well as other adverse factors had forced its postponement.¹⁰⁰ With less enemy interference therefore than was expected six subways leading from communication trenches eight to ten feet deep were tunnelled into the eastern slopes of Zouave Valley. Through them troops could reach assembly trenches within 150 yards of the German front line.¹⁰¹

General Watson assaulted with the 11th Brigade, commanded by Brig.-Gen. V. W. Odium, on the right, directed against Hill 145; on the left the 12th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. J. H. MacBrien) was to seize its sector of the German front-line position and cover the northern flank. Each brigade was strengthened by the addition of a battalion of the 10th Brigade (respectively the 47th and 46th Battalions); and the 11th Brigade also had in reserve the 85th Battalion, which had arrived in France two months earlier to replace the 12th Brigade's 73rd Battalion (see above, p. 225).

The 11th Brigade's attack was initially successful on its right, the 102nd Battalion seizing its half of the forward slope and the 54th passing through to consolidate on the summit. Farther north, however, things did not go so well. A portion of German trench had been left undestroyed by the heavy artillery at the request of the commanding officer of the left assaulting battalion (the 87th), who hoped to put it to good use when captured.¹⁰² From this position machine-gun fire cut down half the 87th's leading wave and pinned the right of the supporting 75th Battalion to their assembly trenches. Those who could pressed on, though harassed in flank and rear by machine-gun fire from the uncaptured sector, and from Germans who emerged from mine shafts and dugouts after the attacking wave had passed. Then came murderous fire from the second trench, whose

garrison had been given ample time to man their positions. The entire left wing of the 11th Brigade's attack broke down, and the 54th Battalion, its open flank under counter-attack, was forced to withdraw. Thus for a time the Brigade was left with only the 102nd Battalion on its objective, the south-western slope of the hill. The presence of this unit prevented any artillery bombardment of the German-occupied trench; but at one o'clock bombing parties of the 87th Battalion, supported by Stokes mortars and machine-guns, successfully attacked the troublesome position. Before dark, two companies of the 85th Battalion overran the two remaining trenches on the west side of the summit, silencing the harrying enemy fire from the hill.¹⁰³

An attempted German counter-attack had as little success as the one which had failed to materialize farther south. That morning von Falkenhausen, commander of the Sixth Army, not realizing the extent of the Canadian Corps' success, was still regarding his reserve divisions primarily as a relief, to be kept intact for employment in a long drawn-out defensive battle, and not to be used as a counter-attack force. Accordingly, he first directed resting battalions of the forward divisions to advance to the battle area and mount local counter-attacks.¹⁰⁴ At 6:00 p.m. a reserve battalion of the 16th Bavarian Infantry Division was ordered to regain the northern slope of Hill 145. It was midnight before the troops reached the Pimple, whence the attack was to be launched. In the darkness many of the men lost their way, some abandoning their short field boots in the mud; those who eventually got close to the objective were dispersed by the fire of a single machine-gun. A pre-dawn attempt to reoccupy the first trench east of the summit, which the Germans had abandoned during the night, was forestalled by parties of the 75th and 85th Battalions.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile on the division's left the 12th Brigade after an encouraging start had also run into difficulty. Three battalions made the assault—from right to left the 38th, 72nd and 73rd. Two mines exploded at zero hour killed many of the garrison opposite the 73rd Battalion; the survivors fled as the Canadians approached. All three battalions quickly took the German first trench, and here the 73rd consolidated to form a firm left flank. The other two units had to fight hard for the second trench, the 72nd Battalion successfully bombing it from a flank when frontal assault failed. The ground which the 38th had to cross was so badly cut up that the men could not keep up with the barrage; some of the wounded fell into water-filled shell-holes and were drowned. Emerging from dug-outs at unexpected places the defenders put up a spirited resistance, though the Germans too received their share of surprises. Some 75 occupants of a dug-out just over the crest were confronted by an officer of the 38th Battalion, Captain T. W. MacDowell, who called on them to surrender, tricking them into supposing that he had a large force behind him. They were marched out in groups of twelve, only to find that the "large force" consisted of two men! For this intrepid act, which materially aided his battalion to gain its objective, MacDowell (who had already won the D.S.O. at the Somme) was awarded the V.C.¹⁰⁶

