CHARLES HUMBLE WARD

THE 56TH DIVISION

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Dudley Ward C.

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Содержание

C. H. Dudley Ward
The 56th Division. 1st London Territorial Division

FOREWORD

When day broke on the 28th March, 1918, the 56th London Territorial Division was in position on the southern portion of the Vimy Ridge. At nightfall the division still held its ground, having beaten back three separate assaults delivered in great strength by picked German troops specially trained in the attack and inspired with confidence resulting from the successes of the previous week. Truly a great achievement, and important as great, for the Vimy Ridge covered the city of Arras and the coalfields of Béthune.

Important as this success was held to be at the time, a time of great strain upon the forces of the Empire, it was not till later on, when Ludendorff took us into his confidence, that we learned its full significance. Ludendorff gives us to understand that the failure of the German effort of 28th March constituted the turning-point of the 1918 campaign. That evening Ludendorff recognised the beginning of the end; the German nation lost heart; the *moral* of the German Army deteriorated rapidly.

I have selected the above—one of the many achievements of the 56th London Territorial Division—to illustrate the stage of efficiency to which the troops of our Territorial Army had attained in war.

I saw much of our Territorial troops in France: I had seen something of them in pre-war days, and I recall an absence of appreciation of the devotion of those whose patriotic enthusiasm put life into the great organisation evolved from the brain of a statesman to whom history will give the credit hitherto unworthily begrudged to Lord Haldane.

I take this opportunity of paying my tribute of respect and admiration to the Territorial Army as a whole, and the 56th London Division in particular.

This note would not be complete without reference to that fine soldier, the late Major-Gen. Sir Amyatt Hull, whose professional qualities and personal charm gained the respect and affection of all ranks, and who imbued with his own unconquerable spirit the officers and men of the division which he commanded so long, and of which he was so justly proud.

***Horne of Stirkoke**, General.*

CHAPTER I
FORMATION AND THE ATTACK ON THE GOMMECOURT SALIENT

After the declaration of war, when the first news of the Expeditionary Force began to trickle across the Channel, the people of England were told that troops were marching to the lilting tune with the Cockney refrain:

Good-bye, Piccadilly,
Farewell, Leicester Square,
It's a long, long way to Tipperary,
But my heart's right there.

Within a few months territorial battalions were marching in France and singing the same absurd song. But the London, the Cockney spirit, impudent, noisy, but good-tempered and friendly, always wide awake, observant, and ready for a scrap, above all never down-hearted, led the way from the very beginning of the war. It is with the light-hearted crowd of Piccadilly and Leicester Square that we are concerned, for the whole of London some time or other passes through those thoroughfares.

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There is something peculiarly fascinating in following the fortunes of London troops, particularly Territorial troops.

For some reason there has been a tendency of late years to look down on the men of London, to dismiss them as weaklings, as men of poor physique, with maybe smart tongues and clothes, but without the necessary stamina for hardy soldiers. It would be difficult to say on what ground such an opinion was based. At least it has no historical foundation. The Trained Bands of London have a very definite place in the history of England.

Although it is not the oldest corps, the Artillery Company of London, formed to train men in the use of the long bow, cross bow, and hand gun, dates back to the time of Henry VIII. Westminster and the County of Middlesex were ever to the fore in raising Volunteers as distinct from the Militia, though the distinction was not always too clear. St. George's, Hanover Square—Pimlico—Inns of Court—Bloomsbury—St. James's are names to be found in every record of effort to meet a national danger. Enfield, Tottenham, Stoke Newington, Chelsea, Kensington, Chiswick, Battersea, Clapham, Clerkenwell, Deptford, Hungerford, Islington, Lambeth, and Wandsworth have all raised companies for the defence of England in former times of stress.

There is no need to labour the point. Every student of the history of the British Army knows what the Service owes to London. The Londoner has always proved himself a valiant soldier, and has not withheld from enlistment.

What England owes to the Territorial is above computation. As the descendant of the old Volunteer he was enrolled to serve in England alone. But when war with the Central Powers was declared he did not hesitate—his response was immediate and unanimous. Territorials landed in France in 1914, and continued to arrive in that country in a steady stream as they could be spared from Great Britain.

When the 56th Division was assembled in France during the first days of February 1916, it was not, therefore, a new unit, looking about with wondering eyes at new scenes, and standing, as it

were, on the tiptoes of expectation as it paused on the outskirts of the great adventure. The twelve battalions of infantry were veterans.[1]

On the 5th February Major-Gen. C. P. A. Hull, to whom command of the new division was given, arrived at Hallencourt, between Abbeville and Amiens, where his staff was to meet.

Lieut.-Col. J. E. S. Brind	G.S.O.1.
Major A. E. G. Bayley	G.S.O.2.
Capt. T. W. Bullock	G.S.O.3.
Bt. Lieut.-Col. H. W. Grubb	A.A. and Q.M.G.
Capt. W. M. Sutton	D.A.A.G.
Major F. J. Lemon	D.A.Q.M.G.
Lieut. H. C. B. Way	A.D.C.

The presence of these officers, however, did not constitute a division. Brigade commanders and their staffs arrived—Brig.-Gen. F. H. Burnell-Nugent, 167th Brigade, Brig.-Gen. G. G. Loch, 168th Brigade, Brig.-Gen. E. S. Coke, 169th Brigade—and we find a wail of despair going up from the 169th Brigade: "No rations, fuel, or stationery yet available"—"No divisional organisation exists" (this on the 8th), and a wealth of meaning in this note written on the 18th: "The Brigade Interpreter (who should have been available at first) arrived at last. Rain whole day." Could anything be more tragic?

Our sympathies are entirely with the staff on these occasions, for though the situation cannot be described as chaotic, it is bewildering. Troops were arriving from all directions and at all times of the day; the machinery was not in running order, and its creaking wheels, which occasionally stopped, necessitated the most careful watching and a great deal of work. When an organisation is being made, no one can say "that is not my job," for it seems as though all jobs are his for the time being. The Interpreter would have been most useful if only to arrange the billeting—and what is a staff officer without stationery?

The Brigades were as follows:

The 167th Infantry Brigade; commanded by Brig.-Gen. F. H. Burnell-Nugent, with Capt. G. Blewitt as his Brigade Major and Capt. O. H. Tidbury as Staff Captain. The battalions of this brigade were the 1/1st London Regt., the 1/3rd London Regt., the 1/8th Middlesex Regt., and the 1/7th Middlesex Regt.

The 168th Infantry Brigade; commanded by Brig.-Gen. G. G. Loch, with Capt. P. Neame, V.C., as his Brigade Major, and Major L. L. Wheatley as Staff Captain. The battalions of this brigade were the 1/4th London Regt., the 1/12th London Regt. (Rangers), the 1/13th London Regt. (Kensingtons), and the 1/14th London Regt. (London Scottish).

The 169th Infantry Brigade; commanded by Brig.-Gen. E. S. Coke, with Capt. L. A. Newnham as his Brigade Major, and Capt. E. R. Broadbent as Staff Captain. The battalions were the 1/2nd London Regt. (Royal Fusiliers), the 1/5th London Regt. (London Rifle Brigade), the 1/9th London Regt. (Queen Victoria's Rifles), and the 1/16th London Regt. (Queen's Westminster Rifles).

It is not easy to keep the brigade groupings in mind at this stage—arrangements were recast and designations were changed. The 1/1st (London) Bde. R.F.A., the 2/1st (London) Field Coy. R.E., the 2/1st (London) Field Ambulance were posted to the 167th Brigade. The 1/2nd London Bde. R.F.A., the 2/2nd London Field Coy. R.E., and the 2/2nd London Field Ambulance were posted to the 168th Brigade. The 1/3rd London Bde. R.F.A. and the 2/3rd London Field Ambulance to the 169th Brigade. But we find that subsequent changes result in—

the 1/1st London Bde. R.F.A. becoming 280th Bde. R.F.A;
the 1/2nd London Bde. R.F.A. becoming 281st Bde. R.F.A.;
the 1/3rd London Bde. R.F.A. becoming 282nd Bde. R.F.A.;

[1] Appendix A.

and a newly-formed 18-pounder brigade, the 283rd Bde. R.F.A. Also the two field companies of the Royal Engineers become known as the 512th and 513th Field Companies, and were joined by the 416th Edinburgh Field Coy., which was posted to the 169th Infantry Brigade.

And the Royal Army Service Corps, which appears at first as numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 Companies, become the 213th, with the 214th, 215th, and 216th posted to the three infantry brigades in numerical order.

The Stokes trench mortar batteries were numbered 167th, 168th, and 169th; the medium trench mortar batteries as X, Y, and Z. They were posted in numerical or alphabetical order to the infantry brigades. There was also a heavy trench mortar battery designated V Battery, which was formed in May 1916.

The pioneer battalion was the 1/5th Battalion Cheshire Regt. The veterinary unit was the 1/1st London Mobile Veterinary Section.

These were the bits of machinery forming the 56th Division.

The first divisional conference was held on the 11th February, when most of the officers attending had their first introduction to Gen. Hull. He was a tall, good-looking man with an abrupt manner, but of singular charm. It did not take him long to win the complete confidence of his division.

In the midst of the work of getting the machine properly fitted together, there were the usual rumours and warning orders which came to nothing. The first information Gen. Hull received was that the VI Corps, of which his division formed a part, would relieve the XVII French Corps and would move to the area Domart-en-Ponthieu. The move took place on the 27th February, in the midst of a heavy fall of snow, which made the roads very heavy for transport. And a further move was made on the 12th March to the Doullens area, between that town and St. Pol.

Whenever units were behind the line they trained. It did not matter how long the individual soldier had been in France and Belgium, he was never excused as a “fully trained soldier.” Even instructors were sent from time to time to receive fresh instruction at Divisional, Corps, or Army schools. And so, during the period of assembly, the units of the 56th Division trained. Some were attached for ten days or a fortnight to the 14th Division for work in a “forward position” round about Dainville—infantry, artillery, engineers, and field ambulance took their turn at this work; others carried on the routine of exercise on the training-grounds in the neighbourhood of their billets. The Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, visited the divisional area and the school at Givenchy on the 30th March.

In studying the adventures of a division, whether it is holding the line or whether it is in a reserve area, one must always visualise a great deal more than the twelve battalions of infantry which make or repel the final charge in any engagement. A division occupies and works over a large area, and depends, of course, on a base of supplies. When a person is told of the front taken up by a division, he will look at the map and measure off the width of the front line. “There,” he says, “is the division”! But the division covers quite a big area in depth as well. Not only do the billets of troops not actually employed in the front line go back a long way in successive stages, but the wagons and lorries of the Royal Army Service Corps work back many miles. The narrowest measurement of a divisional area is usually the front line.

