

CHAPTER XIV

THROUGH THE HINDENBURG LINE TO CAMBRAI

(See Maps 12 and 13 and Sketches 50 and 51)

The Expanding Allied Offensive

On 21 August Sir Douglas Haig received a visit from the British Minister of Munitions, Mr. Winston Churchill, who assured him that the supply of gas, large-calibre shells, and tanks for the armies in France was being speeded up considerably. This was gratifying news, but when Churchill reported that the General Staff in London saw the following July as being the decisive period of the war, the C.-in-C. told him forcibly that every effort should be made to get a decision in the present autumn. The Germans were being outlasted and beaten. "If we allow the enemy a period of quiet", declared Sir Douglas, "he will recover, and the 'wearing out' process must be recommenced."¹

The success of the Amiens offensive had convinced Haig that the time had come for an all-out effort against the enemy-who was "feeling that this is the beginning of the end for him".² In the C.-in-C.'s opinion bold action should replace unenterprising caution. He told his army commanders to emphasize to their subordinates the changed conditions under which they must now fight. It was no longer necessary "to advance step by step in regular lines as in the 1916-17 battles. All Units must go straight for their objectives, while Reserves should be pushed in where we are gaining ground."³

The first move in the Allied scheme to extend the stalled Amiens offensive on both wings was made on the southern flank on 20 August, when the French Tenth Army of General Mangin struck northward from the Aisne between Compiègne and Soissons with twelve divisions. An advance of nearly five miles in two days carried the assault to the river Oise between Noyon and Chauny. On the 21st the French Third Army (General Humbert) on Mangin's left resumed operations with some success, while on the same day north of Albert the British Third Army initiated Sir Douglas Haig's share in the renewed offensive. General Byng's forces struck a telling blow on the 23rd, when a two-mile advance towards Bapaume netted 5000 prisoners from General Otto von Below's badly shaken Seventeenth Army. This achievement was matched on Haig's right flank, where the Fourth Army had taken up the battle astride the Somme and the 1st Australian Division had shattered two German divisions on the southern bank.⁴ The next two days saw some slight progress on both the Third and Fourth

Armies' fronts, and on 26 August an expansion of the battle into the First Army's sector brought the Canadian Corps once more into action. (See Sketch 51 on p. 455.)

The period of rest and refitting that would normally follow participation in such extensive operations as the Amiens battle was denied the Canadians; for in these last hundred days of the war each major offensive so rapidly succeeded its predecessor that unprecedented demands had to be made on the stamina of the forces employed. Back under General Horne's command in its former position east of Arras, the Canadian Corps was confronted by a series of formidable defence positions which the enemy was holding in strength. Immediately in front of the Canadians, about Monchy-le-Preux, were the old British trenches lost in the German offensive of March 1918, and to the east of these lay the enemy's former front line. This was backed up, two miles east of Monchy, by the so-called Fresnes-Rouvroy line, which was actually an extension south of the Scarpe of the original line joining Rouvroy (south-east of Lens) to Fresnes (north-east of Arras). Another mile to the east the approaches to Cambrai were blocked by the strongest position of all—the Drocourt-Quéant line (the southernmost portion of the *Wotan I-Stellung*), which, extending northward from the Hindenburg Line (*Siegfried-Stellung*) at Quéant, had been constructed by the Germans to contain any Allied advance into the Douai plain. Still farther east, crossed by the main road at Marquion, was the unfinished Canal du Nord, connecting the Somme Canal with the Sensée Canal. Though not yet extensively fortified it formed in conjunction with the Sensée marshes a major obstacle.

On 22 August General Currie outlined to his divisional commanders his plans for an attack eastward astride the Arras-Cambrai road. The Canadian Corps had been given the task of forcing the Drocourt-Quéant line south of the Scarpe and advancing to the line of the Canal du Nord. Having thus broken the hinge of the Hindenburg system the Corps was to swing southward and sweep down behind that formidable position in order to deny the Germans opposing the Third Army a rallying ground.⁵ On Currie's right the 17th Corps, operating on the Third Army's northern flank, was under orders to cooperate with the Canadian Corps, attacking south-eastward along both sides of the Hindenburg position.⁶

General Currie's was an important and a difficult assignment. The enemy's main defence positions, supplemented by various subsidiary switches and strong points, were among the strongest on the Western Front. The ground was pocked with the scars of 1917 and early 1918, and in the litter of old trenches and fortifications German engineers had found ready-made positions which they had considerably strengthened. Furthermore, topography was on the side of the Germans. The battle area spread over the north-eastern slopes of the Artois Hills, whose summits about Monchy were over three hundred feet above the valley-bottoms of the Scarpe and the Sensée. The latter river, flowing generally eastward, together with its tributaries had dissected the hills into numerous deep valleys. The intervening ridges and high points, often mutually supporting, the enemy had fortified with a skill that demonstrated his mastery in military engineering.

The Germans' general defensive plan at this time was to give up ground in the region of the Lys and Ypres salients and to fight a determined rearguard action in the Somme area. Ludendorff overruled the views of those staffs (in particular Crown Prince Wilhelm's) that favoured a major voluntary retirement into the Hindenburg and adjoining defence systems.⁷ His purpose was by means of a gradual fighting withdrawal to wear out the Allied forces before they reached the Hindenburg position, thus gaining time to reorganize behind that formidable defence line. The defences about the Arras-Cambrai road in the Monchy area would form the pivot of any German retirement south of the Scarpe, while the security of Prince Rupprecht's northern armies also depended on retaining them.

These positions became the initial Canadian objective. With the enemy expecting attack, except for the actual hour of assault, surprise was clearly impossible. It would be a case of launching successive frontal, grinding assaults against well-established lines manned by tenacious, alert troops.

The Battle of the Scarpe 1918, 26-30 August

The front taken over by the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions on reaching the Arras sector extended from Neuville-Vitasse north to the River Scarpe, a mile west of Fampoux. Three high features, all held by the Germans, dominated the landscape to the east. Three miles away Monchy-le-Preux, so fiercely fought for in previous encounters, stood on its own hill north of the Cambrai road; while ranged like twin bastions in front of it were the long ridge of Orange Hill reaching up towards the Scarpe and Chapel Hill lying astride the highway.

The 1st and 4th Canadian Divisions did not arrive from the Fourth Army until 25 and 28 August respectively, and in the meantime the 51st (Highland) Division formed part of the Canadian Corps, providing flank protection north of the river. General Currie's plan for the first phase of the offensive called for simultaneous attacks by the British division on the left, the 3rd Canadian Division between the Scarpe and the Cambrai road, and the 2nd on the right covering as far as the inter-army boundary, which ran eastward from Neuville-Vitasse. They were to secure a north-south line just west of Monchy-le-Preux, exploiting thence as far east as possible. The 51st Division, given no definite objective, was to capitalize on any success south of the Scarpe by pushing troops along the northern bank. For gun support General Currie could call on fourteen brigades of field* and nine of heavy artillery. Nine tanks from the 3rd Tank Brigade were allotted to each of the Canadian divisions, but as a result of the losses to armour at Amiens these were not to be used ahead of the infantry unless definite resistance demanded their employment.⁹ The boundary between the Canadian divisions was the Cambrai road almost as far as Chapel Hill, where it swung eastward to place the hill in the 2nd Division's sector of operations.

* These included in addition to the artillery of the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions that of the 15th, 16th and 39th divisions and three army brigades.⁸

Monday, 26 August, was fixed as the day of assault, and zero hour, originally at dawn, was advanced to 3:00 a.m. in hope of confusing the enemy.¹⁰

There were preliminary operations along the Corps southern boundary in conjunction with advances made by the Third Army. In a daylight raid on 23 August, the 31st Battalion captured a sugar factory south of Neuville- Vitasse, and on the following evening gained partial control of the town, which was still in German hands.¹¹ German sources reveal that Neuville- Vitasse was evacuated early on the morning of 24 August. The decision not to undertake a protracted defence was reported to have been taken by the German 39th Infantry Division because “the commitment of the Canadians, the best British troops, had been recognized”.¹² Bright, moonlit nights preceding 26 August and a favourable weather forecast raised meteorological hopes which proved vain. Heavy showers fell at intervals throughout the night of the 25th-26th, and General Currie noted in his diary that “it was none too bright at zero hour.”¹³

In order to meet an Allied attack in the event of the Somme operations being extended northward the Germans had concentrated three divisions astride the Scarpe. Facing the Canadian Corps on 26 August were the 48th Reserve Division north of the Scarpe, the 214th Division from the river to south of the Arras-Cambrai road, and the 39th Division in the Neuville- Vitasse sector. They were ready for action. Their artillery was arranged to counter an assault and their resting battalions had been moved forward to their battle positions.¹⁴

The attack started on time. The opening artillery and machine-gun barrage was reported as admirable. The 2nd Division attacking south of the road made fine progress. At first the Germans, surprised by the early hour of the assault, offered little resistance, so that the advancing infantry had no need to call on the tanks for help. While the 6th Brigade, under Brig.-Gen. A. H. Bell, pushed out a defensive flank on the Corps right and mopped up the Neuville-Vitasse area, the 4th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. R. Rennie) making the main assault, drove rapidly through the enemy's outpost zone, encountering very little resistance. Shortly after 6:00 a.m. the 20th Battalion captured Chapel Hill, 2500 yards west of Monchy. By this time day had broken, making it easier for the tanks to support the infantry closely. But it also allowed the enemy good observation from high ground about Monchy; and his field artillery put a number of the tanks out of action. By 7:30, the 21st Battalion was approaching the outskirts of Guémappe, where it ran into heavy fire coming from Monchy, a mile to the north.

A mid-morning shift in the forward boundary of the First and Third Armies (partly in order to aid the Fourth Army by exerting more pressure in a south-easterly direction) had repercussions on the Canadian front. The 2nd Division, hitherto attacking eastward, was ordered to shift its axis of advance to the south-east, and to capture the high ground across the Cojeul River south-east of Wancourt. General Burstall gave the task to the 6th Brigade, assigning as objective the ruins of Wancourt Tower, 1200 yards south of Guémappe. At 4:40 p.m. the 27th and 28th Battalions crossed the dry river bed and attacked the ridge, supported by an effective barrage fired by the 5th and 6th Brigades C.F.A., which had moved forward of Neuville-Vitasse.¹⁵ As the attackers topped the rise

from the Cojeul valley they were heavily hit. The crest of the ridge was thick with uncut wire and swept by machine-gun fire from outposts of the Hindenburg Line over towards the right, which the British 52nd Division, making a parallel attack on the Third Army's left flank, had not yet reached. The two battalions were forced to dig in at dusk short of their final objective; but early next morning in a silent attack they secured Egret Trench on the German forward slope, thereby gaining a good jumping-off line for operations on the 27th.¹⁶

Meanwhile on the Corps left, where the approach of the 3rd Division was dominated by Orange Hill, rising sixty feet above the surrounding countryside, General Lipsett's plan was to turn the position by an attack along the southern bank of the Scarpe. The 8th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. D. C. Draper), employing in the assault three battalions of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, found the German opposition lighter than expected. The 4th C.M.R. advanced along the river bank and outflanked Orange Hill. It was followed by the 2nd C.M.R., which, turning sharply to its right, took the hill from the north. The 1st and 5th C.M.R. then passed through to left and right respectively, to attack Monchy from the north and the west; by 7:40 the village was in Canadian hands.* Shortly afterwards the 7th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. H. M. Dyer) pushed through to attack with The Royal Canadian Regiment and the P.P.C.L.I. a number of enemy-held woods east of Monchy.¹⁸ The change in the 2nd Division's axis had led to the withdrawal of the 4th Brigade south of the Arras-Cambrai road. As a temporary measure two machine-gun batteries of General Brutinel's Canadian Independent Force were dispatched down the road to cover the gap.¹⁹ The 42nd Battalion was then put in on the 20th Battalion's former front, where it evicted the enemy from its heavily-wired trenches south of Monchy.²⁰