Up to this point an effective smoke barrage had combined with the snowstorm to conceal the operations on the left flank from observers on the Pimple. But now the smoke began to clear and soon heavy machine-gun fire from the German-held feature prevented further progress. The survivors of the 72nd Battalion, which had been stricken with casualties, could do no more than gain a footing in the third German trench. The initial setback to the 11th Brigade was adversely affecting the movement of the 12th's right-hand battalion. Passing through the 38th Battalion according to plan, the 78th Battalion had come under fire from Hill 145 and had lost its supporting barrage. About 8:30 am. as the few remaining men of the leading companies neared their final objective just outside Givenchy, they were counter-attacked and overpowered by a force of some 200 Germans. But the enemy's attempt to regain his second trench was beaten off with Lewis gun and rifle fire. Late that afternoon, as the 85th Battalion mounted its attack for the 11th Brigade (above, p. 260), two companies of the 46th, which was on loan from the 10th Brigade, came forward to capture a number of craters beyond the disputed second trench. Night fell with the main objectives still untaken.¹⁰⁷

Since the 12th Brigade could not complete its task until the whole of Hill 145 was secure, at 6:00 p.m. on 9 April General Watson called upon the 10th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. E. Hilliam), which had been standing by in readiness to assault the Pimple, to take the exhausted 11th Brigade's final Red Line objective. By 3:15 next afternoon Brig.-Gen. Hilliam's two uncommitted battalions were in position on Hill 145. The barrage which had been fired on the *Hangstellung* the day before was repeated, and as it lifted the assaulting waves charged down the eastern slope, the 44th Battalion on the right and the 50th on the left. The action was a brilliant success, though the 50th Battalion suffered almost 240 casualties.[#] A quick mopping up of the enemy dug-outs yielded 150 unwounded prisoners and a number of machine-guns. Working forward through the northern end of the Bois de la Folie, parties of the 44th Battalion linked up with the 3rd Division's left flank.¹⁰⁸ On the left all forward battalions of the 12th Brigade improved their positions next morning as German artillery fire dwindled, and at mid-afternoon, when Hill 145 was completely in Canadian hands, they occupied with relative ease the Brigade's final objective, the "Givenchy Line".¹⁰⁹

So ended the "Southern" operation. The whole of the main part of Vimy Ridge on a length of 7000 yards and to a maximum depth of 4000 yards had been captured. On the right the 51st British Division had advanced to its objectives and was in touch with the Canadian flank at the Brown Line. Canadian casualties in the two days' fighting totalled 7707, of which 2967 were fatal. To these must be added the 13th British Brigade's losses on Easter Monday - approximately 380. Up to midnight on 9-10 April, about 3400 German prisoners had been counted; and more were still coming in.¹¹⁰

[#] (Transcribers note: the following text was not in the original Nicholson text but was added to PDF Version by DND, at this location as well as in the Index and List of V.C.'s) Private J. G. Pattison, of the 50th, earned the V.C. by rushing forward under heavy fire to wipe out the crew of a machine gun that was holding up the advance.

The Pimple, 12 April

There remained to be captured the northern tip of Vimy Ridge and the Lorette spur west of the Souchez River. The most important objective was the Pimple, with its complete command of the Souchez defile. This German stronghold had withstood many Allied raids. Its surface was a maze of trenches, and below ground German engineers had constructed deep dug-outs and tunnels protected in every way that their ingenuity could devise. Although it was originally intended that the capture of the Pimple would not be a Canadian task (above, p. 245), revised plans by the First Army divided the “Northern” operation between the Canadian Corps and the 1st British Corps.

The attack was to be made within 24 hours of the launching of the “Southern” operation.¹¹¹ While the 24th Division (1st British Corps) assaulted the Bois en Hache on the eastern slopes of the Lorette ridge, the 4th Canadian Division would send the 10th Brigade against the Pimple, provided the general situation on the afternoon of 9 April had not required its employment elsewhere.¹¹² But, as we have seen, General Watson had been forced to commit the 10th Brigade in reducing Hill 145, and time was needed for the participating units to recover, however desirable it would have been to strike while the enemy was still disorganized. The northern attack was therefore postponed 48 hours. In the meantime General von Falkenhausen had belatedly ordered regiments of his “counterattack” divisions to take over the new German front line.* The Canadian attack was to fall mainly on a fresh battalion of the 5th Guard Grenadier Regiment, hastily entrained from the north and thrust into position in front of Givenchy to stem the attack that was bound to come.¹¹⁴

