

THE SOMME OFFENSIVE

excerpt from *The Real War 1914-1918*(*)

By Captain B.H. Liddell Hart.

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The series of "battles" -- or, to be strategically accurate, the series of limited actions -- which opened on July I constituted the offensive campaign of the Franco-British armies in 1916. Into it was thrown the entire British effort of the year on the western front, and such part of the French effort as was available after the exhausting strain of the long defensive "battle" at Verdun. And it proved both the glory and the graveyard of "Kitchener's Army" - those citizen volunteers who, instantly answering the call in 1914, had formed the first national army of Britain.

The Somme offensive had its genesis at the [Chantilly Conference](#) of the Allied commanders on December 5, 1915. Joffre, in his appreciation of the situation, claimed that the autumn offensives in Champagne and Artois (including Loos) had brought "brilliant tactical results," and ascribed the failure to develop these into a strategical success partly to bad weather and partly to a temporary shortage of ammunition. The essential for the next effort was that "the Higher Command must have no anxiety as regards ammunition," and for this reason it could not be undertaken in less than three months. By early February he had realized that the date must be later still, if, as was essential, the Russians were to attack simultaneously and the British were to take an adequate share with their newly raised armies. At a meeting with Haig he emphasized the view that a broad frontage of attack was the method of success, and to this end desired a combined offensive by the French and British "bras dessus bras dessous," with the attacking line of one Ally prolonging that of the other Ally. Joffre envisaged the French attacking with forty divisions on a twenty-five miles front from Lassigny to the Somme, and the British attacking thence to Hébuterne, fourteen miles, with twenty-five divisions, or as near that number as possible.

While there was unanimity on the main scheme, a certain divergence of view became manifest in regard to the method. In these discussions Joffre constantly pressed for the British to make preparatory attacks north of the Somme and in conjunction with the French and Belgians between Ypres and the Belgian coast -- to draw in and fix the enemy's reserves, so easing the way for the Franco-British main blow. Haig preferred to trust in one great stroke, with all the forces available and when they were fully prepared. Although Haig's attitude was justified by the incompleteness of his resources and by the barrenness of such preparatory attacks the previous autumn, the critic is compelled to recognize that Joffre had the experience of history on his side, and that the experience of the war was to show that decisive offensives were vain until the enemy's reserves had been attracted elsewhere. But if Haig acceded only reluctantly and in a modified form to the French pressure, he was unquestionably right in maintaining that any such preparatory offensive to fulfill its object should only precede the general offensive by ten days or a fortnight.

The result of the postponement of the Allied offensive, whether inevitable or not, was to yield the initiative to the Germans, and their attack at Verdun, from February 21 onwards, impaired the whole of the Allied plan and campaign in 1916.

On February 22 Joffre urged anew that the British should launch the preparatory attacks without delay, and also take over more line. Haig did not see his way to comply with the first request, and in the outcome no such moves preceded the July assault. To meet the second request, hitherto evaded, he hastened the relief of the French Tenth Army, round Arras, which was sandwiched between his own First and Third Armies. Allenby's Third Army side-slipped northwards, and the newly formed Fourth Army, under Rawlinson, took over its front between Maricourt and Hébuterne. The British now held a continuous front from Ypres almost to the Somme.

As the French were drained of their strength at Verdun, so did their share of the Somme plan evaporate. Ultimately their front of attack shrank from twenty-five miles to eight, and their force from forty divisions to sixteen, of which only five attacked on July 1. From now onwards the British were to take up the main burden of the western front campaign, and because of this fact alone July 1, 1916, is a landmark in the history of the war.

It is a question how far Haig's real aims were reduced in proportion to the shrinkage of resources. His orders no longer ordained the unlimited objectives of Loos and Champagne, nor foresaw so rapid a break-through as had then proved a mirage. And he framed an alternative plan, to switch his Reserve Army north to Ypres, in case of complete failure. But he does not seem to have foreseen the case of mixed success and failure -- always the greater probability in war. And for this want of elasticity his plan suffered in execution. Realism was perhaps equally lacking. The hopeful intention of the British Command was, in the first place, to break the German front between Maricourt and Serre; in the second place to secure the high ground between Bapaume and Ginchy, while the French seized that round Sailly and Rancourt; in the third place to wheel to the left and roll up the German flank as far as Arras, so enlarging the breach. With this object all available troops, including cavalry, would work northwards, from the line Bapaume-Miraumont, while a cooperating attack was launched against the German front southwest of Arras. Fourthly was to come a general advance towards Cambrai-Douai. What a contrast between intention and achievement! Strategically, the plan was shrewdly designed, and Haig was wise to take such long views. But he does not seem to have looked clearly enough at the ground beneath his feet. The very belief in such far-reaching possibilities suggests a failure to diagnose the actual conditions. There was a fundamental unrealism in a plan which, while discarding the old and ever-new master key of surprise, made no pretense to provide a substitute.