North of the Scarpe the 51st (Highland) Division had kept pace with little difficulty, pushing its line forward to secure the chemical works north of Roeux and establish patrols on the west side of Gavrelle.²¹ By dusk the Canadian line, well inside the old German front trench system, ran from west of Pelves, on the south bank of the river, passing 1000 yards east of Monchy-le-Preux to include Guémappe and Wancourt Tower.²² Powerful counterattacks developed from the direction of the Bois du Vert and Jigsaw Wood, which the enemy was holding as outposts to his Fresnes-Rouvroy line. These were launched by two regiments of the German 35th Division, moved forward from the Drocourt-Quéant Line with orders to retake Monchy. The German effort was smashed, but it had succeeded in preventing any further Canadian advance on the 26th.²³

General Currie's orders for the next day directed both Canadian divisions to attack in two stages to break through the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line. The 51st Division would continue pushing forward along the north bank of the Scarpe. In the opening stage, the 3rd Division was to overcome the troublesome Bois du

* This quick success by the 8th Brigade was not achieved without some difficult fighting, in the course of which Lieut. C.S. Rutherford, M.C., M.M., of the 5th C.M.R. was awarded the V.C. for "most conspicuous bravery, initiative and devotion to duty". During the advance, Rutherford captured some 70 prisoners and silenced several enemy machine-guns single-handed.¹⁷

Vert and Bois du Sart and establish a line through Boiry-Notre-Dame. At the same time the 2nd Division was to secure the ground on its front lying between the Cojeul and the Sensée River, two miles beyond, and having captured the villages of Chérisy and Vis-en-Artois in the Sensée valley, advance its line a further 2000 yards to the east. The 3rd Division was given as subsequent objectives Etaing and Dury, and the 2nd the village of Cagnicourt. To achieve these final goals would involve an advance of approximately five miles through heavily defended positions. Before the offensive opened on 26 August it had been Currie's intention to assault with only one brigade a day on each divisional front, in order that divisions could remain in action for three days without relief. But the vigour of the German resistance had spoiled this plan, and the G.O.C. had to warn the 1st Canadian and 4th British Divisions that they must be prepared to relieve the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions on the evening of the 27th.²⁴

Heavy rain fell during the night of the 26th-27th, and the slippery ground added to the difficulties of assembly. It was still raining when the 9th Brigade, which had not previously been committed in the battle, attacked at 4:55 a.m. through the 42nd Battalion north of the Cambrai road. The 52nd Battalion cleared the Bois du Vert, and the 58th the Bois du Sart; but the 116th Battalion, moving through the 52nd against Boiry-Notre-Dame, was halted by the hail of machine-gun fire coming from Artillery Hill and Jigsaw Wood to the north.²⁵ The newly-arrived 35th German Infantry Division was defending the Boiry area with, from south to north, the 61st, 176th and 141st Infantry Regiments.²⁶ On the left Pelves remained untaken, and the only additional advance that day on the divisional front was on the southern flank, where the 43rd Battalion joined in the 4th Brigade's attack on Vis-en-Artois.

Owing to the late arrival of the 5th Brigade from the rear, the 2nd Division did not begin the day's operations until ten o'clock. On the left the 4th Brigade advanced along the valley of the Cojeul, paralleling the Arras-Cambrai road. The 18th Battalion, with assistance from the 43rd Battalion north of the road, occupied Vis-en-Artois without much difficulty, but ran into damaging enemy fire at the Sensée. It took persistent fighting all afternoon to gain a small bridgehead over the narrow stream.²⁷ Farther south the 5th Brigade, advancing down the western slope of Wancourt Tower Ridge, received useful aid from supporting tanks and from batteries of the 2nd Canadian Machine Gun Battalion in dealing with hostile posts. On the right the 26th Battalion was over the Sensée by noon, and shortly afterwards the 24th and 22nd Battalions, having captured Chérisy, crossed above and below the village. They met stiff resistance on the far side, and on instructions from Corps Headquarters not to attempt too much in the face of heavy opposition, General Burstall ordered the 2nd Division to make good its line along the Sensée's east bank and to secure the bridge on it the Arras-Cambrai road.²⁸ The increased German resistance encountered beyond Chérisy came from units of the 26th Reserve Division, which shortly after midday on 27 August had assumed command in the Rémy area. On its left, opposing the extreme right of the Canadian Corps, was the 21st Reserve Division.²⁹ On Burstall's right the 52nd Division had kept up by capturing

Fontaine les Croisilles east of the Sensée. North of the Scarpe, the 51st Division reported taking the commanding Greenland Hill, opposite Pelves, but the afternoon brought a counter-attack and dusk found the line still west of the height. The proposed relief of the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions was postponed, and both were ordered to continue the advance on 28 August with the object of breaching the Fresnes-Rouvroy line and capturing Cagnicourt, Dury and Etaing.³⁰

The fighting on the 28th, a day warm and bright after much rain during the night, was extremely bitter and accompanied by heavy losses. On the previous afternoon General Lipsett had reorganized his front, both to sort out units that had got mixed up in the close fighting of the 26th and 27th, and because he wanted to assault the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line in strength, with all three of his brigades attacking abreast. He placed the 8th Brigade between the Arras-Cambrai road and the Cojeul River, the 9th north-westward to the Bois du Sart, and the 7th from there to the Scarpe. He planned to smother the German machine-gun nests with an immense concentration of artillery fire—a procedure which proved highly successful.

At eleven o'clock Brig.-Gen. Ormond's 9th Brigade attacked on a 1000-yard front with four battalions* covered by all the artillery of the 3rd Division. The three leading units pierced the Fresnes-Rouvroy line between Boiry and the Cojeul River and then the 52nd and 58th Battalions swung north to secure Boiry and Artillery Hill beyond. As the division's guns turned next on the German positions opposite the 8th Brigade, the 43rd Battalion and the 5th C.M.R. stormed the high ground between the Cojeul and the Sensée known as "Seventy Ridge". They captured the ridge and Rémy Wood beyond, but could not take the village of Haucourt, just across the Sensée. In the 7th Brigade's sector Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and the 42nd Battalion drove stoutly resisting Germans of the 141st Regiment out of Jigsaw Wood, and on the extreme left flank the 49th Battalion occupied Pelves, which the enemy had evacuated during the night.³¹

An equally fine effort by the 2nd Canadian Division in the general direction of Cagnicourt was less rewarding. The attack started half an hour after midday, behind a rolling barrage of field artillery which followed a morning bombardment by the heavy guns. The 5th Brigade, using the same three battalions as on the previous day, carried the major part of the operation. On the left the 4th Brigade, exhausted from two days of extremely heavy fighting, could muster only what amounted to a composite battalion from its four battalions - the reserve consisting mainly of headquarters details, batmen and cooks. In spite of the determination of all ranks to take the so-called Fresnes-Rouvroy line, the obstacle of uncut wire covered by intense machine-gun fire proved too much for troops that were mentally and physically worn out not only from fighting but from a serious shortage of sleep during the preceding eight days.³² Although the 22nd and 24th Battalions got into the German front line during the afternoon, a

* The 52nd, 58th and 116th Battalions, and the 4th C.M.R. The last unit was temporarily under command from the 8th Brigade in exchange for the 43rd Battalion, which could not be disengaged.

counter-attack about 9:00 p.m. forced them back practically to their starting line.

Casualties for the day were heavy, and brought the total reported by the 2nd and 3rd Divisions in the three days' fighting to 254 officers and 5547 other ranks.³³ The 22nd Battalion had lost all its officers, and the 24th Battalion was also grievously stricken. Major Georges Vanier (a future Governor General of Canada), who had taken command of the decimated 22nd Battalion on the previous day, lost his right leg in the action.³⁴ Lt.-Col. W.H. Clark-Kennedy, the 24th's CO., amalgamated the remnants of both battalions and, in spite of a serious wound, continued to direct his forces against the German lines. His heroic and distinguished leadership in this and the previous day's fighting brought him the Victoria Cross.³⁵ The German High Command had been anxiously watching that sector of the Seventeenth Army between Bapaume and the Scarpe where the divisions of the 2nd Bavarian Corps were under critical pressure. Thus it was that although great deeds are often overlooked in the glum atmosphere of impending defeat, the German communique of 29 August did not fail to extol the valiant defence put up by the Württemberger regiments astride the Arras-Cambrai road on 28 August.³⁶

The 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions were now thoroughly tired. During the night of 28-29 August the 2nd was relieved by the 1st Division, and the 3rd Division by the 4th British Division, which had been placed under General Currie's command, pending the arrival of the 4th Canadian Division from the Amiens front. In order better to protect his left flank, which he considered particularly sensitive about Pelves because of the lag in the advance north of the Scarpe, General Currie placed Brig.-Gen. Brutinel in charge of a composite brigade*, strong in machine-guns, assigning it to the 4th British Division to guard against counter-attacks from the direction of Hamblain.³⁸

As the formations which had been relieved moved to locations west of Arras for an all too brief period of recuperation, they could take pride in having got the Corps operation away to an excellent start. In three days of the bitterest kind of fighting, over difficult, broken country beset with a maze of stoutly held trenches, the two Canadian divisions had advanced more than five miles on an ever-widening front and had seized an important part of the enemy's strong Fresnes-Rouvroy defence system, capturing more than 3300 prisoners and a vast quantity of booty that included 53 guns and 519 machine-guns.³⁹

Ahead loomed a bigger task—the conquest of the Drocourt-Quéant Line (which we shall hereafter frequently refer to as the D-Q Line). On the afternoon of the 28th General Currie notified General Horne that because of the setback that day at the Fresnes-Rouvroy line it would not be possible to attack the next defence system before 31 August at the earliest.⁴⁰

Plans for Attacking the D-Q Line

It was essential first to secure a firm jumping-off line. This meant completing the capture of the Fresnes-Rouvroy line and the Vis-en-Artois Switch (which

* Brutinel's Brigade, as it was called, consisted of the 1st Canadian Motor M.G. Brigade, the 101st M.G. Battalion (less one company) and the Canadian Cyclist Battalion.³⁷

from Vis-en-Artois angled south-eastward to join the D-Q Line a mile west of Cagnicourt), besides taking other strongly defended localities. While the heavy artillery concentrated on cutting enemy wire in front of the D-Q Line, and the engineers assembled bridging material that would be needed to cross the Sensée and the Canal du Nord, the Canadian Corps carried out a number of minor operations on 29 August which considerably bettered the Canadian position. In the northern sector Brutinel's Brigade, still under the orders of the 4th British Division, advanced the line nearly one thousand yards by seizing Bench Farm and Victoria Copse, north of Boiry- Notre-Dame, with the Canadian Corps Cyclist Battalion establishing posts right up to the Scarpe. The rest of the division captured Rémy and Haucourt, and occupied the Fresnes-Rouvroy trench system as far south as the Sensée River. The Canadian front was considerably shortened as command of the 51st Highland Division and the 11th Division (which during the day relieved Brutinel's Brigade) passed to the 22nd Corps. For the time being, at least, General Currie would no longer have to worry about a long northern flank.⁴¹