Perhaps the following list, showing the dispositions of the division in billets during March, will give those with no experience some idea of what is meant by the word “division”:

Divisional Headquarters	Le Cauroy
Divisional Artillery Headquarters	Le Cauroy
Divisional R.E. Headquarters	Le Cauroy
5th Cheshire Regt.	Grand Rullecourt
B Squadron King Edward's Horse	Grand Rullecourt
Divisional Cyclists' Coy.	Grand Rullecourt
1/4th London Howitzer Bde.	Wamlin and Rozière
Divisional Ammunition Column	Etrée-Wamin
Headquarters Divisional Train	Bruilly
No. 1 Coy. Divisional Train	Wamin
56th Sanitary Section	Le Cauroy
Mobile Veterinary Section	Bruilly
Salvage Company	Le Cauroy
R.E. Ordnance Dump	Le Cauroy
Divisional Canteen and Shops	Le Cauroy
Divisional Schools	Givenchy-le-Noble
167TH INFANTRY BRIGADE	
Brigade Headquarters	Rebreuve
167/1st and X56th Trench Mortar Batteries	Rebreuve
1/1st London Regt.	Ivergny
1/3rd London Regt.	Cannettemont
1/7th Middlesex Regt.	Beaudricourt
1/8th Middlesex Regt.	Rebreuviette
1/1st London Bde. R.F.A.	Rebreuve
2/1st London Field Coy. R.E.	Honval
No. 2 Coy. Train	Rebreuviette
2/1st London Field Ambulance	Ivergny
168TH INFANTRY BRIGADE	
Brigade Headquarters	Manin
168/1st Trench Mortar Battery	Magnicourt
Y56th Trench Mortar Battery	Berlencourt
1/4th London Regt.	Beaufort
1/12th London Regt.	Ambrines
1/13th London Regt.	Lignereuil
1/14th London Regt.	Villers-sire-Simon
1/2nd London Bde. R.F.A.	Berlencourt
2/2nd London Field Coy. R.E.	Sars-les-Bois
No. 3 Coy. Train	Denier
5th Entrenching Battalion	Blavincourt
2/2nd London Field Ambulance	Liencourt
169TH INFANTRY BRIGADE	
Brigade Headquarters	Houvin-Houvigneul
169/1st and Z56th Trench Mortar Batteries	Houvin-Houvigneul
1/2nd London Regt.	Séricourt
1/5th London Regt.	Magnicourt
1/9th London Regt.	Houvigneul
1/16th London Regt.	Moncheaux
1/3rd London Bde. R.F.A.	Bouret-sur-Canche
No. 4 Coy. Train	Houvin-Houvigneul
2/3rd London Field Ambulance	Houvin-Houvigneul
Divisional Supply Column	Liencourt
Divisional Ammunition Sub-Park	Avesnes-le-Comte

All these units contribute to an advance. Some designation, such as "shops," may strike the ear as strange, an unlikely unit to help much in an advance; but a man cannot march without boots, a gun can neither shoot nor advance with a broken spring, a motor lorry will not bring up a single tin of "bully beef" if its axle breaks, and all these things are put right by men who are labelled "shops." Even the Divisional Canteen plays its part, and has on occasions pushed well forward to refresh wearied troops.

We say these units contribute to an advance! They contribute to every action, to every move —they are the division.

As a further measure, which will give the importance of the unit rather than the size of it, the maximum British effort was 99 infantry, 6 cavalry, and 4 yeomanry divisions (the latter were more often infantry than cavalry).

The work of perfecting the organisation went on through the months of February, March, and April. The problem of how to create from nothing had sometimes to be faced as the Army usually faces such conundrums—by cutting a bit from something else which did exist. Capt. Newnham notes in the 169th Brigade diary under date 17th April: "Brigade Machine Gun Coy. formed. Capt. J. R. Pyper, 4th London, to command, and Capt. J. B. Baber, Queen's Westminsters, second in command. Company formed from existing personnel in battalions, each battalion finding a section, and some from Headquarters. No M.G.C. gunners available, as per War Office letter. Already weak battalions lose good men and reinforcements will have to come from them as well."

The health of the division was good except for an outbreak of measles in the 169th Brigade.

On the 3rd May the 167th Brigade moved to Souastre, under the VII Corps, and the rest of the division followed on the 6th May, Divisional Headquarters being established at Hénu.

On the 9th May the C.R.A., Brig.-Gen. R. J. C. Elkington, took over artillery positions from the C.R.A. 14th Division on the Hébuterne front.

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Three months had elapsed since the division had commenced to assemble at Hallencourt. Troops were well rested and trained, and were now to be launched in the big operations of 1916. It would be as well at this point to note the general situation, as from now on the 56th Division took a prominent part in the severe fighting which commenced on 1st July.

We will give the German point of view as expressed by Gen. von Falkenhayn and published in his war book [2]:

> "France has been weakened almost to the limits of endurance, both in a military and economic sense—the latter by the permanent loss of the coalfields in the north-east of the country. The Russian armies have not been completely overthrown, but their offensive powers have been so shattered that she can never revive in anything like her old strength. The armies of Serbia can be considered as destroyed. Italy has no doubt realised that she cannot reckon on the realisation of her brigand's ambitions within measurable time, and would therefore probably be only too glad to be able to liquidate her adventure in any way that would save her face.
>
> If no deductions can be drawn from these facts, the reasons are to be sought in many circumstances … the chief among them cannot be passed over, for it is the enormous hold which England still has on her allies."

He then goes on to discuss what can be done to break the will of England. He says that the history of the English wars against the Netherlands, Spain, France, and Napoleon is being repeated. That England is "obviously staking everything on a war of exhaustion." He puts the winter of 1917 as the latest date when a food crisis and "the social and political crisis that always follow them, among the members of our alliance," will occur, and asks, or rather states, that England must be shown that her venture has no prospects. But "in this case, of course, as in most others involving higher strategic decisions, it is very much easier to say what has to be done than to find out how it can and must be done."

How can one inflict a decisive defeat on England on land? Invasion is impossible—the German Navy is convinced of that.

> "As far as our own Continent of Europe is concerned, we are sure of our troops, and are working with known factors. For that reason we must rule out enterprises in the East, where England can only be struck at indirectly. Victories at Salonica, the Suez Canal, or in Mesopotamia can only help us in so far as they intensify the doubts about England's invulnerability which have already been aroused among the Mediterranean peoples and in the Mohammedan world. Defeats in the East could do us palpable harm among our allies. We can in no case expect to do anything of decisive effect on the course of the war, as the protagonists of an Alexander march to India or Egypt, or an overwhelming blow at Salonica, are always hoping. Our allies have not the necessary means at their disposal. We are not in a position to supply them, owing to the bad communications, and England, which has known how to swallow the humiliations of Antwerp and Gallipoli, will survive defeats in those distant theatres also.

[2] *General Headquarters, 1914-1916, and its Critical Decisions*—Gen. von Falkenhayn.

> When we turn from them to the European theatre, where England can be struck on land, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that we are faced with an extraordinarily difficult problem."

It would seem that England was giving poor von Falkenhayn a lot of trouble. After looking vainly in the East for a vulnerable point in her armour, he is forced to turn his eyes to the West. And in the West he does not like the look of the British Army. He cannot collect more than twenty-five or twenty-six divisions to attack with, and they are not nearly enough!

> "Attempts at a mass break-through, even with an extreme accumulation of men and material, cannot be regarded as holding out prospects of success against a well-armed enemy whose *moral* is sound and who is not seriously inferior in numbers. The defender has usually succeeded in closing the gaps. The salients thus made, enormously exposed to the effects of flanking fire, threaten to become a mere slaughterhouse. The technical difficulties of directing and supplying the masses bottled up in them are so great as to seem practically insurmountable."

He sweeps aside the idea of attacking the English Army with a final complaint that, even if he drove it completely from the Continent, "England may be trusted not to give up even then," and France would not have been very seriously damaged, so that a second operation would have to be taken against her. It would be impossible to get sufficient men.

England's allies are called her "tools," and the only thing to do is to smash up the "tools." But no weapon is to be discarded, and so unrestricted submarine warfare must be undertaken against this arch-enemy.

> "If the definite promises of the Naval Authorities that the unrestricted submarine war must force England to yield in the course of the year 1916 are realised, we must face the fact that the United States may take up a hostile attitude. She cannot intervene decisively in the war in time to enable her to make England fight on when that country sees the spectre of hunger and many another famine rise up before her island. There is only one shadow on this encouraging picture of the future. We have to assume that the Naval Authorities are not making a mistake."

As for the "tools," Italy is ruled out as a possible one to be broken as she is not of much account in Falkenhayn's opinion, and he thinks there will soon be internal troubles. Russia is also ruled out because he does not see any gain in the capture of Petrograd or Moscow, and there are also "internal troubles." There is France left.

> "As I have already insisted, the strain on France has almost reached the breaking-point—though it is certainly borne with the most remarkable devotion. If we succeed in opening the eyes of her people to the fact that in a military sense they have nothing more to hope for, that breaking-point would be reached and England's best sword knocked out of her hand.... Within our reach behind the French sector of the Western Front there are objectives for the retention of which the French Staff would be compelled to throw in every man they have. If they do so the forces of France will bleed to death.... The objectives of which I am speaking now are Belfort and Verdun."

Altogether this document, which was prepared for the Kaiser and must have been read by that potentate with mixed feelings, was not the work of an optimist. It reads more like despair, as though Falkenhayn was saying, "I can still fight, I can still hurt, but I am bound to go down in the end"! One cannot see any very shrewd reasoning in it, for he not only underrated the valour of the French (as the Germans always did), but he was placed in very serious difficulties by the successful attack of Brussiloff on the Austrians in June, so that he also undervalued the strength of Russia. For

this misfortune, however, the Germans blame the Austrians, condemning them for their offensive against the Italians in May, which was undertaken against German advice and made the Brussiloff adventure possible. But this document shows the policy and plans of Germany for the year 1916—the great German effort on Verdun, which was to bleed France to death, dominates all other events. The attack was launched on the 21st February and coincides with the formation of the 56th Division, and the subsequent movements of the division were connected with the wide-spreading influence of the Verdun battle.

In his dispatch dated the 29th May, Sir Douglas Haig sums up the early situation very briefly. Since the 19th December, 1915,

> "the only offensive effort made by the enemy on a great scale was directed against our French Allies near Verdun. The fighting in that area has been prolonged and severe. The results have been worthy of the highest traditions of the French Army and of great service to the cause of the Allies. The efforts made by the enemy have cost him heavy losses both in men and in prestige, and he has made these sacrifices without gaining any advantage to counterbalance them.
>
> During the struggle my troops have been in readiness to co-operate as they might be needed, but the only assistance asked for by our Allies was of an indirect nature—viz., the relief of the French troops on a portion of their defensive front. This relief I was glad to be able to afford."