The British attack, between Maricourt and Serre, was entrusted to Rawlinson's Fourth Army of eighteen divisions, of which eleven were to lead the attack, with five in close reserve. Only two, together with three cavalry divisions, were in army reserve. In addition a corps of three divisions and the headquarters of a reserve army -- under Gough -- were located in the battle area in the hands of the Commander-in-Chief. Two divisions of the Third Army were to make a subsidiary attack round Gommecourt. The artillery concentration totaled one thousand five hundred guns, averaging one gun to every twenty yards of front, a record at that time, although far eclipsed by later concentrations. The gun strength was the same as that of the Germans for their great Dunajec break-through, but the defenses on the Russian front a year before could not be compared with the network of wire and trenches on the Somme front. Another significant contrast was that, whereas the French had nine hundred heavy guns, the British had less than half this number for a far wider front.

In subsequent years it has been claimed that Haig did not aim at a break-through. Undoubtedly as the hour approached he became less hopeful, in view of the shrinkage of French aid and aims, and some weeks before the attack he gave the Cabinet a warning that a decision might not be possible, and that his purpose was to wear down the Germans in readiness for a final blow in 1917. But caution in dealing with one's employers is natural. And on such questions personal evidence is usually a truer guide than the discreet ambiguity of official documents. Rawlinson, according to his diary, was against an attempt to break through "the whole of the enemy's lines of defense . . . in one attack." And on April 30 he records:

"The attack is to go for the big thing. I still think we would do better to proceed by shorter steps; but I have told D.H. (Douglas Haig) I will carry out his plan with as much enthusiasm as if it were my own."

But the slow and long-drawn-out bombardment which he advocated had been adopted instead of a six hours' hurricane bombardment. General Seely, then in command of one of the cavalry brigades, has also stated that his orders for July 1 were "to gallop right through to Cambrai, encircle it, and cut the railway lines to the east."

To understand both the problem and the course of the battle a brief description of the ground is necessary, for in few battles on the western front did topography have so important an influence or make so deep an impression on the minds of the combatants. From Péronne, where the Somme makes a right-angled turn south, a range of hills, runs northwest, forming the watershed between the Somme and the basins of the Scarpe and the Scheldt. This ridge, intersected by the narrow valley of the little river Ancre, had been in German possession since the "race to the sea" of October 1914, and it gave the enemy command and observation over the Allied lines and the land behind them. For the first year this disadvantage mattered little, for when British troops relieved the French here in July 1915 the front had an air and a condition of peacefulness astonishing to men accustomed to the incessant "bickering" of Ypres or La Bassée. Report said that in some places the troops of our Ally went back for *déjeuner* to villages hardly touched, close to the line, leaving only sentries in the trenches; that in another hamlet which stood in No Man's Land the sleeping accommodation was nightly shared between the opposing sides by tacit consent. I can vouch for the fact that in the first months after the British had taken over this front it was possible for battalions to drill undisturbed on fields in full view of the German lines -- whereas six months later billets several miles further back were harassed by gunfire. The campaign policy of the French, except when engaged in active operations, was "live and let live," and in retrospect there seems little doubt that it was wiser than the British policy of continual "strafing." For when the Germans held the dominating positions, as well as a superiority in ammunition and equipment, these worrying tactics wore down the British troops more than the enemy -- attrition on the wrong side of the balance-sheet. Further, they stirred the Germans to strengthen their trench defenses, to develop by art the advantages of nature, so that the offensive came against an almost impregnable fortress instead of against the relatively weak defense system which existed in the autumn of 1915. Masefield, in his book, [The Old Front Line](#), expressed the situation aptly: "Almost in every part of this old front our men had to go up hill to attack The enemy had the lookout posts, with the fine views over France, and the sense of domination. Our men were down below, with no view of anything but of stronghold after stronghold, just up above, being made stronger daily." Today the tumbled desolation that was the

Somme battlefield has passed. Though he underestimated the time, Masfield's instinct was correct that "when the trenches are filled in and the plough has gone over them the ground will not keep the look of war. One summer with its flowers will cover most of the ruin that man can make, and then these places, from which the driving back of the enemy began, will be hard indeed to trace, even with maps." "Centre Way, Peel Trench, Munster Alley, and these other paths to glory will be deep under the corn, and gleaners will sing at Dead Mule Corner." Yet, while even memory finds it difficult to recapture the war-time aspect, a tranquil visit impresses the mind with the steepness of the ascent and the command from the ridge, even more than in days when progress was reckoned in yards and the contour was seen from the eye-level of trenches and shell-holes. From an artillery point of view there were advantages in attacking uphill, because the German trenches were more clearly displayed, but in other ways it was a physical and psychological handicap not only to the attacking infantry.