There was further progress on the 30th, the chief gains resulting from a skilfully planned operation carried out with daring by the 1st Canadian Brigade. Taking advantage of the 17th Corps' capture of Hendecourt, which lay behind the Fresnes-Rouvroy Line, General Macdonell devised with Brig.-Gen. Griesbach, the Commander of the 1st Brigade, a scheme to turn the flank of the enemy position by attacking northward from Third Army territory. Reaching their assembly positions by a night march, the 1st and 2nd Battalions assaulted at 4:40 a.m. behind an ingenious barrage that rolled from right to left across the divisional front. They caught the garrison completely by surprise and rapidly mopped up the line northward.* At the same time the 3rd Battalion attacked frontally a mile south of Vis-en-Artois and with bomb and bayonet began clearing the German trenches southward. By 7:00 a.m. it had gained touch with its sister battalions in the vicinity of Upton Wood, which lay in the angle between the two German switch-lines. There the Canadians held on all day under heavy fire. They drove off a German counter-attack, and after dark the 1st Battalion cleared Upton Wood, capturing 50 prisoners and five machine-guns.⁴³

North of the Cambrai road the 4th British Division, attacking that afternoon across the Sensée River, advanced one thousand yards east of Remy through the Bois Soufflard and got troops into Eterpigny.⁴⁴

At a conference between Generals Horne and Currie on 30 August the date for the assault of the Drocourt-Quéant Line was again postponed. Both commanders recognized the line as the backbone of the enemy's resistance and it seemed wise "not to attack it until we are ready, and then to go all out." On the following day the First Army issued the order for the Canadian Corps to attack the position on 2 September and exploit rapidly forward to seize crossings over the Canal du Nord on a five-mile front between Sains-lez-Marquion and Palluel

* According to a German account the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 121st Reserve Regiment were wiped out. Only 50 men escaped; the remaining survivors, including the two battalion headquarters, became prisoners. The parent formation, the 26th Reserve Division, completely exhausted, was withdrawn next day.⁴²

and capture the high ground beyond. The 3rd Tank Brigade, an armoured car battalion and a regiment of cavalry were placed under General Currie's command for the task.⁴⁵

While these plans were developing, and work proceeded on the tremendous task of repairing and extending roads and light railways behind the front, the 1st Canadian and 4th British Divisions continued to improve their positions. Six-inch howitzers of the corps heavy artillery maintained their steady pounding of the wire of the D-Q defences. In a surprise dawn attack on the 31st, the 8th Battalion seized the Ocean Work, a strongpoint in the German trenches south of Haucourt which had held out on the previous day.⁴⁶ The British division, having secured Eterpigny, advanced level with the Canadians. Fighting continued throughout the night, while the 4th Canadian Division moved the 12th Brigade into the front line between the 1st Canadian and 4th British Divisions.

These successes ensured that when the main assault went in there would be no costly delay in having to deal with intervening obstacles. Yet another bid for a good jumping-off place was made on the morning of 1 September, when the 2nd and 3rd Brigades captured the Crow's Nest, an enemy strongpoint on a high bluff which overlooked a large section of the D-Q defences. The attack, carried out by the 5th Battalion, flanked on the right by the 14th and on the left by the 12th Brigade's 72nd Battalion, began at 4:50 a.m. and achieved quick success. Retaining the position, however, proved to be more difficult in the face of three stubborn though vain and costly counter-attacks which were made during the day. The Canadians captured 200 prisoners, the enemy leaving behind more than 140 dead, besides nine light trench mortars and upwards of 80 machine-guns.⁴⁷

The Drocourt-Quéant Line was one of the most powerful and well organized German defence systems. It consisted of a front and a support line, both abundantly provided with concrete shelters and machine-gun posts and protected by dense masses of barbed wire. The Buissy Switch, connecting the D-Q Line with the Hindenburg support system, was constructed on the same solid principles. The two lines joined along the forward slope of Mont Dury (which filled the space between Dury and the Cambrai road), the switch-line angling south eastward to pass in front of Villers-lez-Cagnicourt and Buissy. In general the front D-Q line was sited either on a crest or a forward slope in order to provide a good field of fire—the support system being on a reverse slope.⁴⁸ Next to the problem of capturing the village of Dury, which was incorporated in the D-Q Line itself, one of the most challenging tasks to the attackers was the necessity of crossing Mont Dury. Advancing infantry would be exposed to fire from machine-guns sited on its forward slopes; while covering the crest and rear slope were more guns well disposed in depth, and farther back the advanced batteries of the German field artillery.

That the formidable nature of the position now to be attacked was fully realized by the War Cabinet in London was demonstrated by a personal telegram which the Chief of the Imperial General Staff sent to Sir Douglas Haig on 29 August. Associating the D-Q Line with the Hindenburg Line General Wilson

warned the C.-in-C. that “the War Cabinet would become anxious if we received heavy punishment in attacking the Hindenburg Line without success”. This discouraging communication Sir Douglas kept to himself; his plans and orders remained unchanged.⁴⁹

General Currie planned to make his main attack with the 1st Canadian Division on the right having two brigades abreast, the 4th in the centre on a single brigade front, and on the left flank-beside the Sensée marshes-the 4th British Division on a frontage of 2500 yards. Late in the afternoon of 31 August, however, the British G.O.C. (Major-General T. G. Matheson) told the Corps Commander that because of heavy losses in the preliminary fighting he could assault with only one brigade. Accordingly at the last minute the 4th Canadian Division took over half the British Division’s frontage.⁵⁰

It was Currie’s intention to break the German line at what was probably its most critical point, the Arras-Cambrai road, and then swing outward to roll up the German defences to north and south. He designated his objectives by four phase lines. Capture of the first two would bring the attackers within striking distance of the Canal du Nord. These were the Red Line, passing through Dury and west of Cagnicourt, inside the D-Q support line; and the Green Line, which ran along the dominating ground approximately 1200 yards west of the Canal du Nord. The remaining objectives were on high ground east of the Canal.⁵¹ In corps reserve for the operation were the 1st British Division and Brig.-Gen. Brutinel’s mobile group, now re-formed as the Canadian Independent Force (Brutinel’s Brigade having been disbanded on 31 August). Six companies of Mark V tanks were allotted on the basis of two companies to each attacking division. If necessary the tanks were to advance before zero to ensure that the maximum number reached the first line of wire before the infantry. To drown out the noise of their engines arrangements were made with the 1st Brigade R.A.F. for twin-engine aircraft to fly over the area on the eve of the assault. An elaborate artillery barrage would carry the infantry forward to the first objective in three lifts.⁵²

South of the Arras-Cambrai road the 1st Division, next to the 57th British Division of the Third Army, planned to assault with the 3rd Brigade on the right and the 2nd on the left. With Cagnicourt taken, the 1st Brigade, in reserve during the initial assault, was to leapfrog the two leading brigades immediately east of the Buissy Switch and capture the villages of Buissy and Baralle.⁵³ General Macdonell would temporarily have an open right flank; for the 57th Division, having no supporting tanks, would make no frontal attack. Instead it would station its assaulting brigades behind the 3rd Canadian Brigade ready to pass through and swing to the right after the Canadians had breached the D-Q line.⁵⁴ The 4th Canadian Division, in the centre, had to change its plan of attack, as we have seen, by increasing its frontage to the north. This imposed a difficult task on the 10th Brigade, which had to march ten miles into the new area, relieve a British brigade and take up its assembly positions, all in the hours of darkness preceding the attack. On the right of General Watson’s front the 12th Brigade was to advance over Mont Dury to gain the first objective, where the 11th

Brigade would pass through; on the left, the 10th Brigade was ordered to capture Dury and exploit eastward.⁵⁵

On the Corps left the 4th British Division was given only three successive objectives. Its advance in the initial stages would by-pass Etaing on the left. Etaing itself was included only in the Division's final phase line, which ran along the south bank of the Sensée as far as Oisy-le-Verger.⁵⁶ It was the role of the Independent Force, as soon as the Red Line had been gained, to push rapidly down the Arras-Cambrai road and attempt to seize crossings over the Canal du Nord.⁵⁷

Fighting for advantageous jumping-off lines continued along the Corps front almost to zero hour. Sensing the coming offensive, the enemy launched violent counter-attacks throughout the afternoon and evening of 1 September, particularly against the junction of the two Canadian divisions. The Germans persistently tried to push the forward edge of their outpost zone, already one mile deep in places, farther from their main trenches. The 12th Infantry Brigade astride the Cambrai road was hard beset, and its 72nd and 85th Battalions had to fight vigorously to retain their positions for the main operation.⁵⁸

Assault and Capture, 2-3 September

A dark night, free from rain, preceded the attack. It was after midnight before every battalion commander had issued his operation order, and by the time all the assaulting troops were in their assembly trenches dawn was not far off. Its arrival coincided, as planned, with zero hour, and with it came the tremendous crash that opened the barrage.

On the Corps' southern flank three battalions led the 1st Division's attack- the 16th and 13th Battalions on the right opposite Cagnicourt, with the 7th Battalion of the 2nd Brigade on their left. The two 3rd Brigade units pushed forward quickly up the long slope to the enemy wire. They met little resistance at first, the Germans surrendering in large numbers. By 7:30 a.m. the 13th Battalion had captured its section of the D-Q support line. Shortly afterwards the 14th Battalion passed through to take Cagnicourt, where it surprised and captured in the village cellars enough Germans to make a full battalion.⁵⁹ The men of the 14th then seized the Bois de Loison east of the village and in a quick dash across 2000 yards of open country reached their final objective in the Buissy Switch directly in front of the village of Buissy.

On Brig.-Gen. Tuxford's right progress was slower. The 16th Battalion, suffering heavily from machine-gun fire coming in across the open southern flank, lost the supporting barrage and had to storm weapon posts which the enemy was quick to re-man in his front line. Among many acts of bravery performed that day two stood out at this stage of the operations. Lance-Corporal W.H. Metcalf, M.M., an American serving with the 16th Battalion, calmly walked across bullet-swept ground guiding a tank and directing its fire against

German strongpoints which were holding up the infantry's advance. Later, after the battalion had broken through the main D-Q position, only to be halted in front of the support line, the Commanding Officer, Lt.-Col. Cyrus W. Peck, went forward through bursting shells and withering machine-gun fire to make a personal reconnaissance, and to compel roaming tanks to protect his open flank. He then reorganized his battalion and led them on to their objective. Both Metcalf and Peck won the Victoria Cross* – one of the very few occasions in the war when a battalion twice earned the coveted award in a single day.⁶¹ Pushing through the 16th Battalion at the Red Line, the 15th, suffering crippling casualties, fought slowly forward to the Bois de Bouche, some 3000 yards short of the Buissy Switch, which here angled sharply to the south-east. Here the survivors consolidated as the 3rd Battalion came up from reserve. At 6:00 p.m. British infantry finally arrived to seal off the open flank which had proved so costly to the Canadians.⁶²

On the 2nd Brigade's front the 5th Battalion was still engaged in hand-to-hand fighting for the jumping-off line when the 7th Battalion passed through to assault. Aided greatly by the shrapnel barrage and the supporting tanks the 7th had little difficulty in capturing and mopping up the D-Q line in its sector. At eight o'clock the 10th Battalion took over the lead at the Red Line. Up to this stage the tanks had kept well to the fore, knocking out one enemy post after another. East of the D-Q Line, however, they began falling victim to the German artillery fire. Soon the 10th Battalion was halted by the intense fire that came from machine-guns and trench mortars in the Buissy Switch in front of Villers-lez-Cagnicourt. In dogged fighting the battalion had by late afternoon established a line east of the village. One more effort was to be made. An artillery barrage called down at 6:00 p.m. on the German positions eased the situation, and the weary Canadians pushed forward again to capture the Buissy Switch by 11:00 p.m.