On the other hand, plans for a Franco-British offensive had been fully discussed by Sir Douglas Haig and Marshal Joffre and complete agreement arrived at. Vast preparations were in progress. Sir Douglas Haig desired to postpone the attack as long as possible, because both the British Army and the supply of ammunition were growing steadily, and time would enable the newer troops to complete their training. But though the original plans had no connection with Verdun, they were bound to influence and be influenced by the great German attack.

It may be said that the Entente Powers were not looking for a speedy termination of the war, but were bent on inflicting heavy blows on Germany and her allies, while Germany was seeking, by a concentration on France at Verdun, to gain a decision in the West. Falkenhayn's advice was being followed, although the unrestricted submarine warfare was postponed for the time being.

The plan for the British offensive was that the main attack should be delivered by the Fourth Army, under Sir Henry Rawlinson, on a front stretching from Maricourt, on the right, to Serre, on the left; while farther north the Third Army, under Sir E. H. H. Allenby, would make an attack on both sides of the Gommecourt salient.

For an offensive on this scale enormous preparations were necessary. There was no end to the amount of stores to be accumulated, from ammunition to horseshoes. In the forward trench system many miles of trenches had to be dug—assault trenches, assembly trenches, communication trenches, trenches for telephone wires—dugouts had to be constructed for sheltering troops, for dressing-stations, for storing food, water, and engineering material, not forgetting ammunition. We are bound to admit, however, that in those days, although much work was done on dugouts, the infantry saw precious little of them. Mining they saw, indeed, but dugouts were rare.

Then there were dumps to be made at convenient points, and many miles of railway line, both standard and narrow gauge, to bring the stores within reach of the fighting troops. Roads had to be constructed, and in some places causeways had to be built over marshy valleys. Wells were sunk, over a hundred pumping stations were installed, and a hundred and twenty miles of water-mains laid.

The whole country behind this vast front was teeming with men and horses, with wagons and motor lorries. At night it was as though an army of gigantic ants were at work, stretched out in long lines, building and excavating, marching in solemn silent processions with grim, determined purpose in the slowness of their gait, and bowed down under loads of material. They passed and repassed in

never-ending streams; the roads were congested with motor and wagon traffic; paths across the open country could be traced by the shadowy silhouettes of men in single file. And the horizon flickered with the flash of guns as with summer lightning, while shells passed overhead with a long-drawn, ghostly wail, or fell with a sharp swish and a crash. The line, that maze of foul mud-filled ditches constructed in a belt of shell-pounded and festering earth, was indicated at night by floating starlights rising irregularly as sparks, bursting into brilliancy, and remaining for a moment, suspended in the blackness of the sky like arc lamps, then dying once more to so many sparks before they fell to the ground.

Sometimes the nights would be quiet—that is to say, quiet except for occasional crashes at intervals of several minutes—although the constant flickering on the horizon would never cease; at others they would be "lively," one might almost say there would be a sensation of hustle, so swift would be the wailing passage and so continuous the crash of bursting shells. This might last all through the night as an organised "shoot," or would come suddenly, without warning, a swift artillery attack on roads, working parties, or billets—what was afterwards known as "harassing fire" though it was in a more intense form—and shifting from one point to another, from front line to roads, from roads to billets, from billets to some spot where troops were suspected to be working. Or there would be a raid with an angry concentration of artillery from both sides.

And night after night the preparation for the "Big Push" went on.

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The 56th Division, now trained and "shaken together," arrived in the Hébuterne sector, on the right of the Gommecourt salient and towards the left of the front under preparation for the British effort. The 167th Brigade took over the front-line system held by the 145th Brigade, 48th Division, on the 4th May. The 168th Brigade marched from their billets in the Doullens area on the 6th, and the 169th Brigade followed on the 7th May. Divisional Headquarters were established at Hénu.

First blood was drawn for the division by the 167th Brigade on the 18th May. A German patrol attempted to bomb a sap held by the 3rd London Regt., and was beaten off with the loss of one officer and one N.C.O. killed. These proved to be of the 169th Infantry Regt., 52nd Division, one of the divisions of the XIV German Corps and a normal identification.

The system of holding the line was one of "grouping." On the 22nd May Brig.-Gen. Coke, 169th Brigade, was in command of the line, which was held by two battalions of the 169th Brigade and two battalions of the 168th Brigade. In support was Brig.-Gen. Nugent, with his headquarters at Souastre, having under his command his own four battalions and one of the 169th Brigade. Brig.-Gen. Loch, 168th Brigade, with his headquarters at Grenas, had two of his own battalions and one of the 169th Brigade.

Plans were now in preparation for a very remarkable achievement.

We have seen that the scheme for the big British offensive included an attack on the Gommecourt salient. This was to be undertaken by the Third Army, and the task fell to the VII Corps (Gen. Snow), holding the front in question. For the moment we will confine ourselves to the point that the 56th Division was to be one of the attacking divisions.

When Gen. Hull was informed of what he was expected to do, he was at once confronted with an obvious difficulty—the front line of his sector was some seven hundred yards away from the enemy! It was not impossible to shorten this distance, but, with one exception, the several ways of doing it must result in heavy casualties; the enemy would be bound to see what was afoot, and would try by every means in his power to prevent and to hinder its execution, and render it as costly as he could. It would also be a lengthy business unless it was boldly tackled. Gen. Hull decided on the boldest of all courses.

He traced out a new line which was, on an average, four hundred yards in advance of the old one. This meant working, in some spots, within two hundred and fifty yards of the enemy. *And he decided to dig it in one night!* It meant that at least three thousand yards of trench must be constructed in a few hours, a task of appalling magnitude; and it must be remembered that every effort was always made to limit the number of men in any working party required for No Man's Land. When he announced his intentions there was something like consternation at Corps Headquarters.

The task was allotted to Brig.-Gen. Nugent and the 167th Brigade. He had at his disposal, over and above the five battalions of his "group," one company of the 5th Cheshire Regt. with a half of the 2/2nd London Field Coy. R.E.

So that the men might know the lie of the land, the 167th Brigade was sent on ahead of the rest of the division and straight into the line, which it held for a fortnight. The Engineers, the company officers of battalions concerned, and the brigade staff made most careful reconnaissance, patrolling every night, noting landmarks, getting acquainted with that silent, eerie tract separating the two lines of combatants. Conversations throughout the day were punctuated with references to "the strong point," "the lonely tree," the "May bush," "the Z hedge," "the head of Sap 4," as landmarks became familiar. Sometimes German patrols were met, sometimes imagined.

It was decided to divide the whole front into four sections—A, B, C, and D. The only difficulty was the junction between B and C, but this was eventually marked by a heap of white stones—a small heap.

Four days before the date fixed for the operation, the brigade was relieved, and during the following days the whole of the arrangements were rehearsed—with the exception of the actual digging—first by day and then by night.

Meanwhile the artillery were warned that nothing was to be done by them to rouse the enemy while the work was being carried out, but that all batteries must be manned and ready for instant action. All known machine-gun emplacements were carefully registered, and arrangements were made with the Brigadier-General commanding the Corps heavy artillery to register on all German batteries whose zone of fire included the area of the work. Two of the Divisional 4·5 howitzers were to assist in the counter-battery work.

Although the trench was dug in one night, the whole operation required three nights to complete. On the first night, the 25-26th May, covering parties crept out and took up positions in advance of the selected line. Then engineers followed, quiet and certain in all that they did, and marked out the line with string and pegs. On the left they got to work speedily: the pegs were about nine inches long and made from small round stakes from which the bark had not been removed; the string was ordinary jute twine which had been prepared with loops at the proper intervals to mark the angle of bays and traverses. They were undisturbed, and C and D sections were marked out.

But in A and B sections the night was one of excursions and alarms. First of all there was great difficulty in getting the covering party through our own wire, which suggests an unfortunate oversight; and then German patrols were encountered. The latter occurrence was a contingency which had always been reckoned with. A game of hide and seek ensued, but meanwhile time passed. There was no question of clearing No Man's Land when other parties were working on the left, and so the marking had to be abandoned. It did not, however, cause any serious inconvenience.

The next night each battalion marched from billets fully armed for digging. Ten per cent. carried picks, and the remainder carried shovels which had been carefully sharpened. Each man had three sandbags, one being wrapped round the shovel or pick to prevent noise, and between them they also carried a quantity of white tape.

In the line ten exits had been made by cutting through our wire and constructing steps out of the trench—trench ladders had also been provided by the engineers in case the steps should be impassable through rain. White boards were hung on the wire to mark these gaps for the withdrawal.

The communication trenches to be used by the working battalions were left quite clear by the troops holding the line, and, at the appointed time, the head of each battalion was at the selected entrance and advanced in the following order: covering parties, taping parties, working parties.

The covering parties, consisting of sixty officers and men in six groups, had orders to use rifle fire as sparingly as possible, but to make full use of the bayonet if enemy patrols were encountered.

When the covering parties had been given time to get out, the two other groups of parties followed at short intervals. And half an hour after the digging parties had left the trench, wiring and carrying parties, about a hundred men to each battalion, went out. There were three thousand men in No Man's Land!

The boldness of Gen. Hull's enterprise was amply justified. By 2.30 a.m. the trench had been made and was held by posts, found from the covering parties, reinforced with Lewis guns; they had rations, water, and shovels to improve their positions, and were in telephonic communication with the old trench, and all the working parties had filed away as silently as they had come.

During the ensuing day the Royal Flying Corps successfully prevented any enemy aeroplanes from approaching our lines, but our airmen photographed the new line themselves, and at noon Gen. Hull was able to see from a photograph what work had been done.

On the night of 27-28th the same number of men were out working again, improving the front-line trench and wire, digging support lines and two other communication trenches. The new work had been pegged out the previous night by the engineers.

The 56th Division had then started its career with the astounding feat of having in the space of forty-eight hours constructed and wired a new system of trenches, comprising 2,900 yards of fire trench and 1,500 yards of communication trenches, in No Man's Land and within 250 yards of the enemy. Casualties were 8 killed and 55 wounded. A little luck had waited on audacity, but the success of the whole operation was undoubtedly due to the intelligence and keenness of the men. They had nothing much to help them. Gen. Hull had, indeed, ordered two or three wagons, loaded with empty shell-cases and biscuit tins, to drive up and down the roads in rear of his lines, and the artillery fired an occasional round from a howitzer as a means of distracting the attention of the enemy, but it only required one foolish man to lose his head and disaster would have descended on the whole brigade.

It is interesting to note the dress. The covering parties were in full fighting kit and carried one day's ration; the taping, digging, and wiring men had no equipment, but carried a rifle, loaded with ten rounds, and one bandolier; the wire-carrying party had no arms or equipment.

The first stage was over. There was, however, still an enormous lot of work to be done—the trenches had to be improved, deepened, revetted, emplacements had to be made for machine guns and trench mortars, stores for ammunition of all sorts had to be constructed, cables had to be buried —it is but a repetition of what was going on everywhere on that front.