Surprise, difficult in face of such commanding positions, was the more difficult because the art of concealing preparations, and of camouflage, had yet to be relearned. The construction of new hutments on both sides of the Ancre provided the Germans with the first clue, in February, and thenceforward signs continually multiplied. Falkenhayn contemplated an attempt to dislocate the British offensive, but found that he could not spare the necessary troops. If the vast preparations had not given it away, a bombardment of a week's duration would in any case have announced the coming assault. Even earlier, an incautiously worded speech of appeal to the munition workers by the British Minister of Labor, Mr. Arthur Henderson, on June 2, had given the German Command a hint of its early delivery. The one redeeming factor was that, despite accurate predictions and warnings of the attack both from the immediate army command (the Second) and from agents abroad, Falkenhayn continued to believe that it was only a preliminary to the real blow further north, apparently feeling that British preparations were too blatant to be true. In consequence he withheld reinforcements, and not until July 5 was he convinced that the Somme was Haig's chosen battleground. In the meantime he dismissed the Chief of Staff of the Second Army for having been right and "asking for more."

The bombardment began on June 24; the attack was intended for June 29, but was later postponed until July 1 owing to a momentary break in the weather. This postponement, made at French request, involved not only the spreading out of the ammunition over a longer period, and a consequent loss of intensity, but a greater strain on the assaulting troops, who, after being keyed up for the effort, had to remain another forty-eight hours in cramped trenches under the exhausting noise of their own gunfire and the enemy's retaliation -- conditions made worse by torrential rain which flooded the trenches.

July 1 dawned a day of broiling heat, and at 7 a.m. the bombardment rose to its height. Half an hour later the infantry advanced from their trenches -- and thousands fell, strewing No Man's Land with their bodies, before the German front trench was even reached. For their opponents were the Germans of 1916, most stubborn and skillful fighters; while the shells flattened their trenches, they sheltered in dugouts or shell-holes, and then as the barrage lifted dragged out their machine-guns, to pour an unslackening hail of lead into the unduly dense waves of the attackers -- for 1916 marked the nadir of infantry attacks, the revival of formations that were akin to the eighteenth century in their formalism and lack of maneuvering power. Battalions attacked in four or eight waves, not

more than a hundred yards apart, the men in each almost shoulder to shoulder, in a symmetrical well-dressed alignment, and taught to advance steadily upright at a slow walk with their rifles held aslant in front of them, bayonets upwards - so as to catch the eye of the observant enemy. An excellent imitation of Frederick's infantry *automata*, with the difference that they were no longer advancing against muskets of an effective range of barely a hundred yards. It is hardly remarkable that by nightfall on July 1 many battalions were barely a hundred strong. Haig, indeed, had laid down that the Verdun method of the Germans should be adopted, strong patrols feeling their way forward to test the result of the bombardment before the mass of the infantry were committed. But his Chief of Staff, Kiggell, nevertheless ordered "waves." Only as the upstanding waves were broken up by the fire did advance become possible. For then human nature and primitive cunning reasserted themselves against authorized tactics; the more enterprising and still uncowed survivors formed little groups, usually under some natural leader, and worked their way by short rushes, and crawling from shell-hole to shell-hole, stalking the opposing machine-guns, and often progressing to a considerable depth with little further loss. But in many places packets of the enemy and nests of machine-guns were left in their wake, to take heavy toll of the supports.

Thus, save in the south, the force of the tide slackened and later ebbed. Fricourt, on the right center, formed a turning point both in the front and in the fortune of the day. The French, south of the Somme and north of it as far as Maricourt, gained all their objectives with slight loss. This success they owed partly to their more flexible tactics and heavier artillery concentration, partly to the lesser strength of the German defenses, and to the fact that the attack here came as a tactical surprise to the Germans, who had expected an attack only on the British front. Between Maricourt and Fricourt the British XIII Corps (30th and 18th Divisions) reached its objectives, though with greater loss, capturing Montauban. On its left the XV Corps partially achieved its task of pinching out the bastion of Fricourt village and wood. The 7th Division turned one flank by capturing Mametz, and on the other flank the 21st Division penetrated some half a mile into the German lines, holding on to a narrow tongue of captured land with both its own flanks in the air until Fricourt fell next day.