In the meantime the 4th Canadian Division was fighting its own hard battle. At the start the 12th Brigade on the right had to contend with an enemy pocket along the Arras-Cambrai road; and its supporting tanks arrived too late to help here. The leading battalions—from right to left the 72nd, the 38th and the 85th—found the D-Q trenches, as expected, heavily wired and strongly garrisoned. Nevertheless the Red Line, east of the support line, was reached on schedule. But as the 72nd and 38th Battalions crossed the long, exposed crest of Mont Dury they met the full force of the German machine-gun fire. From the objective, a sunken road joining Dury to the Cambrai road, German reinforcements swept the bare slopes with bullets, while on the right the 72nd Battalion was also caught in enfilade fire from the direction of Villers-lez-Cagnicourt.⁶³ In spite of mounting casualties the Canadians, aided by good work on the part of the tanks, pushed on grimly and by mid-morning they had captured and cleared the sunken road.

The 10th Brigade's initial assault on the divisional left was led by the

* It is a measure of the bitter fighting on both sides that no less than seven Victoria Crosses were won by Canadians on this day. The others who received this highest award for their courage were Captain B.S. Hutcheson, C.A.M.C. (attached to the 75th Battalion); Sgt. A.G. Knight, 10th Battalion; Pte. C.J.P. Nunney, D.C.M., M.M., 38th Battalion; Pte. W.L. Rayfield, 7th Battalion; Pte. J.F. Young, 87th Battalion.⁶⁰

47th and 50th Battalions. Wire, largely intact, imposed serious delay as it had to be cut by hand. The two battalions occupied the main line trenches, allowing the 46th Battalion to leapfrog them and advance on the support line, which ran through the centre of Dury. There was particularly vicious fighting for the village, which was taken only after a flanking movement by the 46th had overcome a strong point on the southern outskirts, capturing some 120 prisoners and nine machine guns.⁶⁴ With the fall of Dury, the brigade's objective line at the sunken road was secured by 7:30 a.m.

The second phase of the attack began soon after eight, when the 78th Battalion, until now held in reserve, attempted to push forward on the right of the 10th Brigade. But it could make little headway against the storm of machine-gun fire coming out of Villers-lez-Cagnicourt and from a sugar-beet processing plant at the crossroads north-east of the village. A mile east of the sunken road, on a ridge extending from Buissy to Saudemont, German artillerymen were firing over open sights. By nine o'clock the 78th had been brought to a halt 200 yards east of the sunken road. Attempts by the 11th Brigade to exploit the 12th Brigade's gains east of Mont Dury were equally fruitless. By mid-afternoon all brigades on the divisional front reported their advance held up. Armoured cars from the Independent Force made several unsuccessful attempts to reach the lateral Villers-Saudemont road;* the Force had to confine its efforts to firing at enemy positions with machine-gun detachments posted on either side of the main Cambrai road.⁶⁶ On the Canadians' left the 4th British Division was able to capture its part of the D-Q system, but did not take Etaing until the following morning.

Although the Canadian Corps had not achieved all the objectives set (rather optimistically) for the attack, the results of 2 September were nevertheless eminently satisfactory. The Drocourt-Quéant Line had been assaulted and overrun on a frontage of seven thousand yards. In addition, the 1st Division had captured the Buissy Switch and the villages of Villers-lez-Cagnicourt and Cagnicourt. Some German formations in the forward line on 2 September had yielded quickly, but the Canadians had met resolute opposition from regiments of the 1st and 2nd Guard Reserve Divisions and the 3rd Reserve Division.⁶⁷

That evening General Currie issued orders for the three divisions under his command to continue the advance on the 3rd, in order to gain direct observation of all bridges over the Sensée River and the Canal du Nord.⁶⁸ During the night, however, the enemy withdrew on a wide front. Air patrols flying over the enemy lines on the morning of 3 September saw no Germans between the Cagnicourt-Dury Ridge and the Canal du Nord. At the same time the Third Army reported that it had occupied Quéant and Pronville without fighting and that everywhere the enemy was falling back. By noon the entire Canadian Corps front was in motion as a general advance began to the Green Line. Except for artillery fire, resistance was practically negligible. By evening the 1st Division, having

* Unfortunately claims to success came back without foundation. Because of these the artillery was not able to re-establish its neutralizing fire over a belt about 1000 yards wide astride the Arras-Cambrai road which it had been ordered to suspend for the Independent Force's advance. A serious consequence was the heavy unopposed German fire that met the Canadians attacking down the forward slopes from Dury.⁶⁵

occupied Buissy and Baralle, had swept across the open fields to the west bank of the Canal du Nord. The 4th Canadian Division pushed quickly ahead, liberating the villages of Rumaucourt, Ecourt St. Quentin, Saudemont and Récourt. It reported the east bank of the Canal strongly held and all bridges destroyed. The 4th British Division cleared along the Sensée Canal, occupying the village of Lécluse. By nightfall the Canadian Corps controlled all ground west of the Canal du Nord between Sains-lez-Marquion and the Sensée. The formations which had broken the D-Q position had earned their relief, and during the hours of darkness the new line was taken over from north to south by the 1st British and the 3rd and 2nd Canadian Divisions.⁶⁹

In reviewing the Corps' success General Currie had special praise for the 1st Canadian Division. In his diary he assessed as "one of the finest performances in all the war" its achievement in assaulting and capturing both the Fresnes Rouvroy and the Drocourt-Quéant lines—a total penetration of nearly five miles. "It is a question", he wrote on 3 September, "whether our victory of yesterday or of August 8th is the greatest, but I am inclined to think yesterday's was."⁷⁰ Few would disagree with Sir Arthur. The Corps' success in destroying the hinge of the German defence system had not only made it possible for the Third Army to advance; the repercussions were to be felt along the whole front from Ypres to the Oise.

The German withdrawal had followed what von Hindenburg described as one of the "disagreeable decisions" forced upon the High Command in the first week of September.⁷¹ About midday on the 2nd he had issued orders for the Seventeenth Army to retire that night behind the Sensée and the Canal du Nord, and on its left the Second Army to withdraw into the Hindenburg Position next night. Farther south the Eighteenth and Ninth Armies were to follow in succession, which meant that by 9 September the whole salient won in the March fighting would be abandoned. In the north the Sixth and Fourth Armies fell back between Lens and Ypres, giving up without a fight the Lys salient seized in the previous April.⁷²

All this came as a result of the German defeat. The High Command had made every effort to throw back the attacking forces, stationing seven divisions opposite the Canadian Corps and the Third Army's left. From these the Corps captured approximately 6000 unwounded prisoners between 1 and 4 September.⁷³ In achieving their success the Canadians suffered between 1 and 3 September casualties of 297 officers and 5325 other ranks.

There followed a lull in Canadian operations. As a result of the advance the left flank of the Corps had again become very long; accordingly at midnight on 4-5 September command of the 1st British Division and its sector passed to the G.O.C. 22nd Corps. To the south the Third Army was still fighting its way through the outworks of the Hindenburg Line.

Fashioning the Next Blow

A mile south-east of Dury, at the highest point where the Drocourt-Quéant system crossed the Arras-Cambrai road, stands the Canadian Memorial to

the soldiers who broke through that famous defence line. In the centre of a small park surrounded by holly hedge and maple trees a simple square block of stone carries the inscription beginning, "The Canadian Corps 100,000 strong..." From its base one looks westward towards Arras over the terrain so gallantly captured by the Canadian divisions. To the south-east lie other battlefields. Seven miles away, to the right of the straight road reaching down to Cambrai, the observer can discern on a clear day the high mound of Bourslon Wood silhouetted against the sky. To the Canadians dug in on the Dury ridge in September 1918 this was a significant landmark, for they knew that between the wood and themselves lay the next major barrier in their path-the Canal du Nord.

Any operation to cross so formidable an obstacle as the Canal du Nord required much careful planning and preparation. To General Currie a frontal assault from his existing positions seemed out of the question. Not only was there the obstacle of the canal itself; on the far side marshes extended north and south of the Arras-Cambrai road, and these the enemy could cover by machine-gun fire from trench systems to the rear. Furthermore the high ground to the east gave the Germans full command of the canal approaches. It was not an encouraging prospect.⁷⁴ In the meantime what had been taken must be held. This presented no great problem, for having flooded the Sensée marshes and destroyed the canal bridges, the enemy had prevented himself from taking effective offensive action against the Canadians. By Currie's orders captured trenches were reversed and rewired and organized into an outpost line of resistance, a battle zone, and a rear zone-though no extensive fortifications were constructed. Until fighting began again the Canadians made the most of the opportunity to "reorganize, refit and rest."⁷⁵

Except for patrol clashes and outpost fighting the quiet period on the Canadian front continued until 27 September. The term is relative only-there were few days when the count of battle casualties fell below 100. Because of the losses sustained by troops holding the canal bank, on the 16th Currie ordered the front line moved far enough back to escape the enemy's dominating machine-guns, while retaining control of the canal approaches with Canadian fire.⁷⁶ During this period the Corps lost the services of Major-General Lipsett, who had commanded the 3rd Division since 1916. He was succeeded by Major-General F.O.W. Loomis, formerly commanding the 2nd Brigade. General Lipsett, a British officer (who had been one of Currie's pre-war instructors), was given command of the British 4th Division on 1 October, but shortly afterwards he was killed while making a reconnaissance. General Loomis' promotion led to a number of changes in the command of infantry brigades. The 2nd Brigade was taken over by Brig.-Gen. R.P. Clark, the 4th by Brig.-Gen. G.E. McCuaig, the 6th by Brig.-Gen. A. Ross and the 7th by Brig.-Gen. J.A. Clark.

As the Germans on a wide front extending from the Scarpe to the Aisne fell back to the Hindenburg Line, Allied planners prepared for an assault on this most formidable of all the enemy's defensive systems. To avoid the risk of finding all the German reserve massed against the Allied onslaught, General Foch insisted on extending the front and the scope of the offensive. His directive

of 3 September outlined the future course of the campaign. There was to be a general offensive on the entire front from the Meuse to the English Channel, with four great hammer-strokes delivered at crucial points. The British Armies were to attack towards Cambrai and St. Quentin; the French centre would continue to push the enemy beyond the Aisne; in the south the American Army was to reduce the troublesome St. Mihiel salient and then join with the French Fourth Army in a drive towards Mézières; while on the northern flank King Albert of Belgium was to lead a combined force in an offensive in Flanders, directed on Ghent and Bruges.⁷⁷ No longer were the Allied leaders seeking to knock out the enemy by battering him at his strongest point while absorbing tremendous punishment in the attempt. The great dull blows rained on the enemy from 1915 to 1917 by the lethargic heavyweight, "leading with his chin", now became the subtle crippling punches of a skilled boxer, elusive and wary, but crowding his opponent towards defeat. Successive attacks at different but closely related points, quickly begun and suddenly ended, were the mark of this strategy, described by Foch as "*Tout le monde à la bataille!*"⁷⁸

Sir Douglas Haig met the commanders of the First, Second and Third Armies at General Byng's headquarters on 15 September. He explained his intention of launching a joint operation towards Cambrai by the First and Third Armies. General Horne was to seize Broulton Wood and cover the Third Army's left as it advanced on Cambrai, and then extend this protection along the Scarpe and the Scheldt as far as Valenciennes. The capture of Broulton Wood was assigned to the Canadian Corps, which would then form a defensive flank for operations farther south by establishing a general front from the north-eastern outskirts of Cambrai to Aubencheul-au-Bac on the Sensée Canal, for which purpose Currie would be given the 11th British Division.⁷⁹

But first the obstacle of the Canal du Nord had to be overcome. Faced with broken bridges and flooded marshland, the 2nd Division after much careful reconnaissance reported that the canal was "practically impassable by any force larger than a platoon without considerable preparation."⁸⁰