* * * * * * *

Gen. Hull and his G.S.O.1, Lieut.-Col. J. E. S. Brind, an artilleryman, were considering the problem of attack. The main features of it are noted by Gen. Hull as follows:

> (*a*) The village of Hébuterne, which affords concealment from view to within a short distance of our present line and good observation of the German positions between Gommecourt and the spur north of the sunken road (K17a and b) on the right of the divisional front.
>
> (*b*) The valleys west of Hébuterne, which afford good artillery positions and cover from view, except from the trees in Gommecourt Park.

(*c*) The spur running eastward from Hébuterne just north of the Hébuterne-Puisieux Road, which defilades the area, north of the spur, from the German trenches, south of the spur.

(*d*) Gommecourt Park and village, which, to a certain extent, dominate the ground to the south.

(*e*) The spur running from E29c (north-east of Gommecourt) through K5a and b to the Rossignol Wood along the southern portion of which spur runs the German fourth line.

This spur commands the eastern edge of Gommecourt, dominates the German trench system south-east and south of Gommecourt, and affords concealment, both for battery positions in the valley to the east and for a covered means of approach for a counter-attack against the captors of Gommecourt.

(*f*) The valley south-east of Nameless Farm, in which runs the Puisieux-Gommecourt Road, a line of approach covered from view from our present line.

It was once asked after a severe action for the capture of some rising ground, "What is the use of turning Fritz off a hill? There is always another hill behind it." Which was true enough. But it is as well to remember that the high ground to the left as far as Blairville, held at this date by the Germans, was in 1918 in our hands, and it enabled Sir Douglas Haig to turn the whole of the old Somme position.

Of the German line Gen. Hull says:

"The German position south-east of Gommecourt Park and village consists of three lines of trenches, of which the first is heavily wired, the second lightly wired, the third does not appear to be wired at all unless there is sunken wire on the road. All three lines are visible from our present position except the second and third lines behind the strong point K11c and d. The northern flank of this system of trenches rests on the southern edge of Gommecourt Park, the trenches along which are organised to fire south. The southern flank of the system rests on the strong point K11c.

In rear of this system is another consisting of two lines of trenches running from the south-east corner of Gommecourt along the ridge in 5Ka, b, and c, to Rossignol Wood. The front trench of this system is heavily wired and visible."

In a most interesting paper on the proposed attack Gen. Hull says:

"The object of the VII Corps attack will be to establish itself on the line 16 Poplars-Nameless Farm-Little Z-Tree at E23a12.

The 46th Division will attack from the north and the question was discussed:

(*a*) Should we endeavour to secure a footing on the ridge E29c-K5a in the initial assault, or

(*b*) Should the 56th Division first secure the German third line from the south-east corner of Gommecourt Wood and then, under Corps direction, launch a second attack to secure the ridge?

Whichever solution the Corps Commander considers it wisest to adopt, there is one point which I wish to urge: that no advance through the village or park of Gommecourt should be attempted until the ridge E29c-K5a is secured.

The clearing of the village and wood is bound to be a costly enterprise if the enemy makes any attempt to fight it out. It is to be hoped that the heavy bombardment will very seriously affect the *moral* of the garrison of the village and park, and I consider that the knowledge that they were cut off from escape and from

reinforcements might have so great an effect on the German troops as to make them surrender and so save us valuable troops for further operations.

I was, and still am, in favour of the first solution, i.e. to secure the Quadrilateral in the first assault. The reasons which have been urged against this course are:

(*a*) That at Loos no success was achieved after a certain limited distance had been carried.

(*b*) That in the event of either the 46th or the 56th Divisions failing to achieve their objective, the detachment of the other would be in an extremely isolated position.

I have carefully considered both these arguments, and do not think there is any reason to alter my opinion.

At Loos the 47th Division was the only division to which a definite objective was given. Its rôle was to form a defensive flank on the right of the IV Corps. Its left flank advanced nearly 2,500 yards behind the German front line without serious loss or difficulty. In the present case I am proposing an advance, at one point on each divisional front, of only 800 yards, in the case of the 56th Division, and less in the case of the 46th Division. In the present case, too, we have the additional advantage of much heavier artillery, more ammunition, and a salient to attack.

As regards the second argument, that in the event of one or other attack failing the detachment of the other division would be isolated:

In the event of my reaching my objective in K5a, and the 46th Division failing to reach E29c, I should consider it my duty to put in troops (if necessary from my reserve brigade) to help the 46th Division.

Troops at K5a would be within 500 yards of the unit at the south-eastern edge of Gommecourt, and in direct communication by visual signalling with my present trench system, so that they can hardly be considered isolated, and the risk, if any, is, I consider, worth running in order to isolate completely the enemy troops in Gommecourt Park and village.

I do not like the idea of delay and a second attack to capture the Quadrilateral in K5a. The second attack would have to be launched from our front line trenches, as I do not consider it would be feasible to organise and launch an attack from the newly-captured trenches. Any delay would enable the enemy to put his barrage in front of our front-line system, as if there is a weak point in our organisation, it is in the number of counter-batteries available to deal with the enemy guns. If we delay we lose the advantage surprise would give us."

While these problems were being discussed, Sir Douglas Haig had decided to hurry on his preparations. We have seen that his desire was to delay as much as possible and perfect his machine, also that every day meant to him added strength. But meanwhile the Entente Powers were being pressed in another direction. The Austrians had attacked the Italians with great initial success. By the end of May the situation on that front was so serious that the Russian offensive was opened in the early days of June in order to relieve the pressure.

The Germans accuse the Austrians of having drained their front in Galicia of artillery for their Italian offensive, and also of holding the line with troops of poor quality. However that may be, Gen. Brussiloff's army, "after a relatively short artillery preparation … got up from their trenches and simply marched forward." Falkenhayn has a delightful observation on the whole business: "A 'reconnaissance' like Brussiloff's was only possible, of course, if the General had decisive reason for holding a low opinion of his enemy's power of resistance. And on this point he made no miscalculation."

The immediate effect of the Russian success was the transfer of three divisions from the Western Front, and later more followed; but the Germans were still very strong in numbers, and there was no slacking off of their efforts on Verdun. They were able to help the Austrians to check the Russian advance and eventually to repulse it, but, on the other hand, the Italian counter-attack met with success and drove the Austrians back.

Sir Douglas Haig says that

> "The heroic defence of our French Allies had already gained many weeks of inestimable value and had caused the enemy very heavy losses; but the strain continued to increase. In view, therefore, of the situation in the various theatres of war, it was eventually agreed between Gen. Joffre and myself that the combined French and British offensive should not be postponed beyond the end of June. The object of that offensive was threefold:
>
> (1) To relieve the pressure on Verdun.
>
> (2) To assist our Allies in the other theatres of war by stopping any further transfer of German troops from the Western Front.
>
> (3) To wear down the strength of the forces opposed to us."

We begin to see now the dominating influence of Verdun. In any case the offensive could not have been postponed much longer, and if it was an alteration of plan forced by the enemy, it was not to be compared with the abandonment by the Germans of their offensive—which Falkenhayn says he had prepared against the British with the object of forestalling the Entente blow on the Western Front—due to the uncomfortable situation of the Austrians.

Probably, however, the date did influence the approaching action of the 56th Division. The new front line was still a long way from the enemy. The Queen's Westminster Rifles succeeded in advancing a small sector of the line by a hundred yards and, had there been time, the whole division would have crept closer before jumping on the enemy.

The weather, too, was very bad.

In due course Gen. Hull issued his preliminary instructions, from which it will be seen that the decision to attempt the capture of the Quadrilateral in one operation had been taken:

> "The attack of the 56th Division will be carried out by the 168th and 169th Brigades, whose tasks will be as follows:
>
> (*a*) The objective of the 168th Brigade will be to capture the German line from Fair Trench, about K11d13, along Farm, Fame and Elbe, Felon, to a point in Fell fifty yards north-west of the trench junction at K5c52, and to establish itself in three strong points:
>
> (1) About Farmyard, Farmer, Farm.
>
> (2) About Elbe, between Et and Felon.
>
> (3) About cross-trenches of Fell and Felon with Epte.
>
> 168th Brigade will be responsible for the construction of a fire trench facing south-east to connect the right flank of the captured line to our present line in W47.
>
> (*b*) The task of the 169th Brigade will be carried out in three phases. The object of the 169th Brigade in the first phase will be to capture the line of German trenches from the left of the 168th Brigade along Fall, Fellow, the Cemetery, Eck, the Maze, Eel, and Fir, and to establish strong points:
>
> (1) From Feud through Ems to the Cemetery inclusive.
>
> (2) About the Maze.
>
> (3) About the south-east corner of Gommecourt Park.
>
> The second phase of the 169th Brigade attack will take place immediately after the first phase.

The objective of the second phase is the Quadrilateral of the trenches in the south-east portion of K5a. The artillery lifts will be timed on the assumption that the infantry will reach Ems (between Etch and Fillet) twenty-five minutes after zero; and Exe (between Etch and Fillet) twenty-seven minutes after zero time.

The third phase will take place directly after the Quadrilateral is captured, and will consist of the securing of the cross-trenches at K5a78 (where Indus crosses Fill and Fillet) and joining hands with the 46th Division along Fill. Fillet will be consolidated facing east.

The following will be carried on the man:
200 rounds S.A.A.;
Waterproof sheet;
Haversack;
Iron ration and current day's ration;
Two to three sand-bags;
Two tube helmets;
Proportion of wire-cutters, bill-hooks, tools."

The instructions for the 167th Brigade are practically embodied in the following paragraphs:

"One company 167th Brigade will be placed at the disposal of the Brigadier-General commanding 169th Brigade, to hold sectors Y49 and Y50.

Seven officers and 200 men of the 167th Brigade will be detailed for the control of smoke, and will be under the orders of the Divisional Gas Officer. Approximately 1,200 men will be required for work under the C.R.E. on communication trenches across No Man's Land and for carrying parties."

Practice attacks, based on these instructions, were carried out by the brigades in reserve.

We have written of the constructive preparations which were going on all along the line of proposed attack. These preparations were continued until the last moment. But meanwhile another element was introduced—that of destructive preparation. It is scarcely necessary to point out that neither form of preparation could be concealed from the enemy. The Germans knew as well as we did where we would attack.

The Gommecourt sector to be attacked was held by the German 169th and 170th Regiments, with about 1-1/2 battalions on the front line, 1 battalion in support, 2 battalions in reserve in Bucquoy, and 2 companies at Ablainzeville. Their artillery consisted of 5 batteries of heavy artillery and 12 batteries of field artillery. These batteries were divided into three groups at Quesnoy Farm, on the left of the British position, Biez Wood and Puisieux. There was a further group of guns near Adinfer Wood which could assist in the defence.

The 56th Divisional Artillery, together with the heavy VII Corps guns, had now to prepare for the infantry assault by smashing up not only the wire and trench system, but billets and gun positions behind the German lines as well. As regards villages, most attention was given to Bucquoy, Essart, Ablainzeville, and Achiet-le-Grand.