But the 21st Division marked the boundary of success, and all to the north was failure -- with the heaviest British loss of any day's fighting in the war. One significant factor was the greater width of No Man's Land. Of the III Corps the 34th Division pushed past La Boisselle to Contalmaison, but it was forced to fall back, its flank enfiladed by Ovillers, against which the waves of the 8th Division beat practically in vain. Northward, again, the X Corps (32nd and 36th Divisions) penetrated some distance into the German lines, portions of the 36th Ulster Division even to Grandcourt, but the supports could not get forward, the advanced parties were cut off, and at nightfall only small fractions of the German front trenches near Thièpvail remained in British hands. The attack of the VIII Corps (29th, 4th, and 31st Divisions) on the left flank was shattered more abruptly, though here again a few isolated parties pressed through to Beaumont Hamel and Serre.

The tally of prisoners who passed through the corps cages that day is in some degree an index of the comparative initial success : XIII Corps (Congreve), 934 ; XV Corps (Horne), 517 ; III Corps (Pulteney), 32 ; X Corps (Morland), 478 ; VIII Corps (Hunter-Weston), 22. It reveals that in the north the X Corps made a deep penetration, although the Ulstermen were forced to relinquish the ground later because of the repulse of the troops on their flanks. For the French, who had taken 6,000 prisoners at little cost, July 1 may be counted a victory. But the major attack was that of the

British, and here the Germans could justly claim success, for with only six divisions available, and roughly a regiment holding each British division's sector of attack, they had only yielded 1,983 prisoners and a small tract of ground to the assault of thirteen British divisions. The high hopes built up beforehand had fallen to the ground, and the months of preparation and sowing had only garnered a bitter fruit. Yet, although a military failure, July 1 was an epic of heroism, and, better still, the proof of the moral quality of the new armies of Britain, who, in making their supreme sacrifice of the war, passed through the most fiery and bloody of ordeals with their courage unshaken and their fortitude established.

All along the attacking line these quondam civilians bore a percentage of losses such as no professional army of past wars had ever been deemed capable of suffering -- without being broken as an effective instrument. And they carried on the struggle, equally bitter, for another five months. Experience would improve their tactical action, still more their handling by the Higher Command, but no subsequent feats could surpass the moral standard of July 1, "a day of an intense blue summer beauty, full of roaring violence, and confusion of death, agony, and triumph, and from dawn till dark. All through that day little rushes of the men of our race went towards that No Man's Land from the bloody shelter of our trenches. Some hardly left our trenches, many never crossed the green space, many died in the enemy wire, many had to fall back. Others won across, and went further and drove the enemy back from line to line till the Battle of the Somme ended in the falling back of the enemy." That falling back, however, was long postponed, and when it came was so timed as to discomfort the attackers far more than it advantaged them.

Late on July 2, Haig, confronted with a difficult situation, decided to press the attack where success had been gained, instead of making a fresh frontal assault on the intact defenses from Ovillers northwards. The tactical experience of the later years -- and earlier history -- confirms his wisdom, and the only question is why the exploitation of the success in the south was not more prompt. Part of the dense infantry strength which had been used to strew No Man's Land with dead might better have been kept to swell the reserve for such a purpose. Even as it was, the Germans were badly shaken, and if British reserve divisions were few, theirs were less, as their delay in counter-attacking showed. But the Fourth Army made no attempt to push reserves through at the sectors of least resistance, and at 10 p.m. on July 1 merely ordered its corps to "continue the attack" evenly along the whole front. Fortunately the two left wing corps commanders pointed out the hopelessness of a fresh attack without adequate preparation, and the plan was then modified on Haig's intervention. Less fortunately, this intervention was somewhat belated. All that he did on July 1 was to place the two left corps (X and VIII) under Gough -- but without removing them from the control of the Fourth Army. As they were not in a state to attack unbroken defenses again, nothing happened on July 2. Meantime the XIII Corps, which had made a real penetration on the extreme right, was held back. This passivity was the more regrettable because, in conjunction with the French, it had already shattered a ragged and fumbling right counterattack by a German division hurried up from Cambrai -- the one enemy reserve immediately available.

Opportunity receded further when, for July 3, Rawlinson merely ordered a renewed attack by the left wing in conjunction with his center. This plan Haig approved, but modified -- with not altogether happy results. He was now turning his eyes to the right, and he reduced the morrow's attack to thrusts by small packets against Thièpvall and Ovillers. The rearrangement accentuated the

defects due to divided control, so that the attacks became not only petty in scale but disjointed in delivery -- and proved void of any effect except further casualties. Meantime, troops of the XIII Corps on the right walked into Bernafay Wood almost without opposition, but were restrained from going further. The French XX Corps next to it was, as a corollary, also constrained to inactivity, but south of the Somme the French captured the German second line and the high ground overlooking Péronne.