The outbreak of war had halted construction on the Canal du Nord, leaving the work at varying stages of completion. The naturally swampy area which the Germans had flooded extended from Sains-lez-Marquion northward across the Arras-Cambrai road; but southward along the 4000-yard stretch between Sains-lez-Marquion and Moeuvres the ground was firm and the canal itself was dry. The bank on the far side was strongly held by machine-guns, and immediately to the east the enemy had built his "Canal du Nord Defence Line". Air photographs revealed that its main strength lay in its dense barricade of wire; the trenches were not expected to give much protection from heavy bombardment. About a mile farther to the east and roughly paralleling the canal was the well-wired Marquion Line, which from the eastern outskirts of Marquion ran south for four miles to join the Canal Line at the Cambrai-Bapaume road. Broulton Wood on its dominating hill a mile behind the Marquion Line - flanked by the village of Broulton on the north-west edge and Fontaine-Notre-Dame to

the south-east - was difficult to assess from air photographs because of the foliage still on its magnificent oak trees. These were some of the few to be found in Northern France and were not yet shattered by gunfire. But the ground between the wood and the Marquion Line was dotted with old excavations, dug-outs and shelters, all of them potential machine-gun sites. The grim fighting of the previous November gave warning that here there might be serious trouble. The last prepared defence line before Cambrai was the Marquion defence system, which was based for much of its length on the Canal de l'Escaut, passing east of Fontaine to cut the Arras road at Raillencourt.⁸¹

General Currie planned to carry out in two phases the task assigned him. First would come the passage of the canal and the capture of Bournal Wood and the high ground to the north about Pilgrim's Rest and La Maison Neuve (a farm beside the Arras-Cambrai road). In the second phase the Corps would seize bridges over the Canal de l'Escaut, north-east of Cambrai, and establish a firm line reaching across to the Canal de la Sensée.⁸² Because the Canal du Nord was impassable in the northern portion of the Canadian front, on Currie's recommendation the Corps boundary was extended 2600 yards to the south to include the dry section opposite Inchy-en-Artois. While this change would permit a crossing in an un-flooded area, it introduced the difficult problem of moving the whole Corps through a narrow defile before fanning out on a battle front that would rapidly expand to 9700 yards.⁸³

The first phase was to be a set piece attack between Sains-lez-Marquion and the army boundary, with the 1st Division on the left on a two-brigade front, and the 4th with a single brigade on the right. In the second phase the front would be widened, as the 11th British Division moved up on the left of the 1st Division and the 3rd Canadian Division on the right of the 4th. Depending on the possibilities which then presented themselves, all four divisions were to push resolutely forward, the 3rd maintaining contact with the Third Army's left flank. The 2nd Division was to remain in corps reserve throughout the operation.⁸⁴

The familiar "Red", "Green" and "Blue" lines marked three intermediate objectives for the first phase. From the northern outskirts of Sains-lez-Marquion the Red Line swung south-east to follow the Marquion Defence Line across the Canadian front. The Green Line, about 1500 yards to the east, included Marquion, Bournal village and the western edge of Bournal Wood. A further 2000 yards to the east the Blue Line crossed the Cambrai road near La Maison Neuve to pass behind Pilgrim's Rest on the crest of its hill and thence along the eastern outskirts of Bournal Wood to the army boundary opposite Fontaine-Notre-Dame. Attainment of the Blue Line was vital to the success of the whole operation, for Bournal Wood provided the key to the capture of Cambrai. It was a task full of difficulties.*

The sloping ground on either side of the canal, which gave the enemy good observation of the entire Canadian front, complicated the concentration of

* General Currie reveals that General Byng, the Commander of the Third Army, came to see him a few days before the attack and read over the plans drawn up by the Canadian Corps Staff. Byng considered the plans were the best under the circumstances, but his remark to Currie was, "Old man, do you think you can do it?"⁸⁵

troops for the attack. On 23 September General Currie ordered all movement east of a line through Neuville-Vitasse carried out during hours of darkness. But the vast scale of preparations for the offensive made some daylight movement by road unavoidable; and enemy air reconnaissance could not fail to notice evidence of the increase in horselines, vehicle parks and camps of all descriptions, which, as the 2nd Division later reported, had made the bare and treeless area behind the front lines “as populous as Coney Island on July 4th”.⁸⁶

The alteration in the Corps front and the penetration which the attack was expected to achieve posed special problems to the artillery. The restricted area of the assault meant that in order to give the infantry assembly room batteries had to be kept well to the rear and sited in depth. In the first phase the 4th Division would have to advance more than 4000 yards to reach its final objective, the capture of which, as well as the success of the second phase, depended on a quick advance by the artillery. A solution was worked out to ensure support at all times on the moving front. Six of the ten field brigades supporting the 4th Infantry Division fired the barrage to the Red Line. At zero hour the other four limbered up and closely followed the attacking infantry to the canal, arriving in time to take part in the barrage for the Green Line. As the outranged brigades in the rear dropped out of the barrage, two moved up to the canal to join in the barrage to the final objective, while two more established a standing barrage on the west side of Bourlon Wood. The remainder then came forward to cross the canal, which by that time (zero plus four hours) had been made passable by the Engineers. This arrangement worked out most satisfactorily, the infantry reporting the barrage as being “very good”.⁸⁷ Sains-lez-Marquion, which was to be by-passed and then assaulted from the rear, required a specially planned barrage. When the village was attacked, the supporting fire would creep backward towards the canal.⁸⁸

A unique feature of the planned artillery support was the preparation of what was indeed a rolling barrage programme fired by heavy artillery. Inner limits of fire and timings followed the principle of a rolling barrage by field guns, except that the successive lifts varied from 500 to 1500 yards at different points, according to the speed with which the infantry was expected to advance. A large number of barrage maps on a scale of 1:40,000 were printed and distributed both to the heavy artillery and the attacking infantry.⁸⁹ Arrangements were also made for a comprehensive machine-gun barrage. All the Corps engineer resources, including sappers and pioneers of the 11th British Division, were placed at the disposal of the Chief Engineer, Major-General W.B. Lindsay, as special arrangements were made for the rapid construction of vital bridges over the canal immediately the attack had been mounted.⁹⁰ In achieving these tasks the new engineer reorganization (above, p. 384) decidedly proved its worth.

While preparations for the offensive went forward in the First Army's sector, to the south other Allied armies were closing up to the main Hindenburg position. Beginning on 12 September came two weeks of bitter fighting by the French First and the British Third and Fourth Armies as they wrestled the enemy out of the old Allied fortifications which the Germans had converted into

outworks to his main defence line.* The failure of the German Second Army to repel the Fourth Army's advance brought the removal of General von der Marwitz from the command.⁹¹ Meanwhile on 12 and 13 September at St. Mihiel, between the Meuse and the Moselle, United States forces vindicated General Pershing's repeated demands that the Americans be allowed to fight as a national army. In a few hours the inexperienced yet eager American divisions excised a salient sixteen miles deep which had troubled the Allied line for four years.⁹²

The enemy's stubborn resistance during the September fighting had brought heavy casualties to both sides, and on 21 September Haig received another warning from the Secretary of State for War that the unsatisfactory recruiting situation in the United Kingdom made it necessary to guard against needless dissipation of the strength of the British Armies in France. The Commander-in-Chief was fully aware of the possible cost of attacking the formidable Hindenburg Line, as well as of the political effects that an unsuccessful attempt would have, both in Britain and in Germany. But having carefully weighed these considerations against the advantages to be gained by the proposed operations, Haig was convinced "that the British attack was the essential part of the general scheme, and that the moment was favourable. Accordingly", he wrote in his subsequent despatch, "I decided to proceed with the attack."⁹³

The Canal du Nord and Brouillon Wood, 27 September

The night of 26-27 September was tense with expectation. There was no preliminary barrage and the air was still. In the crowded assembly areas infantry were closely bunched with artillery and machine-guns, brought forward this far in readiness for a rapid advance. Apprehensive that a counter preparation by German artillery might come down on their dangerously dense numbers, the troops waited impatiently for zero. Rain began to fall and the cold ground became slippery, adding to the difficulties expected in the coming assault. Morning arrived overcast and dark, but the rain had stopped.⁹⁴ Then, at 5:20 a.m., came a myriad of flashes from the guns in the artillery areas followed by the crash of bursting shells over the enemy positions.

On the Corps right, troops of the 10th Brigade, hugging their artillery cover, quickly crossed the canal[†] on a two-battalion front between Inchy and Moeuvres. They overcame resistance from the Canal du Nord Line, and established themselves on Red according to schedule. The 11th and 12th Brigades, leading the 4th Division's attack on the right and left respectively, pushed forward but almost immediately met trouble from the south. Opposing General Watson's formations was the German 187th Infantry Division, with its

* In the area between St. Quentin and the Bapaume-Cambrai road the Third Army fought the Battle of Havrincourt (12-18 September), and the Fourth Army the battle of Epehy (17-18 September).

† This part of the Canal du Nord was only partially excavated. The western bank was from 10 to 12 feet high, the eastern 4 to 5 feet. The canal was about 40 yards across.⁹⁵

188th Infantry Regiment directly west of Bourlon Wood, flanked to north and south respectively by the 186th and 187th Regiments.* Farther south was the dismounted 7th Cavalry Division; unused to infantry tactics they were quickly defeated.⁹⁷ The 52nd Division, attacking on the Third Army's flank, had not achieved the same initial success as the 4th Division, and as a result the Canadian right suffered many casualties from enfilade fire.

In stiff fighting the 87th Battalion gained an entry into the southern part of Bourlon village by 9:45 a.m., and the 54th, passing through, skirted the north end of Bourlon Wood to reach the far side. The slower advance of the British troops to the south compelled the 102nd Battalion to form a defensive flank beside the Bapaume road and defeated the plan to encircle the wood from the south. This left the 54th in a pronounced salient, suffering mounting casualties. The battalion pushed on towards Fontaine-Notre-Dame, finally coming to a halt about 7:00 p.m. just west of the village, the 75th and 87th Battalions coming up on its left. Farther north the 12th Brigade also had stiff fighting throughout the day. The 85th and 38th Battalions, heavily hit by shelling and machine-gun fire during their advance, cleared their part of the Marquion trench system, allowing the 78th and 72nd Battalions to gain all but the extreme right of its Blue Line objective. It took a fresh attack mounted at 8:00 p.m. by the 78th Battalion to overcome the final pocket of resistance.⁹⁸

In the course of the 4th Division's operations on 27 September two subalterns had won the Victoria Cross. Lieutenant G. T. Lyall of the 102nd Battalion, and Lieutenant S. L. Honey, D.C.M., M.M., 78th Battalion, through their skilful leadership and courage in dealing with German strongpoints both significantly contributed to the capture of Bourlon Wood. Like many another recognition for brave deeds in the war, Lieutenant Honey's award came posthumously.⁹⁹

On the Corps left the 1st Division's success paid tribute to careful planning and well-directed and determined execution. Two guns of the 1st Battery C.F.A. gave the 1st Brigade a good start by moving in front of Inchy-en-Artois and firing point-blank into enemy positions along the canal. Thus aided, the 4th Battalion, having crossed the dry bed with little difficulty, was able to jump ahead to the north-east and capture its assigned portion of the Marquion Line. Here the 1st Battalion pushed through as planned and secured the Green Line in short order. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions now assumed the lead, only to be stopped by heavy fire from the embanked railway which curved north from Bourlon. With the aid of a timely flanking attack by the 72nd Battalion they overcame this resistance and swept on to the Blue Line.¹⁰⁰ The action of the Commander of the 3rd Battalion's left support company, Lieutenant G.F. Kerr, M.C., M.M., in rushing single-handed a German strongpoint near the Arras-Cambrai road played an important part in the 1st Brigade's advance. Kerr, who captured four machine guns and 31 prisoners, was awarded the Victoria Cross.¹⁰¹