Three groups of artillery were formed—a northern group, under Lieut.-Col. Southam, a southern group, under Lieut.-Col. Macdowell, and a wire-cutting group under Lieut.-Col. Prechtel. The northern and southern groups were under the orders of the Corps, and consisted of:

Northern Group

3 batteries of 18-pounders (until zero day, then 4 batteries).
1 battery 4·5 howitzers.
Affiliated at zero to the 169th Brigade.

Southern Group

4 batteries of 18-pounders.
1 battery 4·5 howitzers.
Affiliated at zero to the 168th Brigade.

Wire-cutting Group

5 batteries of 18-pounders until zero and then 4 batteries.
1 battery 4·5 howitzers.
Two of the guns of the 4·5 battery will be at the call of the counter-battery group.

In the preliminary instructions it will be noticed that a party of officers and men were detailed to act under the Divisional Gas Officer. Their special duty was to cover the approach of the infantry by the discharge of a smoke cloud. It was hoped to introduce some element of surprise by occasional discharges of smoke during the preparatory bombardment, and so the Corps ordered that the bombardment should be carried out for a period of five days, and the attack would take place on the sixth. These days would be known as U, V, W, X, Y, and Z days.

> "Smoke discharges lasting for a period of ten minutes will take place on the days and at the hours mentioned below. They will coincide with the intense artillery bombardment of the enemy trenches. These bombardments will commence thirty minutes before the smoke, and will reach their maximum intensity during the ten minutes that it is being discharged:
>
> U day, no discharge.
> V day, no discharge.
> W day from 10.15 a.m. to 10.25 a.m.
> X day from 5.45 a.m. to 5.55 a.m.
> Y day from 7.15 a.m. to 7.25 a.m.
>
> On Z day the smoke cloud will commence five minutes before zero. On the 46th and 56th Divisional fronts its duration will be as arranged by divisions. On the 37th Divisional front it will continue for one hour."

U day was the 24th June, but the whole of the great attack was postponed for two days, so that, instead of having five days of the preliminary bombardment, there were seven.

Naturally the Germans did not sit still under this destructive fire, but retaliated on our front line and trench system, and on our rear organisation. The enemy artillery had been active during the month of May, and the division had suffered in casualties to the extent of 402; for the month of June casualties leapt up to 801. The end of June was a prolonged crash of guns. Only for one half-hour, from 4 p.m., did the guns cease so that aeroplanes might take photographs of the German lines, and then the sky was speckled with the puffs of smoke from the German anti-aircraft guns.

The guns of the 56th Division fired altogether 115,594 rounds, of which 31,000 were fired on Z day. To this total must be added the work of the Corps heavy artillery. The 6-inch, 9·2-inch, and 15-inch fired on V day 3,200 rounds, on W day 2,200 rounds, on X day 3,100 rounds, and on Y day 5,300 rounds (which was repeated on the two extra days) at the front-line trenches and strong points. 6-inch, 9·2-inch, 4·7-inch, 4·5-inch, and 60-pounder guns also dealt with the villages of Bucquoy, Achiet-le-Grand, Essart, and Ablainzeville, but in nothing like the same proportion of rounds.

The first smoke cloud was discharged on the 26th June, and drew very little hostile machine-gun fire. The enemy lines were reported to be much damaged on that day. On the 27th the smoke discharge was somewhat spoilt by the premature bursting of a smoke shell an hour before the appointed time.

This misfortune caused the enemy to put down a barrage on our front-line and communication trenches, which prevented the smoke detachments getting to their appointed positions. When the cloud was eventually discharged there was a large gap in the centre of it, so it must have been obvious to the enemy that it was only a feint.

The continual bombardment became more intense, and the enemy reply more vigorous. On the 28th the enemy wire was reported as satisfactorily cut in front of their first and second lines. Observers also noted that there was considerable movement of troops behind the German lines.

Every night, the moment it was dark, although the artillery still pounded trenches, roads, and tracks, patrols crept forward to ascertain what progress had been made in the battering down of defences. 2/Lieut. P. Henri, of the 3rd London Regt., raided the front line. He found the Germans working feverishly to repair their trench, and succeeded in capturing one prisoner, who proved to be of the Labour Battalion of the 2nd Reserve Guards Division. He reported that the wire in some places still formed a considerable obstacle.

A patrol of the 1st London Regt. reported, on the 29th, that new French wire and some strands of barbed wire had been put up. Up to the last moment the Germans worked at their defences. Great activity was seen on the morning of the 30th.

The artillery grew more furious. A hail from heavy and field-gun batteries descended on trenches and strong points. Lieut.-Col. Prechtel's wire-cutting group pounded away at the wire. The trench mortar batteries added their quota, though they were chased from pillar to post by German retaliation. And as the evening shadows fell on the last day, the usual night firing was taken up by the never-wearying gunners.

* * * * * * *

The main object of this attack was to divert against the VII Corps enemy artillery and infantry, which might otherwise have been used against the left flank of the Fourth Army at Serre. To achieve this result the two divisions, 46th and 56th, were given the task of cutting off the Gommecourt salient.

From the 24th to the 30th June the line of the 56th Division was held by the 167th Brigade. The other two brigades then practised the assault on a replica of the German defence system near Halloy. In the early morning of the 1st July the 168th and 169th Brigades took over the line, and the 167th withdrew to Hébuterne.

The 5th Cheshire Regt. had a company with each of the assaulting brigades; the Royal Engineers sent a section of the 2/1st London Field Coy. with the 169th Brigade, and a section of the 2/2nd London Field Coy. with the 168th Brigade.

The London Scottish attacked on the right with the Kensingtons in support; then came the Rangers with the 4th London Regt. in support. The rôle of these battalions of the 168th Brigade may be briefly described as a half-wheel to the right. They had to capture the strong point round about Farm and Farmer trenches, and establish other strong points at Elbe and Et, south-east of Nameless Farm, and the junction of Felon and Epte.

On the extreme left of the division was the London Rifle Brigade, and next to them the Queen Victoria's Rifles. Again as a rough indication of their task, they had to make a left wheel and hold the line of the edge of Gommecourt Park, establishing strong points. The Queen's Westminster Rifles would then push straight on, carrying the attack forward, as it were, between the right and left wheels, and capture the strong point known as the Quadrilateral.

At 6.25 a.m. every gun opened on the German lines, and for one hour the enemy was pelted with shells of all sizes, the maximum speed of fire being reached at 7.20 and lasting for ten minutes. At this moment smoke was discharged from the left of our line near Z hedge, and in five minutes the smoke was dense along the whole front. Then the assaulting battalions climbed out of their trenches and advanced steadily into the heavy fog.

The German front line was reached with little loss—there was machine-gun fire, but it was apparently high. Almost immediately, however, the Germans gave an indication of their counter-measures—they were reported by the London Scottish to be shelling their own line. This gallant regiment succeeded in gaining practically the whole of its objectives, but they were never very comfortable. Owing to the smoke the two left companies lost direction, the flank company being drawn off in the direction of Nameless Farm, and the inner company failed to recognise its position and overran its objective. This was in no way surprising, as it was extremely difficult, owing to the heavy bombardment, to find, in some places, any trench at all.

Next to the London Scottish the Rangers met with strong resistance, and probably strayed a bit to their left. They were soon in trouble, and two companies of the 1/4th London Regt. were sent forward to reinforce them. Together these two units succeeded in reaching the junction of Epte with Felon and Fell, but there was a gap between them and the London Scottish.

On the left of the attack the London Rifle Brigade had swept up to the edge of Gommecourt Park and commenced to consolidate their position. The Queen Victoria's Rifles, on the other hand, were meeting with fierce resistance, and were short of the Cemetery. The Queen's Westminster Rifles, advancing in rear, soon became hopelessly mixed up with the Queen Victoria's Rifles. Within an hour it became clear that the infantry were everywhere engaged in hand-to-hand fighting.

The German counter-attack plans matured about an hour after the assault was launched. Their barrage on No Man's Land was increased to fearful intensity, and from Gommecourt Park, which was apparently packed with men in deep dugouts, came strong bombing attacks. The London Rifle Brigade called for reinforcements, but platoons of the reserve company failed to get through the barrage and across to the German front line.

The assaulting companies had been provided with boards bearing the names of the trenches to be captured, and as they fought their way forward, these boards were stuck up to mark the advance. At about 9.30 a.m. the artillery observers, who did most useful and gallant work during the whole action, could report that all objectives were gained with the exception of the Quadrilateral. But the troops in the German lines were now held there firmly by the enemy barrage; they were cut off from all communication by runners, and from all reinforcements. On the right the Kensingtons had failed in an attempt to reinforce the London Scottish. Captain Tagart, of the former regiment, had led his company out, but was killed, and of the two remaining officers, one was killed and the other wounded. A confused message having reached headquarters, a fresh officer was sent down with orders to rally the men and make another attempt to cross the inferno of No Man's Land. He found that there were only twenty men left, and that to cross with them was impossible.

The Royal Flying Corps contact machine, detailed to report on the situation, sent constant messages that the Quadrilateral was empty of troops of either side. The artillery observers, however, reported seeing many parties of hostile bombers moving through the Park, and enemy troops collecting behind the Cemetery.

It seemed as though all battalions had at one time gained their objectives except the Queen's Westminster Rifles, but no blame falls on this fine regiment. Lieut.-Col. Shoolbred says in his report, "As no officer who got as far as this (first line) ever returned, it is difficult to know in detail what happened." The three captains, Cockerill, Mott, and Swainson, were killed before reaching the second German line. Apparently the wire on this section of the front was not satisfactorily dealt with. The report says:

> "A great deal of the wire was not cut at all, so that both the Victorias and ourselves had to file in, in close order, through gaps, and many were hit.... The losses were heavy before reaching the bank at the Gommecourt-Nameless Farm road. At this point our three companies and the two Victorias were joined up and

> intermixed.... Only one runner ever succeeded in getting through from the assaulting companies."

There were a few brave young officers of the Queen's Westminsters left at this point—2/Lieuts. J. A. Horne, A. G. V. Yates, A. G. Negus, D. F. Upton, E. H. Bovill. They proceeded to collect their men and lead them forward, and while doing this 2/Lieuts. Yates and Negus were killed. 2/Lieut. Upton, having then reorganised a bombing party, bombed the enemy out of Fellow and reached the Cemetery. To do this they had to run over the open and drop into Fellow. Another party tried at the same time to bomb their way up Etch, but found it was too strongly held by the enemy. Meanwhile, 2/Lieut. Upton had stuck up his signboard, and more men doubled up over the open and dropped into Fellow Trench. 2/Lieut. Horne then mounted a Lewis gun, under cover of which a platoon of the Cheshire Regt. and some Royal Engineers blocked Etch and also Fell (it would seem doubtful, from this statement, whether Fell was ever held).