Haig was now convinced of the advisability of concentrating his effort on the right. But he met a French stumbling-block. Both Joffre and Foch -- who was in direct charge of the French share of the offensive -- insisted that Haig should capture the ridge from Pozières to Thièpvál in the center as a preliminary to any attack on the right, or Longueval, sector Haig's contention that he had not enough ammunition to cover effectively a renewed attack on the whole front, and that the Longueval ridge defenses were weaker than at Thièpvál, made no impression, and Joffre declared that if the British attacked Longueval they would be beaten. Indeed, he went so far as to give Haig a direct order to attack in the center, whereupon Haig retorted that he was responsible to the British Government, and that, although he was ready to follow Joffre's strategy, in matters of tactics he would take his own line. This settled the question.

A long interval followed, however, before the Fourth Army was ready for the attack on the enemy's second line. The interval was the longer because Haig considered it necessary to clear away all the enemy's outlying footholds before attempting the main stroke, and sought to seize these by a series of nibbling attacks. At the same time the X and VIII Corps on the left were definitely transferred from Rawlinson's Fourth Army to Gough's Reserve Army, later to become the Fifth, and the available reserves and guns were concentrated on the reduced Fourth Army front.

Thus, during the days immediately following July 1 when the German defense was seriously shaken in the southern sector, -- Montauban-La Boisselle, -- the renewed attacks were slight in strength and spasmodic. The resistance had breathing space to reorganize and harden, to strengthen its hold on the commanding ridge, Ginchy-Pozières, where ran the German second line. The British progress became very slow, and a special obstacle was offered by Mametz Wood. The three days' abortive attacks -- by the 38th (Welsh) Division - and consequent delay here were to prejudice the main stroke. But as great a handicap was imposed from above.

If the British Higher Command had been over-ambitious and unduly optimistic before July 1 it perhaps now tended to the other extreme. Rawlinson, however, had been brought to realize that bold and rapid measures were essential if he was to forestall the German reinforcements and labor which were rebuilding, in rear, the fortified front faster than the British could force a way through it. If the British waited until their front line had been carried near enough to the German second line (Braune Stellung) for a close assault, they might well be confronted with a barrier as firm as the original of July 1. Rawlinson framed a plan to attack and break the German defenses on a four-mile front between Delville Wood on the right, and Bazentin-le-Petit Wood on the left. His right was fully three-quarters of a mile distant from this second line, with the vital tactical feature of Trones Wood between still in German hands. Thence towards his left No Man's Land gradually narrowed, until in front of Mametz Wood it was only about three hundred yards wide; but Trones Wood enfiladed a large part of the line of advance. If the obvious course was adopted, and an attack delivered only on the left, the prospects were barren. For the experience of 1915 had shown that an attack on a narrow

frontage against an enemy with ample guns might gain an initial success, only to be blown out of the captured fragment by the concentration of hostile gunfire thus facilitated.

Instead of the obvious, Rawlinson took a course which for all its risks -- calculated risks -- was more truly secure and economical of force. The troops were to cross the exposed area by an advance under cover of darkness, followed by a dawn attack, preceded by a hurricane bombardment of only a few minutes' duration. This plan revived the use of surprise, which lay rusting throughout the greater part of the war, until, in fact, the last year from Cambrai onwards.

In 1916 the ideas of a night advance and of such a brief bombardment were alike so fresh in revival as to be a shock and appear a gamble to orthodox opinion. That he should attempt the maneuver with New Army troops, men who had been civilians less than two years before, made his plan seem yet more rash. The Commander-in-Chief was strongly opposed to it, preferring a more limited alternative, but Rawlinson persevered, his own confidence reinforced by the confidence of the actual troop-leaders in their ability to carry out the night operation. For once Horne, whose capacity for agreeing with the Commander-in-Chief was as consistent as his own rise, agreed instead with his immediate superior, and this fact may have helped to tilt the scales. Rawlinson gained his way, but instead of the already delayed attack being launched on July 13, as he intended, the reluctance of the Higher Command caused it to be postponed until July 14 -- a day's delay that was to have grave consequences. Another drawback was the lack of French cooperation, owing to lack of faith in the prospects of the attack.