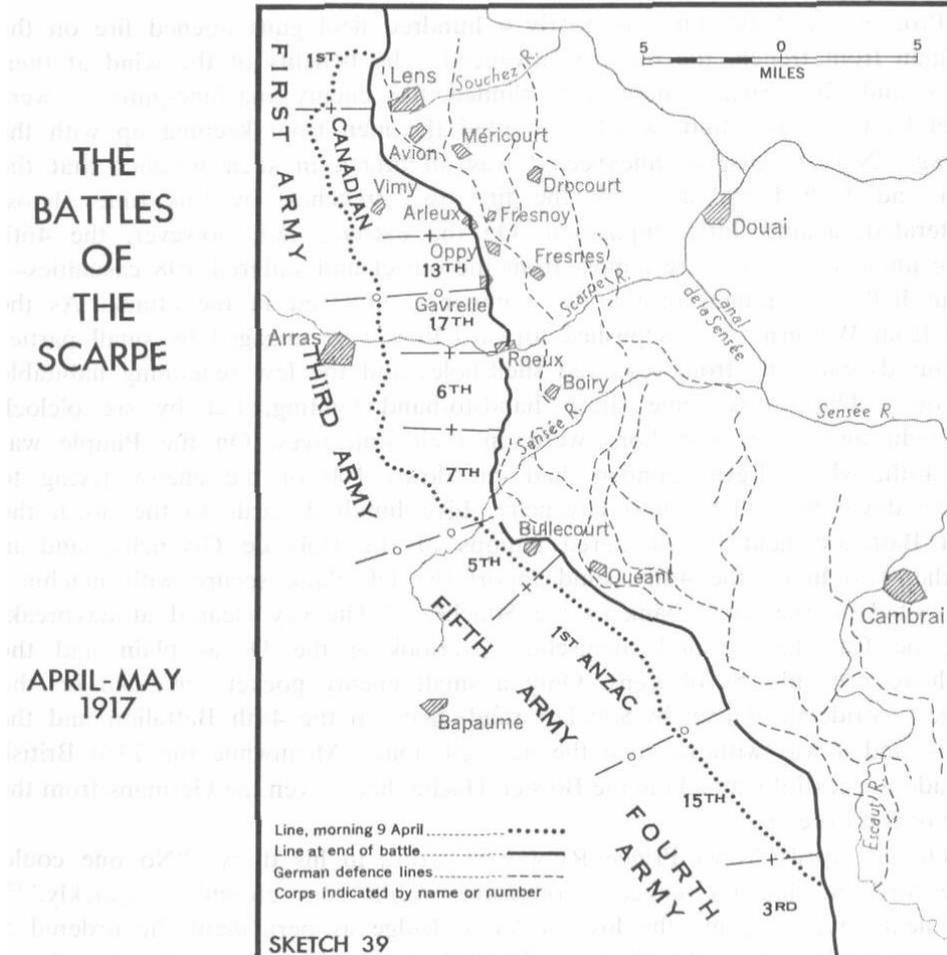
On 11 April the weather deteriorated rapidly, and in the early hours of the 12th, as the Canadians moved forward from their rest area behind Zouave Valley, a strong westerly gale was raging, driving sleet and snow towards the enemy’s positions. Three battalions divided the thousand-yard frontage of the 10th Brigade’s attack - from right to left the 44th, 50th and 46th Battalions.¹¹⁵ There was strong artillery support from No. 4 (Double) Heavy Artillery Group R.A., five siege batteries of the 1st Corps Artillery, and a “Reserve Divisional Artillery” (which, as the Lahore Divisional Artillery, had more than once supported Canadian operations, and was now taking the place of the as yet non-existent 4th Canadian divisional artillery).¹¹⁶ On the eve of the attack, heavy and medium howitzers had engaged the enemy’s communication trenches and rear areas behind Givenchy, and a special company of the Royal Engineers had fired more than forty gas drums[†] into Givenchy itself, killing a number of Germans in the cellars.¹¹⁸

* Holding the sector between Méricourt and Oppy were, from north to south, the 16th Bavarian Infantry Division with two battalions from the 4th Infantry Division in the line, the 111th Infantry Division and the 17th Infantry Division.¹¹³