* The 188th Infantry Regiment reported 27 September as "the blackest day of the Regiment ... at the end of the day only a little band of men was left ... on this day we buried all our hopes for victory".⁹⁶

The 2nd Brigade's role was to follow the 1st up to the Marquion Line and then extend to the left to capture the central portion of the Blue Line on the divisional front. By two o'clock the 7th Battalion was firm on its objective midway between Marquion and Haynecourt. During the afternoon the 5th Battalion went on to occupy Haynecourt and push patrols almost to the main Cambrai-Douai road. On the left, units of the 11th British Division passed through, headed for Epinoy. By the end of the day (27 September) patrols of the 10th Battalion-which had passed through the 5th just east of Haynecourt were approaching the Marcoing Line, coming first to a heavy belt of uncut wire covered by enemy machine-guns. With mounting casualties the infantry cut the wire and pushed forward; but confronted by a second wire barrier, which marked the line itself, and with darkness approaching, the battalion consolidated on the east side of the Douai-Cambrai road.¹⁰²

On General Macdonell's left the 3rd Brigade had the important task of driving northward beyond the Canal du Nord and capturing in turn the villages of Sains-lez-Marquion and Marquion, thereby freeing the eastern bank to permit crossings by the 11th Division. Leading the 3rd Brigade's advance the 14th Battalion crossed south of Sains-lez-Marquion, and swinging north behind the village, quickly captured its part of the Red Line. Four supporting tanks rendered good service in crushing wire barricades and in mopping up the village, but mechanical difficulties kept them from advancing past the Red Line.¹⁰³ From Chapel Corner, south-east of Marquion, the German opposition, which had wavered before the initial rush of the 14th, rallied with heavy fire to stop the 13th Battalion, which was following up the initial assault. It took a joint effort by the 13th and 15th Battalions with tank assistance to clear Marquion. The 15th continued northward across the Arras road, mopping up the area east of the canal. By 2:00 p.m. it was firm at the Blue Line, just south of Sauchy-Lestrée.¹⁰⁴

Both Canadian divisions had received useful help from the tanks-each being supported by a company (of eight tanks) from the 7th Tank Battalion. The four allotted to each assaulting brigade successfully crossed the dry canal under cover of an artillery smoke-screen. Later they contributed to their own concealment by means of smoke discharges fitted to their exhausts. During the day they gave good service in crushing wire entanglements and silencing with their fire enemy machine-gun posts. Of the sixteen tanks engaged in the first phase of the operation five fell victim to German fire.¹⁰⁵

About midday, when the 3rd Infantry Brigade had completed its assigned task of clearing the east bank of the canal, units of the 11th Division crossed at four places between Sains-lez-Marquion and the highway and moved smoothly into place on the left of the 1st Division to start the second phase of the attack. The advance to the north and north-east continued without serious interruption, and by dusk Epinoy and Oisy-le-Verger were in British hands.¹⁰⁶

On the whole the day had gone very well. That night Currie wrote in his diary: "Today's success jeopardizes the hold of the enemy on the Quéant-Drocourt system north of the Scarpe, and he may be expected to fall back to Douai." With the obstacle of the Canal du Nord overcome there was hope that

Cambrai might soon be captured, and that the fall of Douai would follow.¹⁰⁷ But gains had been limited on the Corps right, where the 4th Canadian Division, suffering from an open flank because of the slow progress of the British formations farther south, had been unable to start the second phase of the operation. During the night of 27-28 September, however, the Germans fell back. With his divisions ejected from their lines and lying unprotected in the open fields from Epinoy to Ribécourt, General von Below gave orders for a withdrawal to the far side of the Sensée between Arleux and Aubigny, and to the “Hagen” position running southward from Aubigny through Marcoing.¹⁰⁸

The Marcoing Line and the Fighting Towards Cambrai, 28 September-1 October

On the evening of the 27th General Currie issued orders for the advance to continue throughout the night and following day in an effort to work around the north side of Cambrai and keep the enemy from setting up a defensive line west of the city. The 3rd Division was ordered to relieve all troops of the 4th Division within its own assigned boundaries for the second phase, and to capture Fontaine Notre-Dame as soon as possible. In addition, Brutinel’s Brigade* was warned to be prepared to exploit success, and the 2nd Division, in corps reserve, was readied for quick advance.¹¹⁰

It was impossible in fact for the 3rd Division to take over its portion of the line while Fontaine-Notre-Dame was still under enemy fire. Accordingly, late on 27 September it was decided that General Loomis’ brigades, instead of relieving the 11th Brigade, would use its positions as a jumping-off place from which to attack Fontaine and force the Marcoing Line.¹¹¹ The two brigades, on the left the 7th (commanded by Brig.-Gen. J.A. Clark, who had succeeded Brig.-Gen. Dyer on 12 September) and the 9th Brigade on the right, launched their attack at 6:00 a.m. on the 28th. Led by The Royal Canadian Regiment, the 7th Brigade started well, reporting the capture of the Marcoing front line by 8:50 a.m. But thereafter progress slowed as the R.C.R. encountered dogged resistance in the Marcoing support line, where the Germans were determined to postpone capture of Cambrai and the crossings of the Canal de l’Escaut. The stiffest opposition came from the 26th (Württemberg) Reserve Division and some Guard units. This was the division that one month earlier had delayed the Canadians north and south of the Cambrai road (above, p. 430). In the meantime it had been reorganized, rested, and visited in the various bivouac areas by Field-Marshal von Hindenburg.¹¹²

Mid-morning found The Royal Canadian Regiment pinned down under heavy fire from the front and from Saily on the left flank. The P.P.C.L.I. was

* The Canadian Independent Force had been withdrawn from the line on the evening of 4 September and shortly afterwards disbanded. Brutinel’s Brigade, however, was re-formed on 19 September on a semi-permanent basis.¹⁰⁹

thrust into the action, and by early afternoon both battalions had secured the Marcoing position between the Arras and Bapaume roads.¹¹³ The R.C.R. action had been highlighted by the heroism of an officer, Lieutenant M.F. Gregg, M.C.,* which won him the Victoria Cross. With the advance held up by thick, uncut wire, he crawled forward alone to reconnoitre, subsequently leading his men through a small gap to force their way into the German trench. The enemy counterattacked in force, and, when bombs ran short, Gregg though wounded, returned alone under terrific fire for a further supply. Wounded a second time, he reorganized his reduced numbers and led them on to clear the enemy trenches.¹¹⁴

In the meantime the 9th Brigade had had limited success. While the 102nd Battalion (loaned by the 4th Division) covered the open right flank with fire from the southern edge of Bournon Wood, the 43rd Battalion entered and secured Fontaine and by 9:00 a.m. was half a mile south-east of the village. Continuing resistance from the Marcoing Line dictated a fresh attack by both brigades in the angle between the Arras-Cambrai and Bapaume-Cambrai roads. But there was delay in completing plans for an artillery barrage and in bringing up ammunition, and the operation had to be postponed from 3:00 p.m. until seven that evening.

Brig.-Gen. Clark had been given the task of carrying the Cambrai-Douai road and the railway beyond. It proved to be a costly assignment. On the brigade left Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry advanced 2000 yards to the north-east before running into unmapped wire in front of the Douai road. From the railway embankment and the high ground north of Tilloy German fire raked the Patricias caught in the wire, forcing a slight withdrawal with heavy losses.¹¹⁵ On the right the 49th Battalion, also heavily opposed, could get only as far as the northern outskirts of Ste. Olle—a suburb on the Arras road. On the 9th Brigade's front the 58th Battalion broke through the enemy's defences, allowing the 116th late at night to close up to Ste. Olle.¹¹⁶

North of the highway the 10th Brigade had carried most of the 4th Division's action on 28 September. The 47th and 50th Battalions attacked at 6:00 a.m., the advance going well enough as far as the outskirts of Raillencourt, where the Marcoing Line crossed the Arras-Cambrai road. Both the village and the trenches were strongly garrisoned, with German reserves in Cambrai ready to oppose any drive to encircle the city on the north. Raillencourt was taken in stiff fighting and then the 44th and 46th Battalions passed through as planned, the former clearing the adjoining village of Sailly. But heavy shelling halted their advance short of the Douai road. Throughout the day the 44th Battalion, depleted by heavy casualties suffered on the 27th in the assault of the Canal du Nord, fought off a series of vicious counter-attacks, receiving stout assistance from the Vickers guns of the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion. It was nevertheless compelled to fall back to the light railway east of Sailly.¹¹⁷

As we have noted, the success of the 1st Division on 27 September had

* Later, Brigadier Milton Gregg, who from 1947 to 1957 held successively the portfolios of Fisheries, Veterans Affairs and Labour in the Dominion Cabinet.

placed it well in advance of the 3rd and 4th Divisions. Its plan of attack for 28 September called for the 2nd Brigade to continue the divisional advance to the north-east. Zero hour, at the request of the 2nd, was delayed from 6:00 a.m. until nine in order that the troops on the right might close up level with the 1st Division. But the postponement accomplished nothing. When the 10th Battalion attacked from the Douai road the 4th Division was still lagging behind. The battalion struck heavy uncut belts of wire covered by enemy fire and was stopped practically in its tracks. Efforts throughout the day to cut the wire by heavy artillery shoots failed. The infantry made no significant advance here,¹¹⁸ and similarly on the Corps northern flank the 11th British Division could report few gains.

The 29th was another day of hard fighting which gained little ground. On the Corps' right the 3rd Division had all brigades heavily engaged. The 9th Brigade sent its 58th Battalion across the army boundary to assist units of the 57th British Division clear the Marcoing line towards the Canal de l'Escaut. The 116th Battalion fought all morning to get into Ste. Olle. With the help of a bombardment from a supporting field battery the 116th captured the troublesome suburb about noon and pushed a company forward to the junction of the Arras and Bapaume roads.¹¹⁹ In the centre the 8th Brigade, with orders to secure bridgeheads over the canal in the northern part of the city, at first could make little headway, both the 1st and 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles being held up by fire from Ste. Olle, which was then still untaken. After its fall the two C.M.R. battalions were able to fight* forward to the outskirts of Neuville St. Rémy, a suburb astride the Douai road, west of the canal. On the divisional left the 7th Brigade's attack with the 49th and 42nd Battalions got to the Douai-Cambrai road opposite Tilloy, but was stopped there by machine- gun fire.¹²¹

Things were not much better on the 4th Division's front. General Watson continued the attack with the 12th Brigade, directing it on Sancourt and Blécourt to the north-east. On the right the 38th Battalion crossed the Cambrai-Douai road, only to be halted by fire from the railway embankment. The 78th Battalion passed through in the afternoon but was similarly stopped. Farther north the 72nd Battalion had better fortune; after taking some 250 prisoners and 20 machine-guns in Sancourt it gained a foothold at the railway. One small party reached Blécourt and with great audacity, having mounted a Lewis gun in the village square, began rounding up prisoners in the nearby buildings, withdrawing with some eighty to the railway. But there had been no parallel advance on either flank, and in the face of heavy artillery fire and threatened counter-attacks the 72nd was forced to fall back almost to the Cambrai-Douai road.¹²² To the north neither the 1st Canadian nor the 11th British Division had achieved any significant success. General Macdonell was holding practically the same positions that his troops had captured on 27 September; further progress would

* During this action, described by the 2nd C.M.R.'s regimental historian as "the most desperately fought engagement of the war for our battalion", one of the company commanders, Captain John McGregor, M.C., D.C.M., won the Victoria Cross. Single-handed he silenced a nest of German machine-guns that were holding up his company's advance, killing four of the gunners and taking eight prisoners.¹²⁰

be difficult until the British had captured the commanding ground north-east of Epinoy.¹²³