The attacking troops were composed of the 9th and 3rd Divisions of the XIII Corps on the right (W. T. Furse and J. A. L. Haldane), and the 7th and 21st Divisions of the XV Corps on the left (H. E. Watts and D. G. M. Campbell), while on the extreme right flank Maxse's 18th Division had the task of clearing Trones Wood. On the extreme left the III Corps formed a defensive flank between Bazentin-le-Petit Wood and Contalmaison. Cavalry divisions were brought up close and placed under the orders of the two attacking corps.

The German front was held by only six battalions of mixed divisions in General Stein's group, with the 7th Division in reserve south of Bapaume. The trenches of the Braune Stellung ran just in front of Delville Wood, Longueval, Bazentinle-Grand and Bazentin-le-Petit Woods, with High Wood, "like a dark cloud on the skyline" behind, dominating the whole area of approach. From it the Germans could see several miles behind the old British front line of July 1.

On the right, markers went out some hours after darkness had fallen on July 13 and placed white tapes to guide the troops along their 1000 yards approach; then further tapes at right angles to mark the forward line on which the troops were to form up, so that they should start parallel with their objective. The hazardous and difficult task was carried through successfully, and soon after midnight the battalions assembled in the shelter of Caterpillar Valley, moving up in long worm-like lines of companies or platoons in single file. At 3.20 A.M. the barrage fell on the German trenches, and five minutes later the whole line moved forward to the assault. The vision which had dared to attempt such a surprise stroke, and had supported imagination with good staff work, was justified. The whole of the German second line was rapidly overrun, and the attacking troops passed beyond. From left to right, the 21st Division pressed through Bazentin-le-Petit Wood to the village, the 7th Division cleared Bazentin-le-Grand Wood and pushed up the slopes towards High Wood, the 3rd Division captured Bazentin-le-Grand, and the 9th Division fought their way, albeit with difficulty,

through Longueval to the outskirts of Delville Wood.

On this right flank every yard of advance was bitterly opposed, and in the depths of Delville Wood, during the ensuing days, the South Africans made their supreme sacrifice of the war -- where today a white stone colonnade of peaceful beauty commemorates, and contrasts with, the bloodiest battle-hell of 1916.

But on the left flank opportunity -- and open country stretched out its arms. Soon after midday the German resistance was clearly disintegrating on the front of the 7th Division, and an effort was made to exploit the chance, although some hours were lost. The 7th Division moved forward soon after 6 P.m. with two squadrons of cavalry working on their flank the first mounted cavalry seen on a British battlefield since 1914. Roseate expectations pictured open warfare on the skyline, but once more it proved a mirage in the military desert. The troops of the illustrious 7th Division were a shade battle-weary; their depleted ranks had been filled with many untried drafts. Whatever the cause, the advance tended to lack vigor, and although most of the wood was cleared that evening, the northern corner of the flanking trenches remained in the Germans' grip. Worst of all, twenty-four hours' postponement had enabled fresh reserves to come up, and, as their strength steadily swelled, the German hold tightened, the British relaxed. Late on July 15 the wood was evacuated under pressure of counter-attacks, and two months were to pass before possession was regained. The surprise storm of the Somme "Bastille" on July 14 brought the British to the verge of a strategic decision; thereafter their effort degenerated into a battle of attrition.

After the disappointing end of the July 14 stroke, Haig played for smaller stakes. His overdrawn supplies of ammunition were causing concern, and he had in mind no effective substitute for gun-pounding as an "opener" for the enemy's sealed front. Early in June he had contemplated the step of transferring his main offensive to the Messines sector in Flanders if the German reserves held him up on the Somme. And the Anzac Corps began to move thither in readiness. But by July 7 he had decided instead to pour his own reserves down to the Somme - now, for the enemy, the line of expectation and to throw all his weight into the direct offensive there.

He ordered, however, a number of local attacks in the north as a means to fix the enemy's attention and keep his reserves there, and away from the Somme. The method reveals a most curious military delusion, for while simulated preparations for a large-scale offensive would cause the enemy natural apprehension, the actual delivery of a narrow-fronted local attack would merely disclose the bluff. One consequence was the shattering of the 5th Australian Division in an absurdly advertised attack at Fromelles, an attack which was the final link of an almost incredibly muddled chain of causation.

The rest of the Anzac Corps had been moved to the Somme, where Haig's aim was now to enlarge his lodgment on the main ridge. He had favored the idea of trying to carry out his original third phase, -- of rolling up the German front northwards, although the original conditions had not been fulfilled. But he had not sufficient elbow-room to deploy an adequate force for it. And it would have diverged from the line of cooperation with the French. Hence he decided to continue his main pressure with his right, eastward towards the French line of convergence, while on his left Gough sought to gain the Pozières-Thièpvall end of the ridge, and so widen the British holding upon it.