† This was the first use in a Canadian operation of Livens projectors, capable of firing a 50-lb drum containing 30 lbs of mustard gas distances of from 500 to 1300 yards.¹¹⁷

Promptly at 5:00 a.m., as nearly a hundred field guns opened fire on the German front trench, the infantry advanced. The benefits of the wind at their backs and the driving snow that blinded the enemy machine-gunners were offset by the heavy mud, which prevented the men from keeping up with the barrage. Nevertheless, so unexpected was an attack in such weather that the 44th and 50th Battalions took the first two trenches, by this time almost obliterated, against little opposition. On the extreme left, however, the 46th came under heavy rifle fire almost from the outset and suffered 108 casualties - about half the strength of the two companies involved in the attack. As the men from Western Canada pushed forward they were engaged by small parties of Guards emerging from scattered shell-holes and the few remaining habitable dug-outs. There was some sharp hand-to-hand fighting, but by six o'clock the right and centre battalions were on their objectives. On the Pimple was the 44th, whose Lewis gunners had cut down 100 of the enemy trying to escape down the hillside into Givenchy. Five hundred yards to the north the 50th Battalion held the shattered stumps of the Bois de Givenchy, and in another two hours the 46th could report the left flank secure with machine guns sited on the south bank of the Souchez.¹¹⁹ The sky cleared at daybreak, and the Canadians found themselves overlooking the Douai plain and the south-western suburbs of Lens. Only a small enemy pocket remained on the Ridge - astride the Givenchy-Souchez road, between the 44th Battalion and the 73rd - and it was withdrawn in the next 24 hours. Meanwhile the 73rd British Brigade, successfully attacking the Bois en Hache, had driven the Germans from the edge of the Lorette spur.

On 10 April Crown Prince Rupprecht wrote in his diary: "No one could have foreseen that the expected offensive would gain ground so quickly."¹²⁰ The next day, accepting the loss of Vimy Ridge as permanent, he ordered a general withdrawal to the German Third Position, which opposite the Canadians followed the Oppy-Méricourt line and the Avion Switch, encircling the western suburbs of Lens. All villages in the vicinity were completely cleared of civilians, and except for leaving light rearguards and enough guns to simulate normal activity the Germans completed the move on the night of 12-13 April. This was far enough into the level plain to deprive the Canadians of effective observation from the Ridge, and it meant that with respect to terrain defender and attacker would meet on equal terms. The new trenches though not deep were well protected by wire and manned with fresh troops. It would be suicidal to attack such a strong position without intensive artillery preparation; and this would have to wait until the almost obliterated roads had been rebuilt to allow heavy guns and ammunition to come forward. Even with 5000 men working on them, these would not be passable for several days. At the most, the British and Canadian forces could only maintain contact with the retiring enemy; this they did by vigorous patrolling and limited advances, firmly consolidating the additional ground gained.¹²¹



An advance of the Canadian Corps to the line of the Lens-Arras railway, originally ordered by the First Army on the 10th and postponed so as to coincide with attacks by flanking corps, was carried out by the 1st and 2nd Divisions on the evening of the 13th. Similar progress was made on either flank: the 3rd Division reached the line Vimy-Petit Vimy-La Chaudière; the 4th occupied Givenchy; and units of the 1st Corps, on the left of the Canadian Corps, and the 17th on the right, reached respectively Angres and Bailleul. Next day the First Army advanced another thousand yards on a nine-mile front, opposed only by small rearguards. In his retreat (so much more precipitate than his earlier deliberate withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line) the enemy abandoned many guns and much ammunition. During the winter Canadian gunners had been trained in the use of German guns, and now, unable to get their own artillery forward, they were prompt to put these enemy weapons to good effect. By the evening of 14 April nine captured pieces, ranging from 8-inch howitzers to 77-mm. guns, were in action against enemy trenches and batteries, and bombarding the Germans in

Avion and Méricourt with their own gas shells.¹²² That same afternoon, as patrols confirmed the enemy's occupation of his new positions, General Byng ordered the Canadian Corps to establish a main line of resistance running through Willerval and La Chaudière to the Bois de l'Hirondelle (on the south bank of the Souchez).¹²³ This line the Corps was to hold virtually unchanged until the autumn of 1918, when the final Allied advance of the war began.