Sergt. W. G. Nicholls had kept a party of bombers together and, led by a young lieutenant of the Cheshire Regt., whose name unfortunately is not mentioned [we believe it was 2/Lieut. G. S. Arthur], this party forced its way from the Cemetery to the Quadrilateral. The names of some of the men are given by Col. Shoolbred:

> "Cpl. R. T. Townsend, L/Cpl. W. C. Ide, Cpl. Hayward, Rfn. F. H. Stow undoubtedly did reach the Quadrilateral, where strong enemy bombing parties met them, and the Cheshire lieutenant ordered the party to retire, apparently trying to cover their retirement himself, as he was not seen again."

In any case this advance into the Quadrilateral was but a momentary success, and it may be said that the attack never got beyond the German third line. Signals were picked up by the artillery observers calling for bombs. As early as 10 a.m. two parties of London Scottish, each fifty strong, attempted to take bombs across to their comrades. None got to the German first line, and only three ever got back to ours.

About midday the enemy was launching concerted counter-attacks from all directions. He was coming down Epte, Ems, and Etch, he was coming from Gommecourt Park, he was in Fall on the right. More desperate attempts were made to reinforce the hard-pressed troops. Capt. P. A. J. Handyside, of the 2nd London Regt., led his company out to try and reach the left of the line. He was hit, but struggled on. He was hit again and killed as he led a mere half-dozen men into the German first line.

Capt. J. R. Garland, also of the 2nd London Regt., attempted the same feat with his company, and met with a like fate. All the officers of both companies were casualties.

At 2 p.m. the London Scottish still held firm on the right and the London Rifle Brigade on the left—indeed, 2/Lieut. R. E. Petley, with thirty men, hung on to Eck three hours after the rest of his battalion had been ordered to fall back on Ferret, the German first line. But, although the two flanks held, the troops in the centre were gradually forced back until isolated posts were held in the second German line. By 4 p.m. nothing more was held than the German first line.

By 9 p.m. everyone who could get there was back in our own lines.

But we must not leave our account of the fighting with the story of the 46th Division untold. It was not unreasonable for the men of the 56th Division to hope, while they were being hardly pressed, that the 46th Division might suddenly come to their aid. Perhaps luck would favour that division!

The attack from the north was launched between the Gommecourt road and the Little Z. The 137th Brigade, with the 6th South Staffordshire Regt. on the right and the 6th North Staffordshire Regt. on the left, had Gommecourt Wood in front of them. The 139th Brigade, with the 5th Sherwood Foresters on the right and the 7th Sherwood Foresters on the left, carried the attack up to the Little Z.

The account of this action is one long series of disasters. It seems that the South Staffords on the right started by getting bogged in the mud. A new front line had been dug, but they could not

occupy it for this reason. They filed out through gaps in their wire, and if any succeeded in reaching the German front line it was for a period of minutes only. The North Staffords fared no better, though a few more men seem to have gained the enemy first line, but were, however, quickly forced out. The utmost confusion reigned in that part of the line, and the attack, from the very start, was futile.

The 5th and 7th Sherwoods got away to time (7.30), but

> "there was a little delay in the fourth wave getting out, owing to the deep mud in the trenches, and still more delay in the carrying parties moving up (due to a similar reason), and also on account of the enemy barrage of artillery, rifle, and machine-gun fire which became very heavy on our old front line.... Of the 5th Sherwoods the first and second waves reached the enemy first line fairly easily, but were scattered by the time this occurred. The third and fourth waves suffered severely in crossing from machine-gun fire. The majority of the first and second waves passed over the first-line trenches, but there is no evidence to show what happened to them there, for not a man of the battalions that reached the German second line has returned. The remaining waves … found that the enemy, who must have taken refuge in deep dugouts, had now come up and manned the parapet in parties. The Germans were noticed to be practically all bombers.... The first three waves of the 7th Sherwoods (the left of the attack) moved out to time and found the wire well cut. So far as is known, only a small proportion of these three waves reached the German second line, and after a bomb fight on both flanks, the survivors fell back on the German first line, where they found other men of the battalion consolidating. After expending all their bombs in repelling a German counter-attack, the survivors retired over the parapet."

One can therefore say that, half an hour after the attack was launched, the Germans in the Gommecourt salient had only the 56th Division to deal with. We know that the Cemetery was seen to be occupied by our troops about nine o'clock, and it was probably shortly after this that the party of Queen's Westminster Rifles, led by the gallant lieutenant of the Cheshires, reached the Quadrilateral. But the Germans were then masters of the situation on the north of the salient and, freed from all anxiety in that quarter, could turn their whole attention to the 56th Division. Up to this time fighting had been hard, but slow progress had been made, and with even moderate success on the part of the 46th Division, depression and bewilderment might have seized the enemy. But he turned with elation to the southern attack, and shortly after 9.30 a.m. small parties of bombers were seen moving through Gommecourt Park to attack the London Rifle Brigade, and strong attacks were launched from the east of Gommecourt village.

For the rest of the day no help came from the 46th Division, though a new attack was ordered, postponed, and postponed again. The plan was to reorganise assaulting waves from the carrying parties, and at 3.30 in the afternoon it seemed probable that an attack would materialise, but it did not. It was perhaps as well, for by that time the 56th Division occupied the German front line only, and that in very weak strength.

As night fell all became quiet. The 167th Brigade relieved the 168th on the right; the 169th reorganised.

General Hull's conclusions on this action are that

> "the primary reason for failing to retain the ground was a shortage of grenades. This shortage was due to:
>
> (*a*) The enemy's barrage, and in a lesser extent the machine-gun fire from the flanks, which prevented supplies being carried across No Man's Land.
>
> (*b*) To the breadth of No Man's Land.

(*c*) Possibly to insufficient means of collecting grenades and S.A.A. from men who had become casualties, and from German stores.

I understand that our counter-battery groups engaged a very large number of German batteries—the results were not apparent, and I think this was due to the limited number of guns available, and also to the small calibre of the majority employed (60-pounders, 4·7 guns, and 4·5 howitzers). I consider it would be better to employ the heavy (9·2) and medium (6) howitzers, and even the super-heavy.

It was particularly noticeable that, once our attack was launched, the Germans attempted practically no counter-work.

The preliminary bombardment started on the 24th June, and continued for seven days. During this period the enemy seemed to have increased the number of his batteries.... The effect of the bombardment on the German trenches was very great … on the dugouts the effect was negligible. On the *moral* of the enemy the effect was not so great as one would have hoped....

I am doubtful of the value of these long bombardments, which give the enemy time to recognise the points selected for the attack, and possibly to relieve his troops, and to concentrate guns, and to bring up ammunition.

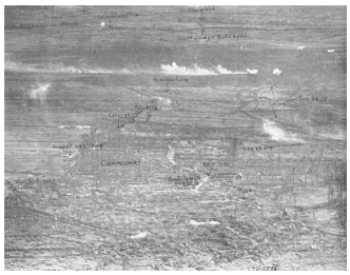
The intense bombardment prior to the attack lasted sixty-five minutes, considerably longer than any of the previous bombardments. I am in favour of having as many false attacks and lifts of artillery fire as possible, but consider there should be no difference....

The German attitude and *moral* varied considerably—some of the enemy showed fight, but other parties were quite ready to surrender as soon as they came up from their dugouts. But it cannot be said that their *moral* was any more shattered by the bombardment than were their dugouts. Later in the day German bombers advanced with great boldness, being assisted by men who advanced over the open. Our men appear to have had no difficulty in dealing with enemy bombers at first—it was only when bombs were scarce that the enemy succeeded in pushing us back. The counter-attacks on the right were never made in great strength, but were prepared by artillery fire which was followed up closely and boldly by bombers. On the left the enemy appeared to be in greater strength, and came out of Gommecourt village and through the Park in great numbers."

The men of London had done well, although the salient remained in the hands of the enemy. The effort of the infantry was valiant, and they were supported with devotion by the artillery. The artillery observers took great risks, and the conduct of one of Lieut.-Col. Prechtel's wire-cutting batteries is well worthy of note. It established itself practically in our front line, about W48, and fired 1,200 rounds during X, Y, Y1, Y2 days and on Z day fired a further 1,100 rounds.

The German plan was, as has been shown, to prevent all reinforcements from crossing No Man's Land, and to deal with those troops who had lodged themselves in their trench system by strong and well-organised bombing attacks.

1. The Gommecourt Salient.
The dotted line is the old British line.
GOMMECOURT, JULY 1916



There is no doubt that the main object of the attack had been fulfilled. Unpleasant as it may seem, the rôle of the 56th Division was to induce the enemy to shoot at them with as many guns as could be gathered together, and also to prevent him from moving troops. The prisoners captured were 141 from units of the 52nd Reserve Division, and 37 from the 2nd Guards Reserve Division, so that no movement of troops had occurred on that front, and we know that the number of batteries had been increased. There were many more prisoners than this, but they were caught in their own barrage as they crossed No Man's Land, and large numbers of dead Germans were afterwards found in that much-battered belt.

The main attack of the Fourth Army, launched on the same day, succeeded on the right. North of the Ancre as far as Serre our losses were severe, and the initial gains of the assaulting troops could not be maintained. After five days' fierce fighting, the enemy's first system of defence farther south had been penetrated to a depth of a mile over a front of six miles. But north of the Ancre, after the first day, operations were confined to maintaining a steady pressure on the enemy.

This battle, with the subsidiary attack on the Gommecourt Salient, is known as the battle of Albert 1916.

* * * * * * *

The division was not relieved. It had suffered in casualties 182 officers and 4,567 other ranks. The London Scottish had sent 24 officers and 847 other ranks into battle, and 9 officers and 257 other ranks had come out. The Rangers had sent in 23 officers and 780 other ranks—6 officers and 280 other ranks came out. The Queen Victoria's Rifles came out with 22 officers and 160 other ranks; the London Rifle Brigade, 18 officers and 300 other ranks; the Queen's Westminster Rifles, 19 officers and 160 other ranks. The supporting battalions suffered only slightly less.

When the fighting had abated the enemy seems to have initiated a truce to gather in the wounded. His own stretcher-bearers came out, on seeing which ours also went out. This state of affairs lasted for an hour, when our men were warned to get back to their lines.

The state of the line was extraordinary. The front line, over which so much labour had been expended, had ceased to exist, and could only be held by means of patrols and a few small posts. Our main line was now what was known as the R Line, the original line when the 56th Division arrived in the sector. And the front held by the division was gradually increased. From the 3rd July onwards the division took over the line to the left until on the 8th the 169th Brigade was north of Fonquevillers with its left opposite Little Z. Each brigade held its front with two battalions in the line, one in brigade reserve and one in divisional reserve.

During the night of the 13th the artillery made a “demonstration” in order to help the Fourth Army, which was again attacking in the south. On this night a patrol of the Queen’s Westminster Rifles captured a prisoner who proved to be of the 91st Regt.—a normal unit.

On the 17th of the month all three brigades attempted raids, but the enemy were found to be too alert, and no prisoners were obtained.