To this end Gough was given the Anzac Corps (Birdwood), and on July 23 he launched part of it against Pozières in conjunction with a renewed assault by the three corps of the Fourth Army along

the whole of its narrow front, from Guillemont to Bazentin-le-Petit. This failed completely; on the left the 1st Australian Division gained a footing in Pozières. Haig reverted to the method of nibbling, now to be exalted as a definite and masterly strategy of attrition, and to be defended by optimistic miscalculations of the German losses.

Nearly two months of bitter fighting followed, during which the British made little progress at much cost, and the infantry of both sides served as compressed cannon-fodder for artillery consumption. On the left flank the Anzac Corps was the main agent of the new plan of "methodical progress." The effect is best described in the measured words of the Australian official history:

"Doubtless to the Commander-in-Chief, and possibly to the Cabinet, the use of terms implying leisurely progress brought some comfortable assurance of economy of life as well as of munitions; but to the front line the method merely appeared to be that of applying a battering-ram ten or fifteen times against the same part of the enemy's battle-front with the intention of penetrating for a mile, or possibly two, into the midst of his organized defenses "

"Even if the need for maintaining pressure be granted, the student will have difficulty in reconciling his intelligence to the actual tactics. To throw the several parts of an army corps, brigade after brigade . . . twenty times in succession against one of the strongest points in the enemy's defense may certainly be described as "methodical," but the claim that it was economic is entirely unjustified."

Twenty-three thousand men were expended in these efforts for the ultimate gain, after six weeks, of a tiny tongue of ground just over a mile deep. And what of the moral effect ?

"Although most Australian soldiers were optimists, and many were opposed on principle to voicing -- or even harboring -- grievances, it is not surprising if the effect on some intelligent men was a bitter conviction that they were being uselessly sacrificed. "For Christ's sake, write a book on the life of an infantryman (said one of them . . .), and by doing so you will quickly prevent these shocking tragedies." That an officer who had fought so nobly as Lieutenant J. A. Raws should, in the last letter before his death, speak of the "murder" of many of his friends "through the incompetence, callousness, and personal vanity of those high in authority," is evidence not indeed of the literal truth of his words, but of something much amiss in the higher leadership "We have just come out of a place so terrible (wrote __, one of the most level-headed officers in the force) that ... a raving lunatic could never imagine the horror of the last thirteen days."

The history indicates that Birdwood lost much of his Gallipoli popularity through his failure to interpose against Gough's impetuous desire for quick results and his lack of thought. Perhaps this was a factor in leading the Australian troops to reject Birdwood's personal appeal when they voted against the conscription of other men to share the horrors that they had experienced.

But Pozières was matched on the other flank by Guillemont - now a peaceful hamlet amid cornfields, then a shambles of blended horror and mystery. From Trones Wood it is down one slope, up another, only a few hundred yards of farm road now, yet, in July and August 1916, an infinite distance. Division after division essayed to cross it, felt the petty prize within their fingers, and then slipped back, unable to maintain their hold. And when it was at last secured on September 3, Ginchy, a few hundred yards further up the slope, was a similar obstruction until September 9. Save Thiépval, still defiant, no hamlets have exacted a heavier price for their possession.

Now at last the British line was straightened on a seven-mile front running northwest from Leuze Wood, overlooking Combles, where it joined up with the French. They had just extended further south the attack south of the Somme, storming three miles of the old German front line near Chaulnes and taking 7,000 prisoners. On August 30 Rawlinson had recorded in his diary,

"The Chief is anxious to have a gamble with all the available troops about September 15, with the object of breaking down German resistance and getting through to Bapaume." And he added, somewhat illogically, "We shall have no reserves in hand, save tired troops, but success at this time . . . might bring the Boches to terms."

Despite his professed faith in attrition, Haig was now reduced to gambling on a break-through.

The attack was to pivot on the left wing -- Gough's army. The primary object of the main blow, by Rawlinson, was to break through what had originally been the Germans' last line between Morval and Le Sars, in cooperation with a French thrust to the south between Combles and the Somme - thus pinching out Combles. If the opening success warranted the attempt the British attack was to be extended northward to seize Courceleste and Martinpuich. Eight divisions were deployed for the original attack, and two detailed for the "extension." A special feature was the employment for the first time of tanks, the armored cross-country machines which had been invented as an antidote to the defensive obstacle of machine-guns and barbed wire. In disregard of the opinions of the tank's progenitors, and of their own expressed agreement with these opinions, the British Higher Command had decided to utilize such machines as were available, as a stake to redeem the fading prospects of the Somme offensive. When this decision was taken, only sixty of the initial one hundred and fifty machines had been transported to France. Forty-nine were actually employed, to work in tiny detachments of two or three machines - another breach of the principles laid down by Colonel Swinton. The scant and hasty preparation combined with the mechanical defects of this early model to reduce the total, so that only thirty-two reached the starting point. Of these, nine pushed ahead with the infantry, nine failed to catch the infantry but helped in clearing the captured ground, nine broke down, and five were "ditched" in the craters of the battlefield. The first nine rendered useful aid, especially in capturing Flers, but the greater prize - of a great surprise stroke - was a heavy forfeit to pay for redeeming in a limited degree the failure of the Somme offensive.