The fighting on this Sunday had been exceedingly bitter, costing 2089 Canadian casualties;* and the enemy's determined defence had made the results disappointing. General Currie was convinced however that each day's attack by the Canadian Corps forestalled a German counter-attack, and he gave orders for the battle to be continued on the 30th.¹²⁵ The new operation was planned in two phases. On the Corps right the 3rd and 4th Divisions were to attack at 6:00 a.m. to seize bridgeheads over the Canal de l'Escaut, respectively at Ramillies and Esuars, north-east of Cambrai. With this accomplished, the 1st Canadian and 11th British Divisions would drive north-eastward, the former to capture the village of Abancourt, east of the Douai railway, and the latter directed towards Fressies, at the Sensée Canal.¹²⁶

Right from the start the 4th Division encountered trouble. It had been planned that the attack should go in under a barrage of heavy artillery, which would include a smoke-screen along the Canal de l'Escaut and the "Batigny[†] Ravine", which extended north-eastward from Sancourt to the Sensée. (This was actually a valley with gently sloping sides, in which were located the villages of Sancourt, Blécourt and Bantigny. At Bantigny it was 1000 yards wide and about 40 feet deep.) But the promised smoke-screen failed, leaving the 11th Brigade's attack fully exposed to the enemy's guns on the high ground south of Abancourt. The 75th Battalion, in the lead, lost the majority of its officers and N.C.Os. Together with the 54th and 87th Battalions, also badly hit, it was withdrawn to the railway line-which was to represent the division's net gain for the day.¹²⁷ Initially the 3rd Division, attacking with the 7th Brigade, had better fortune. The P.P.C.L.I. pushed rapidly through Tilloy and on their left the R.C.R. reached the chapel that stood midway along the Blécourt-Tilloy road. But machine-gun fire that poured into their open northern flank from the direction of Blécourt forced a retirement almost to the railway, though the Patricias were able to retain their grasp on Tilloy.¹²⁸ The first phase having failed, there was no action by the 1st Canadian and the 11th British Divisions. The day's unsuccessful operations had left the crossings of the Canal de l'Escaut as far away as ever.

That afternoon (30 September) the Corps Commander held a conference at Major-General Watson's headquarters and ordered an attack for 1 October by all four divisions in line across the whole front. Divisional objectives remained essentially the same as for the 30th; the 2nd Division and Brutinel's Brigade were to be prepared, however, to move through the 3rd Division and cross the canal, exploiting success north-east of Cambrai. During the night of 30

* Among the wounded was Hon. Lt-Col. F.G. Scott, the senior Protestant Chaplain of the 1st Division, who had served for more than three and a half years on the Western Front. His contribution to the welfare of the troops was typical of the devoted service rendered by the padres in the field. "The men loved him", a former brigade commander was to write, ". . . for in hours of misery, help and comfort radiated from this undaunted soul."²⁴ Whether in an officers' mess or in a trench issuing candy or smokes, or conducting a burial behind the lines, Canon Scott was equally at home. Although he had many times been advised, and even ordered, to keep out of dangerous places, he always insisted on sharing the risks and hardship with the soldiers whom he called his "boys".

† So spelled on contemporary maps, although running through the village of Bantigny.

September–1 October the 56th Division, of the 22nd Corps, took over the northern part of the 11th British Division's front.¹²⁹

Rain set in during the night, and slippery roads delayed the despatch riders delivering barrage maps and orders to all the batteries across the Corps front. Nevertheless promptly at 5:00 a.m. under Corps control a heavy creeping barrage extending from Neuville St. Rémy to north of Epinoy set the attack in motion. It was the beginning of a day of intense artillery activity, during which the guns supporting the Canadian Corps were to fire 7000 tons of ammunition.¹³⁰ Although successful in the initial stages of the operation, later in the day the 1st Division suffered the most severe reverse of any of the divisions engaged under General Currie's command. It attacked with the 1st and 3rd Brigades—both of which had been in reserve since the battle opened on 27 September. On the right the 3rd Brigade, led by the 13th Battalion, quickly pushed through Sancourt and took Blécourt, in spite of growing machine-gun fire from the direction of Abancourt. The 16th and 14th Battalions leapfrogged the 13th east of Blécourt and occupied Cuvillers and Bantigny, pushing patrols farther forward. But as enfilade fire from the left flank increased, it became apparent that these positions were untenable - three times the enemy counter-attacked the 14th Battalion in Bantigny - and both units had to retire. Nor could the 13th Battalion retain Blécourt, in spite of efforts by the 15th Battalion to reinforce it. With the coming of darkness the Brigade was forced to withdraw west of the village, having lost 29 officers and 618 other ranks.¹³¹

The German resistance had come mostly from the left flank, where the 1st Brigade, itself hampered by the 11th Division's lack of progress to the north, had been unable to keep pace with the 3rd. Attacking north of the Batigny Ravine, the 1st and 4th Battalions had been thwarted in attempts to free Abancourt* by the heavy fire coming from in front of the British Division. That formation, assigned the task of protecting the 1st Division's left, had been halted by heavy uncut wire almost before it began to advance. The two Canadian battalions were pinned down all day at the line of the railway. The 1st Brigade's 388 casualties brought to more than a thousand the losses sustained by the 1st Division on 1 October.¹³³

Although it fought well, the 1st Division's inability to secure its objectives seriously affected the operations of the 4th and 3rd Divisions to the south. The 11th Brigade again led the 4th Division's attack—its objective the canal crossings at Eswars. From a start line just south of Sancourt the 102nd Battalion advanced to the road joining Ramillies with Cuvillers. Taking over on the right, the 87th pushed patrols eastward towards Eswars. Prisoners poured in, the identification of a large number of regiments and battalions being evidence that the enemy had thrown in strong reserves to resist the Canadians. But by this time the 1st Division had begun to withdraw, and it further appeared that the 3rd Division to the right would be unable to secure Ramillies.† With General

* In the fight for Abancourt Sgt. W. Merrifield of the 4th Battalion wiped out single-handed two enemy machine—gun emplacements, thereby winning the Victoria Cross.¹³²

† Not the Ramillies of Marlborough's campaigns, which was ten miles north of Namur.

Watson's concurrence Brig.-Gen. Odium abandoned the attempt to take Esuars in order to hold what he had gained. Backed by the 12th Brigade's 85th Battalion he succeeded in maintaining a salient south and east of Cuvillers.¹³⁴

On the extreme right Major-General Loomis had planned for the 9th Brigade to carry out the 3rd Division's operations in two phases-to capture first the high ground some 1000 yards east of Tilloy, and then to wheel to the right and seize bridgeheads over the canal at Ramillies and the nearer Pont d'Aire. The 43rd and 52nd Battalions captured the ridge at comparatively little cost, securing some 350 prisoners. But as they changed course to descend to the canal both battalions were struck by withering machine-gun fire coming from the woods on the far bank opposite Morenchies. An attempt to maintain the advance by passing the 58th and 116th Battalions through failed, the two units being forced to dig in half-way down the hill. Furthermore, the division's left flank was in the air because of the check to the 4th Division. Help came here from the 27th Battalion (2nd Division), which moved up from reserve to a position on the spur north-east of Tilloy. Though heavy German counter-attacks late in the day from the direction of Pont d'Aire drove in the 9th Brigade's advanced posts, the main line held. On General Loomis' right flank the 8th Brigade had established posts along the bank of the canal from the army boundary to the northern outskirts of Neuville St. Rémy.¹³⁵

The day's gains, though far short of what had been hoped for, represented an advance of about a mile. The only significant achievement had been the winning of the high ground east of Tilloy, which gave observation of the valley of the Escaut and the city of Cambrai. The Canadian units, many of which had been fighting continuously since 27 September, were extremely tired. In these circumstances to persist in operations against such strong opposition was inviting failure, and on the afternoon of 1 October General Horne ordered Currie to "maintain and consolidate positions gained by today's fighting and reorganize in depth".¹³⁶ That night the 2nd Division took over the front between the Cambrai-Arras railway and the northern outskirts of Blécourt, relieving the 4th Division, most of the 3rd and part of the 1st.

In the five days' fighting that had just ended the Canadian Corps had fulfilled its mission of protecting the flank of the Third and Fourth Armies. In doing so it had severely punished the German formations opposing it, capturing more than 7000 prisoners and 205 guns. In addition to these losses inflicted upon the enemy the Corps had breached the last organized defence system before Cambrai and gained a position from which an assault of the canal crossings could be launched with good prospect of success.¹³⁷ But almost a week was to pass before Cambrai was freed.

The enemy had shown ample proof of his unwillingness to yield the approaches to Cambrai without stiff resistance. Evidence shows that some units fought bitterly and skilfully until reduced to little bands of exhausted men. According to information from Canadian intelligence Reports and from the record of a great many German regimental histories, during the last four days of September the Germans employed in the Canadian Corps sector nine full divisions and parts of three others. The initial assault on 27 September hit from

north to south the 12th and 187th Divisions and the 7th Cavalry Division (dismounted). On the same day three more divisions were partly committed in fruitless counter-attacks or delaying actions -the 22nd and 207th Divisions and the 1st Guard Reserve Division. All were fully involved by the 28th, as was an "intervention" division, the tough 26th Reserve Division, sent in to fight piecemeal at various trouble spots. On 29 September, as the Canadians were striving to push forward north of Cambrai, the 234th Division appeared in the line; and on the 30th the 220th Division was brought in. In the general area about Abancourt the enemy's resistance had been bolstered on 29 September by the insertion of the 141st Regiment, of the 35th Division. Small elements of the 49th Reserve Division and the 18th Reserve Division also appeared in that sector.

As the successive Allied blows hit the Germans from Verdun to the sea, the High Command frantically shuffled its forces from one trouble spot to another. By the end of the first week of October all but three of these dozen divisions had been withdrawn in varying stages of exhaustion and new formations were approaching the combat area.

On other parts of the Western Front the four-fold offensive set in motion by Marshal Foch had started well, though in general the enemy's stout resistance had reduced the hoped-for pace of the Allied advance. The first blow had been struck on the right on 26 September, when the American First Army and the French Fourth Army attacked the great German salient along its southern face between Reims and Verdun. In spite of the difficulties confronting the Americans in penetrating the forests of the rugged Argonne country, by 3 October the two armies had driven the enemy back seven miles, and German reinforcements were hastening to the area.¹³⁸ Attacking on the 27th, the Third Army, covered as we have seen by the operations of the Canadian Corps forming the First Army's right wing, had broken through the Hindenburg Line south-west of Cambrai to reach the St. Quentin Canal and draw level with the Fourth Army farther south. All this was preliminary to General Rawlinson's attack, for which his Fourth Army had been allotted the bulk of the available tanks, and a heavy share of the supporting guns. Early on the 29th the Fourth Army, which included two American divisions, joined in the attack, and by nightfall had penetrated three miles into the main Hindenburg defences north of St. Quentin.¹³⁹

In the meantime the offensive by the Belgian Army and the British Second Army in Flanders had opened auspiciously on 28 September. In spite of heavy rain the first two days' fighting won back the whole of the Messines-Passchendaele ridge, for possession of which so much blood had been expended in earlier battles. Opposite Ypres the advance progressed more than nine miles, and with the old churned-up battlefield behind them the Anglo-Belgian forces seemed to be in good position to speed forward and turn the enemy's northern flank. But now operations came to a halt, for staffs unused to open warfare could not cope with the difficulty of supplying the attacking troops across the trackless mud of the war-torn ground.¹⁴⁰ From the southern flank of the Allied offensive came similar reports of blocked communications that were holding up the