With the completion of this limited exploitation the Battle of Vimy Ridge ended. In six days the Canadian Corps had advanced some 4500 yards and seized 54 guns, 104 trench mortars and 124 machine-guns. It had inflicted severe losses on the enemy, capturing more than 4000 prisoners. The victory had been gained at a cost in Canadian casualties (for the period 9-14 April) of 10,602 all ranks - 3598 of them fatal. From His Majesty King George V came a message of congratulations to Sir Douglas Haig: "Canada will be proud that the taking of the coveted Vimy Ridge has fallen to the lot of her troops."

The French press, warmly praising the Canadian achievement, called the Ridge an Easter gift from Canada to France. Just as the planners of the operation had studied the lessons of Verdun, so members of the French General Staff revisited the familiar battlefield on the Ridge to review in detail the whole Canadian action.

The First Battle of the Scarpe, 9-14 April

The Third Army's share in the Arras offensive-the First Battle of the Scarpe - had produced territorial gains about equal to those of the First Army. Easter Monday had seen advances of two to six thousand yards, the Blue Line being reached at a number of points, and that evening General Allenby reported the capture of 5600 prisoners and 36 guns.¹²⁴ The enemy had been even more taken by surprise than at Vimy Ridge - as late as 7 April von Falkenhausen had expressed the opinion that any British attack in the German Sixth Army's sector would not take place before the big French offensive in Champagne, which French prisoners revealed was set for about 16 April.¹²⁵ The day's tidings spoiled Ludendorff's 52nd birthday. "I had looked forward to the expected offensive with confidence", he wrote, "and was now deeply depressed."¹²⁶

On the 10th German resistance began to stiffen, and the momentum of the attack correspondingly decreased. This was due in part to the arrival of some of the enemy's reserve battalions, and the fact that the attackers had outrun their initial artillery support. Nevertheless on both sides of the Scarpe the British made further advances of up to a mile, adding considerably to their bag of prisoners.¹²⁷

The third and critical day of the battle was marked by a futile attempt of General Gough's Fifth Army, on the Third Army's right flank, to break through the Hindenburg Line just west of its junction with the newly constructed Drocourt-Quéant Switch (or *Wotan Stellung*). In planning such a thrust to assist General Allenby's offensive, Field-Marshal Haig had given orders for the 4th Cavalry Division to be held in readiness to exploit north-eastward so as to link up

with the main body of the Cavalry Corps, which was to pass through the Third Army and advance on Cambrai.¹²⁸ The attack was made at Bullecourt (eight miles south-east of Arras) by the 4th Australian Division and proved a fiasco. Tanks, called upon to replace the barrage and to smash through broad belts of wire which inadequate artillery preparation had left ungapped, failed in their task; and although the infantry heroically gained a footing in the Hindenburg trenches, they were forced to withdraw, one brigade being almost completely destroyed.¹²⁹ The cavalry, committed by the Army Commander on the basis of false reports of the infantry's progress, were halted near the start by artillery fire.¹³⁰

In the Third Army's sector, despite General Allenby's assurance to his troops that they were "now pursuing a defeated enemy", the only gain on the 11th was the capture of Monchy-le-Preux, just north of the Arras-Cambrai road. The 3rd Cavalry Division had an important share in clearing and holding the village, but its intended role of exploitation did not materialize, and that evening General Allenby, recognizing the obvious, withdrew his three cavalry divisions from the battle. Little progress was made during the next three days, and on 15 April Haig, overruling Allenby's desire to continue the offensive, called a halt to allow time for much-needed reorganization, and particularly the restoration of communications, before launching a coordinated attack on a bigger scale. The first three days' fighting had cost the Third Army 8238 casualties-about 700 less than those suffered by the Canadian Corps over the same period. The Army had captured more than 7000 prisoners and 112 guns.¹³¹

On the German side 11 April saw the removal of the Sixth Army's Chief of Staff as responsible for "this heavy defeat"¹³² His place was taken by Colonel von Lossberg, who at once set about organizing the defence of a new position about six miles east of Arras and the same distance in front of the Drocourt-Quéant Line.¹³³ South of the Scarpe, the new line replaced the fallen Monchy Switch as a continuation of the Méricourt-Oppy line. To ensure that the new position would be strongly held, Prince Rupprecht's headquarters arranged for fortnightly reliefs for the ten or eleven divisions in the line through exchanges with divisions in quiet sectors of the Army Group.¹³⁴