The division remained on this front, keeping the enemy busy, until the 20th August, when it was relieved by the 17th Division, and marched first to Doullens, then to Fromer-le-Grand, then to St. Riquier, where it proceeded to refit and train under the orders of the X Corps.

CHAPTER II
THE SOMME

THE BATTLE OF GINCHY; THE BATTLE OF FLERS-COURCELETTE; THE BATTLE OF MORVAL

The move to St. Riquier, in the neighbourhood of Abbeville, revealed to some of the officers that their men were not very fit for marching. This knowledge appears to come as a revelation to some people. Those on active service very soon discovered that a long period of trench duty, though it hardened the men to those particular conditions, made them unfit for any strenuous marching. It was probably never understood by people in England. They were, then, weary battalions that arrived at St. Riquier.

When it is said that a battalion or a division was "resting," that word must not be taken in too literal a sense. One might define it with greater truth as being a change of location, sometimes a mere matter of a mile or so, at others perhaps fifty miles. There were, it is true, no trenches to man, no sentry groups by day and night, but there was always work to be done. And the work, very naturally, had always the one end in view—the defeat of the Germans.

The training was almost exclusively of an aggressive nature. Unless there was some special object in view, when trenches would be dug to represent our own and those occupied by the enemy, the optimistic nature of the Higher Command always leaned to open warfare training. Companies wandered about, as they do in England, attacking villages, strong points, and woods, and indulged in vast schemes of pursuit after phantom armies called Red or North or South Armies. But this short period at St. Riquier gave the 56th Division a surprise in the matter of training.

Battalions had been reinforced since the Gommecourt action, and there was some grumbling about the nature of the reinforcements. Batches of men, from all sorts of units, were drafted to battalions, and General Hull made great efforts to get this system altered. Battalions, however, were of fair strength.

We know that very early in the war the problem of barbed wire had been exercising the minds of the Staff in general. Long after the Press campaign for high explosives, when this form of shell was provided in large quantities, wire-cutting was still ordered with quite a high percentage of shrapnel. But whatever you did, however long the time you gave to cutting the wire, it never disappeared entirely; vile, treacherous strands stuck out of the earth like brambles, stakes remained miraculously upright with waving lengths of wire to grab you by the sleeve or the trousers; and when the cutting was well done, there had been a mere substitution of obstacles—the state of the ground, blasted into holes, pits, mounds, and mud made progress very slow and difficult.

How was wire to be removed?

Mr. Winston Churchill let his mind wander round steam-rollers linked up with chains. Other minds thought of tractors. At the same time, inventors were considering the old question of moving forts. In August 1916 there came from England a weird and fearful-looking machine known as a Tank.

On the 26th August the 7th Middlesex practised an attack in conjunction with five Tanks. One can easily imagine the Middlesex men, and everybody else who had wind of what was afoot, all agog at this new form of field training! What were the criticisms of the London men on this … machine?

The Tanks had only been landed in France on the 25th, and it is not surprising that two of them broke down. But the practice was continued on subsequent days until each brigade had acquired experience. Sir Douglas Haig, Marshal Joffre, and H.R.H. the Prince of Wales were interested spectators of these evolutions.

The orders for this exercise were that the Tanks would cross our front line at zero hour, and would be followed by the first infantry wave one minute later. The second wave would start at zero plus three minutes; the third wave at zero plus five minutes; the fourth wave at zero plus six minutes. The infantry were instructed to advance in short rushes up to, but not beyond, the Tanks—unless a Tank broke down, when they were to proceed as if it was not there.

Everyone seems to have been much impressed by the behaviour of the Tanks.

On the 31st August, General Hull received a warning order that his division would move to Corbie and come under the XIV Corps (Cavan). And on the following day the artillery was ordered forward. The 168th and 169th Infantry Brigades left St. Riquier on the 3rd, and the 167th Brigade on the 4th. Events came tumbling over one another.

On the 4th September the leading troops of the division were at the Citadel and Happy Valley, near Carnoy; on the 5th at Maricourt Siding. And on the 6th September the 56th Division was ordered to relieve the 5th Division that night in the front line.

No one will ever be able to describe in adequate fashion the scene behind the Somme battle front. Piccadilly in the height of the season, with its slow-moving and ever-stopping traffic, may give some idea of the state of the roads—only one must substitute army carts, limbers, lorries, for smart limousine cars and buses, one must substitute a loose stone road covered with six inches of mud, and holes three feet deep filled with water, for the smooth wood paving of that thoroughfare. And there were no pavements, no sidewalks. The infantry threaded its way in single file through this mass of dirty carts, and sweating men and horses, and overheated motor-lorries, halting sometimes for hours; or broke away across-country where, although the traffic was not so congested, obstacles such as cavalry lines, transport lines, camps, and, as the forward area was penetrated, lines of heavy guns and howitzers were met with.

The whole country seemed pulsing with life and effort. Here was no labour-saving device of peaceful civilisation, but a continual strain of muscle and sinew. Difficulties were overcome by straining horses, straining men, for where the greatest difficulty existed the engine was of no use. And through the midst of all this, threading its way in long files, passed the 56th Division.

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We have said that the results of the first five days of fighting, which started on the 1st July, was an advance of one mile on a front of six miles. This was followed by minor engagements to adjust the line.

The two northern Corps of the attacking Army were given to Sir Hubert Gough, with instructions to keep the enemy busy while Sir Henry Rawlinson battered his way through farther south.

On the 14th July the Fourth Army was again launched on a front from Longueval to Bazentin-le-Petit Wood. This battle was continued for several days, and established the Army on a line from Maltz Horn Farm (Montauban), where it joined on to the left of the French, along the eastern edge of Trones Wood to Longueval, then westward past Bazentin-le-Grand to the northern corner of Bazentin-le-Petit (and the wood), and so to the north of Ovillers. Over 2,000 prisoners were taken, which brought the total since the opening of the offensive to more than 10,000, also in this battle we captured 4 heavy guns, 42 field-guns, 30 trench mortars, and 52 machine guns. [Battle of Bazentin Ridge.]

But our line from Pozières to Delville Wood and Longueval, and then south of Maltz Horn Farm, where it was carried still south by the French to the village of Hem, made a most unpleasant salient. The enemy had excellent observation from Guillemont, and could bring a mass of surrounding artillery to bear on a comparatively small area packed with troops, guns, and supplies. To relieve this most uncomfortable position, it was arranged that the right of the British Army should swing forward in conjunction with the French. To do this the French would have to capture the strongly fortified villages of Maurepas, Le Foret, Rancourt, and Frigicourt, while we would have to take all the

country up to Sailly-Saillisel and Morval, which included the capture of Flers, Gueudecourt, Ginchy, Guillemont, and Les Bœufs. Before this could be done, the enemy, on the 18th July, launched a strong counter-attack on Delville Wood-Longueval-Waterlot Farm. And this was the prelude to much fierce and very confusing fighting. [The battle of Delville Wood commenced on the 15th July and ended 3rd September.]

On the 30th July we attacked Guillemont and Falfemont Farm in conjunction with our Allies, but without success; and on the 7th August our troops again entered Guillemont and were again driven out. Guillemont was the important point to be gained, but it was evident that it could not be won in a small engagement, and as the only objective, without heavy loss. So we and the French made a series of attacks, advancing foot by foot on Maurepas, Falfemont, Guillemont, Leuze Wood, and Ginchy. But no great progress was made. And so the month of August passed.

On the 3rd September a combined French and British attack was made on a wide front extending on the left to the Ancre, so that both the Fourth and Fifth Armies were engaged. The gain in front of Sir Hubert Gough's Army was small, but the Fourth Army managed to win the much-disputed Guillemont, and after many assaults Falfemont Farm (which was only completely captured on the 5th) and the greater part of Leuze Wood. Ginchy and High Wood remained in the hands of the Germans, but we had made a step in the right direction, and had advanced our right to a depth of one mile on a front of nearly two miles and captured over a thousand prisoners. [Battle of Guillemont, 3rd-6th September.]

This was, briefly, the situation when the 56th Division marched forward to take over the line from the 5th Division.

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Brig.-Gen. Loch was ordered to take over a portion of the line, and accordingly the 168th Brigade moved from Maricourt Siding in the direction of Falfemont Farm, and came under the orders of the 5th Division. The local situation was always most difficult to grasp. The Somme field of battle was the most hideous place and absolutely bewildering. A guide was a treacherous person to trust, or perhaps we should say he was a broken reed to lean on; for the poor fellow had no treacherous intent in his heart, he was anxious enough to lead troops in the right direction, but nine times out of ten was completely lost a few minutes after he started. And there were, perhaps, more mistakes made in attempting to trace the front line in that great battle than in any other.

Guillemont was held by us; Combles was strongly held by the Germans. Between these two places was Leuze Wood. We held, with more or less certainty, the line of the road between Leuze Wood and Guillemont, and we also held the country between Leuze Wood and Falfemont Farm, and had pushed troops into the wood itself; but the situation in the rest of the square marked 27 was very vague (see map)—the only certain thing was that there were many Germans there. Except for the wood and the line of the road to Guillemont, the Germans held all of squares 20 and 21. We had a nasty, elongated triangle pushed into enemy territory, and it had a wobbly right side to it.

The Kensingtons went into the front line not very far from Falfemont Farm, in the lower left corner of square 27. The London Scottish were supposed to be in support to the Royal Irish Rifles, and got into a two-foot scrape, unworthy of the name of "trench," about three-quarters of the way through Leuze Wood. The Royal Irish Rifles were imagined to be holding the most southern end of Bouleaux Wood across the road which separated it from Leuze Wood.

The positions were, of course, taken over at night, and the next day the French attacked Combles. In order to help our Allies our guns started a bombardment, but unfortunately most of their shells fell around Leuze Wood. It was one of the unavoidable accidents of war. Close shooting has to be done, and there are many possible causes, from faulty ammunition to wet ground, for guns

shooting short. It is none the less annoying to the infantry. Capt. A. H. Macgregor, of "C" Company (London Scottish), made strong remarks in writing, but failed to stop the energetic gunners.

The Irish were having a much worse time than the London Scottish, as they were also being heavily bombarded by the Germans. So they decided to evacuate their trench.

All this led to some confusion, and on top of it the enemy launched a bombing attack, which was probably in support of their counter-attack on the French. The London Scottish reserve companies, which were at Wedge Wood, moved up, and the battalion prepared to defend Leuze Wood, which they imagined would shortly be heavily attacked. But the Irish, although they lost heavily, threw back the German bombers and were relieved by two companies of the London Scottish.

By midnight everything was re-established as it had been before, and, while probing about in the dark, the London Scottish gathered in two enemy officers and fourteen other ranks of the 107th Infantry Regt. as prisoners.