American offensive west of the Meuse. Impatiently Haig wrote in his diary on 1 October: "What very valuable days are being lost! All this is the result of inexperience and ignorance on the part of the Belgian and American Staffs* of the needs of a modern attacking force."¹⁴¹

The Capture of Cambrai, 8-9 October

Between 2 and 8 October there was little action in the Canadian Corps' sector. The remainder of the 1st and 4th Divisions moved into reserve, leaving the front held, from north to south, by the 11th British, and the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions. On 6 October plans for further reliefs were abruptly cancelled as orders came for a further attempt to seize Cambrai in conjunction with the Third Army, which had succeeded in crossing the Canal de l'Escaut south of the city advantage of any opportunities to exploit eastward.¹⁴³

The operation was to be carried out in two phases. In the first phase the Third Army's 17th Corps, advancing from the south, was to capture the Niergnies-Awoingt Ridge, immediately south-east of Cambrai, while the Canadian Corps staged an artillery demonstration. With this phase completed the 2nd Canadian Division was to force a passage over the canal between Morenchies and Ramillies, and establish a line on the high ground behind Escaudoeuvres, joining hands with the British Corps. The 3rd Division on the right of the 2nd would then cross the canal and establish bridgeheads in Cambrai, while Brutinel's Brigade took advantage of any opportunities to exploit eastward.¹⁴³

The 2nd Division was faced with the problem of attacking down the same exposed slopes which had cost the 3rd such heavy casualties a week before. The lack of cover clearly dictated a night assault, which would be launched at 9:30 p.m. on the day on which the 17th Corps reached its Awoingt objective. Major-General Burstall planned that the 6th Brigade should lead off by capturing Ramillies. For the remainder of the operation it would form a left flank guard reaching back to the Batigny Ravine. The 5th Brigade was to take the bridges at Morenchies, Pont d'Aire and a swing bridge at the bend of the canal immediately south of Ramillies, and establish a good bridgehead about Escaudoeuvres on the east bank. The 4th Brigade would then advance through the 5th to make contact with the 17th Corps. Full precautions were taken to seal off the left flank from German attack. The 1st Motor Machine Gun Brigade, under command of the 4th Division, was detailed to assist the 6th Brigade in maintaining its guard. During the night of 7-8 October British engineers projected 1000 drums of lethal gas - phosgene and chloropicrin - into the Batigny Ravine to deny it to the enemy as an assembly area.¹⁴⁴ Units of the 6th Brigade pushed out a screen of posts between Blécourt and Cuvillers.¹⁴⁵

* The same criticism might have been made concerning the staffs of all the Allied armies at that time (see below, p. 468)

The Third Army's attack went in on the morning of 8 October. While initial reports of the action were encouraging it soon became clear that the progress of the 17th Corps was falling short of expectation. At about 5:00 p.m. the 2nd Division was warned that regardless of whether Awoingt had been captured or not, the canal might have to be forced that night. When confirming orders came three hours later, General Burstall decided to carry out only the first stage of the operation—the capture of a bridgehead at Escaudoeuvres.

The night was very dark and broken by sudden, cold showers and gusts of wind. Troops of the 2nd Division, wearing arm bands of white calico for identification, attacked at 1:30 a.m. The assault was a complete surprise and caught the enemy in the midst of preparing for a withdrawal.¹⁴⁶ It was indeed the beginning of a large-scale retirement across the whole front from the Oise to the Scarpe as the German Eighteenth, Second and Seventeenth Armies began falling back towards the Hermann Line.¹⁴⁷ Construction of this position behind the two northern Groups of Armies had been ordered on 6 September, after the first big Allied offensive, but the required labour was not available before the last days of September. The Hermann Line branched off from the Flanders II Line (which ran from the Belgian coast at Nieuport to east of Roulers). It passed immediately west of Tournai, Valenciennes and Le Cateau, following successively stretches of the Scheldt, its tributary the Selle, and the upper Oise, before joining the Hunding-Brunhild position, constructed in 1917.¹⁴⁸ Prisoners taken by the Canadians in the early hours of 9 October confirmed that the initial retirement of the Seventeenth Army was to a line midway between Cambrai and Valenciennes, running east of the Canal de l'Escaut from Iwuy south through the villages of Naves and Cagnoncies.¹⁴⁹

The 27th Battalion quickly captured Ramillies. Early morning patrols of the 29th and 31st Battalions found Blécourt, Batigny and Cuvillers unoccupied. By mid-morning all three places were firmly in Canadian hands.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile the leading troops of the 5th Brigade with parties of engineers attached had rushed the bridges at Pont d'Aire, where the canal split into several channels. The job of preventing the demolition of the main bridge at this point was assigned to a party of the 4th Battalion Canadian Engineers, led by Captain C.N. Mitchell. While the Canadians worked to render harmless the explosive charges attached to the girders, Mitchell held at bay an enemy party attempting to rush the bridge from the far bank, killing three and capturing twelve. For this heroic act, which preserved the vital bridge from destruction, Mitchell was awarded the Victoria Cross.¹⁵¹ It was still dark when the infantry crossed the canal by two hastily installed footbridges on cork floats and established a firm bridgehead on the far bank. The 25th Battalion captured Escaudoeuvres, and with the 22nd and 26th Battalions began mopping up the north-eastern outskirts of Cambrai.¹⁵²

On the Canadian right flank the 4th and 5th C.M.R., leading the 3rd Division's attack, had advanced through Neuville St. Rémy and crossed the canal on partly demolished bridges to enter Cambrai itself. Chief opposition came from spasmodic enemy shelling, and except for small German rearguards the

Canadians found the city deserted. Parties from the 4th Battalion C.E. immediately began constructing new bridges for wheeled traffic and guns to go forward, and clearing the streets of booby-traps and mines. Evidence of pillage and wanton destruction by the retreating Germans met the Canadians as they advanced. For some days they had seen columns of smoke rising from Cambrai, and it was now apparent that the enemy had determined to destroy the city by fire. But the rapid progress of the Canadians defeated these plans. Piles of combustible material were found unignited, and detachments of engineers extinguished the fires which were raging in many areas. General Loomis made a formal entry into Cambrai at 11:00 a.m., and by midday the 3rd Division had established a line of posts along the eastern outskirts. In the evening troops of the 24th British Division moving up from the south joined hands with the 2nd Division. The 3rd Division's front was pinched out, allowing its units to retire for a rest well-deserved after twelve days of continuous fighting.¹⁵³ On the Canadian Corps' northern flank the 11th British Division, after being held up at Abancourt, by evening had reached and occupied Pailencourt, 5000 yards to the north-east.

Early morning air reconnaissance on the 9th showed that the Germans had withdrawn from the angle between the Sensée and Escaut Canals, blowing bridges as they went. At first there was little except occasional shelling to impede the progress of the 2nd Division, clearing north-eastward astride the Canal de l'Escaut. On the right the 5th Brigade advanced on Naves, while the 6th kept pace along the west bank of the canal. The situation was one of the rare occasions when it seemed that mobile forces might be profitably employed. Brutinel's Brigade was ordered forward and the Canadian Light Horse received directions to push ahead and seize successive objectives of high ground north-west of Naves and on the far side of the Selle.

The participation by the cavalry was short lived. The leading squadron, riding up the Cambrai-Iwuy road, got on to the first objective but was held there by machine-gun fire converging from Iwuy and from Naves. The attempt to exploit across the Selle was abandoned and the cavalry withdrawn, having suffered casualties of a dozen men and 47 horses.¹⁵⁴ By the end of the day the 6th Brigade had occupied Eswars and reached Thun l'Evêque just beyond, though the latter village remained in German hands. At dusk the 26th Battalion ran into heavy machine-gun fire coming from behind strong wire defences west of Naves, and the 5th Brigade's units were forced to dig in for the night.¹⁵⁵

General Horne's orders to the Canadian Corps for 10 October were to continue clearing between the canals and covering the Third Army's left flank. From the opposition which the Canadians encountered it was evident that the Germans were determined to hold as long as possible their link between the Selle and the Scheldt. During the morning the 31st Battalion occupied the village of Thun l'Evêque. Across the canal other units of the 6th Brigade took Thun St. Martin but could advance no further towards Iwuy. On the divisional right the 4th Brigade had no trouble in clearing Naves, and the 19th Battalion attacked across the dry bed of the Erclin River, just south of Iwuy. The crossing was made under

cover of fire provided by the 2nd Battalion C.M.G.C. On General Currie's northern flank the 11th British Division cleared Estrun at the junction of the canals. Farther west along the Sensée patrols reached the outskirts of Hem Lenglet, and the village was taken later that night.¹⁵⁶

The End of the Battle

The relief of the Canadian Corps began during the evening of 10 October, when the 49th British Division took over the southern portion of the 2nd Division's front. But before leaving this part of the line the Canadians were to strike the enemy one more blow. The straightforward plan for operations on the 11th called for an advance of some 6000 yards. On General Currie's right flank the 49th Division was directed to establish a bridgehead over the Selle at Saulzoir. The 2nd Division was to take Iwuy and advance on the villages of Avesnes-le-Sec and Lieu St. Armand, which stood on a ridge overlooking the river. The 4th Brigade, on the right, would then continue north-eastward to Noyelles and cross the Selle in that area. The 11th British Division, on the left flank, was ordered to clear the ground between the Iwuy-Denain railway and the Escaut Canal as far north as Bouchain.¹⁵⁷

When the 4th and 6th Canadian Brigades attacked at 9:00 a.m. on the 11th, a vigorous reply from the enemy's artillery and machine-guns warned that the day would be one of hard fighting. The 6th Brigade met particularly heavy resistance from Iwuy, which was held by units of the 10th Ersatz Division, and it was past midday before the 28th Battalion, assisted by the 31st, finally cleared the sprawling village. It was during this operation that Lieutenant W.L. Algie, a young subaltern of the 20th Battalion, which was suffering heavy casualties on the 4th Brigade's exposed left flank, led a small party of volunteers across the brigade boundary to rush two German machine-guns and clear the east end of the village. He was killed while bringing up reinforcements, and was awarded the Victoria Cross post-humously.¹⁵⁸ About mid-morning as the 4th Brigade, keeping line with the British brigades on its right, reached the high ground south-west of Avesnes-le-Sec, the Germans counter-attacked with some half dozen tanks accompanied by infantry. British and Canadian troops were driven back distances of up to a mile. A battery of field artillery was rushed forward to deal with the tanks, and the guns of the 2nd C.M.M.G. Brigade, already in the line, halted the German infantry with a stream of bullets at ranges of less than 400 yards. During the afternoon both divisions launched a second attack, which regained much of the lost ground. As the day ended the 2nd Division was well established on the forward slope of the Iwuy spur. But the enemy's defences along the Selle were still intact.¹⁵⁹

At 5:00 p.m. on 11 October General Currie handed over command of the Corps front to the G.O.C. 22nd Corps. For the Canadians it was the end of the Arras-Cambrai battle. Their record from 26 August to 11 October was an imposing one. In 47 days the Corps had fought forward 23 miles against very strong resistance. The opposing forces had been identified as belonging to as

many as 31 German divisions, though many of these formations were already badly depleted. Under Currie's firm direction the Corps had functioned well and smoothly; its casualties were many, but by First World War standards not excessive in the light of their task. The total officially reported killed, wounded and missing between 22 August and 11 October numbered 1544 officers and 29,262 other ranks. In achieving its victory the Corps had captured 18,585 prisoners, together with 371 guns and nearly 2000 machine-guns. Besides depriving the enemy of the great distributing centre of Cambrai, the Canadians had liberated 54 towns and villages standing on more than 116 square miles of French soil.¹⁶⁰

Altogether this was impressive testimony to the professional efficiency of the Canadian soldier and his leaders.