The attack was launched at dawn on the fifteenth in a slight mist, and the XV Corps in the center made early and good progress; by 10 a.m. its left division was beyond Flers. But on the right the XIV Corps lost heavily and was held up long before it could reach Morval and Lesboeuifs. The III Corps, on the left, also fell short of its objectives, although its 47th Division finally cleared the long-sought High Wood. On the extreme left the projected extension of the attack was carried out, and both Martinpuich and Courceleste were taken. As a result of the day the crest of the ridge had been gained, except on the right, and with it the commanding observation which the Germans had so long enjoyed.

The failure on the right was redressed on September 25 by another big attack which, in conjunction with the French, compelled the Germans to evacuate Combles. Next day Thiépval at last fell to Gough's army. Haig still called for pressure "without intermission," and, as a result of further small gains, by the first week of October the Germans were back in their last completed line of defenses, which ran from Sally-Saillisel, on the right, past Le Transloy and in front of Bapaume; they were busily constructing fresh lines in rear, but these were not yet complete. On the other hand, these

days had proved the continued strength of the German resistance, and the limited success held but little hope of a real break-through or its exploitation. The early onset of the autumn rains made this hope more slender daily. The rains combined with the bombardments to make the ground a morass in which guns and transport were bogged, while even lightly equipped infantry could barely and slowly struggle forward. Attacks under such conditions were terribly handicapped; that most of them failed was inevitable, and if a trench was taken the difficulties of consolidating it liquidated the gain.

By October 12 Haig seems to have been at last convinced that he could not pierce the German defenses that year. But Joffre and Foch continued to urge him on, and in partial response Haig continued to call for fresh attacks through the mud towards Le Transloy, until a strong protest was made by Lord Cavan, commanding the XIV Corps, who desired to know whether it was deliberately intended to sacrifice the British right in order to help the French left, and pointedly added, "No one who has not visited the front can really know the state of exhaustion to which the men are reduced." But other corps commanders had less moral courage, and Rawlinson, although sympathetic, seems to have yielded against his better judgment to his Chief's determination. Hence the III and Anzac Corps continued a hopeless series of petty attacks until November 16. Their ineffectiveness was redeemed, as their ineptitude was obscured, by a welcome, last-hour success of Gough's army. Even this had an offset, for by redeeming Gough's reputation it paved the way for fresh sacrifices at Ypres the next year.

The wedge that had been slowly driven eastwards between the Ancre and the Somme had turned the original German defenses north of the Ancre into a pronounced salient. For some time Gough's army had been preparing an attack against this, and a temporary improvement in the weather allowed it to be launched on November 13, by seven divisions. Beaumont-Hamel and Beaucourt-sur-Ancre were captured, with 7,000 prisoners, but on the left Serre once more proved impregnable. Haig was pleased - because it would "strengthen the hands of the British representatives" at the forthcoming Allied Military Conference at Chantilly. So the Somme offensive could at last be suspended with honor satisfied.

The folly of the last phase, from September 25 onwards, was that, the crest of the ridge and its commanding observation having at last been won, the advantage was thrown away by fighting a way down into the valley beyond. Thereby the troops were doomed to spend the winter in flooded trenches. "Somme mud" was soon to be notorious.

Thus the miscalled Battles of the Somme closed in an atmosphere of disappointment, and with such a drain on the British forces that the coincident strain on the enemy was obscured. This strain was largely due to the rigidity of the German higher commanders, especially General Von Below of the First Army, who issued an order that any officer who gave up an inch of trench would be court-martialed, and that every yard of lost trench must be retaken by counter-attack. If German mistakes do not condone British mistakes, they at least caused a vain loss of life, and still more of morale, which helped to balance the British loss -- until on August 23 Below was compelled to swallow his own orders and modify his method of resistance, in accord with that of the new Hindenburg-Ludendorff regime.

(*). Chapter marked: 1916 - THE DOG-FALL, SCENE III, THE SOMME OFFENSIVE (pp.227-248)