Vimy Ridge in Retrospect

Although the Canadian advance at Vimy and the Third Army's success in front of Arras did not bring the Allies the expected strategic returns, a great tactical victory had been won. The operations had resulted in the capture of more ground, more prisoners and more guns than any previous British offensive on the Western Front. The effective use of artillery in unprecedented strength with adequate supplies of ammunition, coupled with the gaining of tactical surprise, had paid good dividends. The Canadian achievement in taking with relatively light losses what the Germans considered an impregnable position was justly ascribed by the Commander of the First Army to "soundness of plan, thoroughness of preparation, dash and determination in execution, and devotion

to duty on the part of all concerned".¹³⁵

The Vimy operation was and remains a classic example of the deliberate attack against strong prepared positions. It was further notable in that the assaulting forces were successful in holding what they had gained, repelling counter attacks which the enemy had to make in areas dominated by the Canadian guns. In previous operations objectives had been taken at great cost, only to be lost again through failure to consolidate efficiently against the enemy's counter blows. Vimy set a new standard. At last an Allied formation had proved its ability to pass "readily from swift and sustained assault to aggressive and concerted defence".¹³⁶

For Canada the battle had great national significance. It demonstrated how powerful and efficient a weapon the Canadian Corps had become. For the first time the four Canadian divisions had attacked together. Their battalions were manned by soldiers from every part of Canada fighting shoulder to shoulder. No other operation of the First World War was to be remembered by Canadians with such pride - the pride of achievement through united and dedicated effort. Canada's most impressive tribute to her sons is on the Ridge itself. There, on Hill 145, in ground presented in 1922 by France to the people of Canada, is the greatest of Canada's European war memorials. Two majestic white pylons, representing Canada and France, soar high above the summit for which so many Allied soldiers fought and died. Engraved on the walls of the base are the names of more than 10,000 Canadians who gave their lives in the First World War and who have no known grave. The main inscription on the Memorial reads: "To the valour of their countrymen in the Great War and in memory of their sixty thousand dead this monument is raised by the people of Canada."

Yet without taking from the victors rightful credit for their success, one must charge the enemy's loss of Vimy Ridge and so much important ground to the south in large measure to his own inefficiency. Great efforts were made by the German High Command to determine the causes of the defeat. The Sixth Army Commander and his staff were blamed for having misjudged the strength and the frontage of the expected attack, and having failed to take proper measures to meet it. It was found that the opposition offered by the German artillery had been slow and inadequate during the preparatory stages, and heavy batteries available in Douai had not been brought into action against the guns supporting the attack. The resulting breakdown in communications and supply had caused local shortages of shells and machine-gun ammunition.¹³⁷ Above all the Sixth Army, ignoring the requirement of Ludendorff's new doctrine to assemble its counter-attack divisions close behind the Second Line, had held them fifteen or more miles from the battlefield to avoid their being shelled.¹³⁸ In an appreciation shortly before the battle von Falkenhausen had expressed confidence that his front divisions would not be overrun, planning if necessary to bring forward his counter-attack formations in relief "on the evening of the second day of the battle".¹³⁹

Both Ludendorff and Crown Prince Rupprecht (who were under no delusions as to the Allied intentions) had urged that these reserves be moved close to the battlefield,¹⁴⁰ but neither had seen fit to give the Army Commander a firm order. Even after the battle opened, von Falkenhausen, as we have noted, was in no hurry to commit these divisions, two of which, held near Douai, might have reached Vimy Ridge by rail in the first four hours. He thus failed to take advantage of the opportunity presented him by the inflexible time-table which prescribed that the Canadians should take six hours to gain their final objectives.

A close scrutiny of the evidence however shows that to some extent at least the Sixth Army was criticized beyond its just deserts. One week after being appointed Chief of Staff of that Army, in an outspoken and well founded official report Colonel von Lossberg roundly blamed the Army Group for the initial fiasco at Vimy.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, the Army Commander was not long in following his former Chief of Staff. Within a fortnight he was appointed Governor General of Belgium, a post in which, says Ludendorff, he “retained our complete confidence”.¹⁴² His successor was General Otto von Below, formerly commanding an Army Group in Macedonia.¹⁴³