The position they were in was on the south of the road, and it was decided to try and dig a trench on the edge of Bouleaux Wood, that is, on the other side of the road. A platoon was sent forward the following morning to undertake this work. It was successfully carried out, and the covering party managed to inflict a good many casualties on the enemy—Sergt. Smith, of "B" Company, shot eight—and three further prisoners were taken.

This experience of the London Scottish will give some idea of the conditions which ruled what was officially known as "holding the line." At any moment a post might be wrested from you and have to be fought for again, and all the time you were described as "established" in Leuze Wood.

On the night of the 7th September the Queen Victoria's Rifles took over this bit of line, and the London Scottish went back to Maltz Horn Farm.

On the night of the 6/7th September, General Hull took over command of the divisional front from the G.O.C. 5th Division. There was a slight readjustment of line the next night, and it was then held by the 169th Brigade on the right and in touch with the 1st French Division, and the 168th Brigade on the left and in touch with the 16th Division on the Combles-Guillemont road.

There was to be a big attack on the 9th, but the position from which the 56th Division had to start was not too satisfactory. A study of the battle of the Somme will show that at some time or other every unit lost direction. It was exceedingly difficult to recognise an objective; even the heaps of ruins which marked the sites of villages were frequently mistaken. It is a rolling, featureless country. But perhaps the chief cause of loss of direction was the shape of the jumping-off line. The German defence was very obstinate and the fighting severe. Troops, having made an advance, had to hang on anywhere, facing the enemy where he opposed them most fiercely. The result was a zigzag line, a crazy front, where troops frequently faced east and west and were told to attack north. On an ordinary practice field-day, a platoon commander can get his men out of a trench and make them wheel in the desired direction, but in action attacking troops will always be drawn towards the nearest firing. Men getting out of a trench and hearing or seeing an enemy in front of them will go towards him, no matter how much orders to the contrary have been dinned into their heads.

Consider the line of the 56th Division. The left along the Guillemont-Leuze Wood road was facing due north; it then curled round the wood and faced south-east; another curl made the extreme right of the line face north-east. The attack on the 9th was to be in a north-easterly direction.

To get a better line and form a strong flank facing Combles, an attempt was made to clear the enemy from the trenches south-east of Leuze Wood.

The London Rifle Brigade had relieved the Kensingtons on the right of the line, and companies were somewhat puzzled by their position, which is described as "most obscure." On the night of the 8th they made a bombing attack to clear the trenches on the south-east of the wood. At first this met with some success, but in the early morning of the 9th the enemy came at them again in large numbers, and they were driven back to their former position. It was not thought advisable to try to regain the lost ground.

The attack on the 9th September (the battle of Ginchy) was by the whole of the XIV Corps in conjunction with the XV Corps on the left. The XIV Corps held Guillemont; and Delville Wood was held by the XV Corps. The object was to capture Ginchy and bring the line up to point 141·7, and from there down to Leuze Wood. Incidentally it meant clearing the ground to the south-east of the wood, but in following the actions from this date it must be remembered that the Higher Command intended to work round Combles, and so the right of the British Army was always working to form a defensive flank, until the advance reached a point which would enable troops to join hands with the French on the far side of Combles.

The task of the 169th Brigade was the forming of a flank against Combles by capturing the trenches south-east of the wood (the trenches they had failed to take by bombing) and to advance their line a short way through Bouleaux Wood.

The 168th Brigade, who were on the line of the Guillemont-Leuze Wood road, were to pivot on their right (the advance from the northern end of the wood was very slight) and bring their left up to point 141·7. This "right form" was to be done in two stages, the road to Ginchy marking the halfway line.

The artillery were ordered to put up a creeping and stationary barrage. Fifty per cent. of guns were to fire on a known position as a stationary barrage; the other 50 per cent. were to start just ahead of the infantry and creep forward at the rate of fifty yards a minute, until the stationary barrage was reached, when the latter would be jumped forward to the next stationary barrage line.

It will be gathered from the foregoing account of how the 56th Division took over the line that the conditions under which the infantry waited for the resumption of attack were not dissimilar to those at the end, though not the actual termination, of an engagement—when nobody knows within a few hundred yards where any unit really is. And, indeed, that was always the situation during the battle of the Somme. There was perpetual unrest in the line.

The battle on the 9th has always seemed like a wild rush in fast-fading light. It was to open at 4.45 p.m., but on the left of the Corps it seems to have been delayed. Nowhere was it entirely successful in the assault. The situation remained obscure and fighting continued for several days.

The truth of the whole matter was that the enemy defended Combles with desperation. The right of the 56th Division had as hard a task as was ever set for any troops, and on their left was a German strong point bearing the ominous name of "the Quadrilateral," the strength of which was only learned at bitter cost. We will follow the fortunes of the division from the right of the line.

The 169th Brigade was on the right with the London Rifle Brigade and the Queen Victoria's Rifles attacking. Leuze Wood, as we know, was always a dangerous spot, and the task of the London Rifle Brigade was to capture those trenches on the south-east of the wood and start the building up of the flank facing Combles. But the moment the men left their jumping-off trenches, their attack was met and destroyed by a hail of rifle and machine-gun fire.

On the left of the London Rifle Brigade the Queen Victoria's Rifles, whose objective was the enemy trench on the far side of the Combles road, met with more success and gained a precarious footing in a part of that line. But no troops of the 169th Brigade could be said to be established anywhere on their objective.

Part of the 2nd London Regt. was given to the London Rifle Brigade, and a second attack was launched on the trenches south-east of the wood, almost simultaneously with a counter-attack by the enemy from his Bouleaux Wood defences. The Queen Victoria's Rifles held on to their gains, but the second attack on the trenches south-east of the wood failed. The Queen's Westminster Rifles, who were in reserve, were sent for.

The 168th Brigade, on the left of the division, attacked with the 4th London Regt. on the right and the Rangers on the left. The 4th Londons, pivoting on the north end of Leuze Wood, gained their first objective under close cover of our barrage and with little loss. But the Rangers came under

heavy machine-gun fire from their left. It was ascertained from a prisoner, captured later, that a whole battalion of his regiment, the 161st of the 185th Division, was in the centre of the square marked 20.

The left company of the Rangers, with the troops of the 16th Division on their left, met a strong force of the enemy and were driven back to their point of departure. The right company, however, after hard fighting which lasted until 6 p.m., reached their first objective, the line of the road from Leuze Wood to Ginchy.

Meanwhile the 4th London Regt., sticking close to the artillery barrage, had again advanced at 5.25 p.m. and gained their final objective. But their losses were severe. The machine-gun fire was tremendous, and its effects can be gathered from the fact that a post, which was left to construct a strong point in the first objective, was entirely wiped out.

The right company of the Rangers, having gained their first objective, again advanced, though the opposition they had met with had caused them to be late on the barrage. Again the murderous fire was poured on them from the left, and they swerved so that they came up on the centre of the 4th London troops. These two battalions were now on the line of the trench leading to point 141·7, but exactly how near that point was only determined later. On the right they were in touch with the Queen Victoria's Rifles.

By this time it was quite dark; and the left of the 56th Division was so much in the air that the enemy was on all but one side of it. The 16th Division had fared badly.

The right brigade of the 16th Division had not been able to advance at all, and were scattered about in front of Guillemont. The left brigade had secured a footing in Ginchy, and the 3rd Brigade of the Guards Division was already on its way to relieve the whole of the 16th Division. But the situation was far from good.

The Kensingtons, who were in support to the 168th Brigade, had moved forward to occupy the departure trenches, and the commanding officer, seeing something of what had happened, promptly tried to strengthen the flank of the 4th London Regt. and the Rangers. He disposed of his battalion in forward positions with the object of protecting the left flank. The London Scottish were sent for.

Before 11 p.m. the two reserve battalions, the London Scottish and the Queen's Westminster Rifles, had arrived in the vicinity of Leuze Wood. But the situation which faced General Hull at midnight was not a comfortable one. His left was surrounded by Germans, and probably only protected by the night, and his right was uncertain; there had been reports of enemy snipers in Leuze Wood, and the enemy was certainly pressing strongly with his bombers.

Both brigades were ordered to attack again.

Following events from the right of the line, the Queen's Westminsters were ordered to attack and capture the trenches south-east of the wood before dawn. The night was pitch dark, and the Germans were pouring shells into the wood. The exact bearing of the trench and its distance from the wood were unknown to the battalion. It was impossible to arrange an earlier hour than 7 a.m. for the attack.

Patrols were sent out to get in touch with the enemy and reconnoitre the ground, and while the battalion waited casualties mounted up. At last came the dawn, but it brought no light; a thick mist had settled over the country. At 7 a.m. the attack started.

Two companies attacked. The right company went straight ahead, and the left was told to swing to their left and take a trench beyond the sunken road leading to Combles. The barrage was described as ineffective, which was, maybe, due to the fog. At any rate, neither company reached its objective. The enemy was lining his defences in force and poured in a hot fire with rifles and machine guns.

Later in the day a further attack was launched, but met with no success, and the situation during the whole of the morning, complicated by the thick mist, remained extremely uncertain.

On the 168th Brigade front the London Scottish had not waited till dawn for their attack. They formed up in six waves, in trenches dug by the 5th Cheshires on the extreme left of the original line of departure, and were ordered to thrust through, moving due north, and fill the gap between the 4th

London Regt. and the troops of the 16th Division in Ginchy. It was hoped that all the enemy troops in square 20 would be cut off.

A quarter of an hour after midnight, in pitch darkness, the battalion started to advance. The first three waves progressed some 600 yards, and then, failing to see any landmarks or recognise where they were, they halted and sent out patrols. The last three waves were nowhere in sight; they had lost direction and joined the 4th London Regt. and Rangers on their right. But while the leading waves waited for their patrols to get in touch with either friend or foe, they were attacked by about a hundred Germans from their rear. The London Scottish whipped round and scattered them at the point of the bayonet. The enemy vanished, but left a considerable number of dead on the ground.

The London Scottish were now completely lost, and so marched south to pick up their position again.

The attempted attack, however, was not repeated, but two and a half companies were sent to the trench occupied by the 4th London Regt. and the Rangers (Bully), where they attempted, by bombing, to reach point 141·7. Their efforts were not successful.

Meanwhile the situation to the left of the 56th Division was no less obscure. The 3rd Brigade of the Guards Division had been hurried up in the dark to relieve the 16th Division. The guides of the left brigade of the latter division led a relieving battalion into Ginchy, but had only the haziest idea where their own troops were. Part of the 16th Division on the east of the village was not relieved until midday on the 10th. Ginchy was repeatedly attacked by the enemy, and no one knew with any certainty what was happening.

The right brigade of the 16th Division was not relieved for some time. The guides to the relieving battalion lost themselves completely, and a big gap existed between Ginchy and Guillemont. During the 10th this gap was made good, but the whole of that day was occupied by repulsing enemy attacks and trying to establish a definite line.

On the 56th Division front there were repeated bombing attacks by the enemy, and the S.O.S. was sent up several times. We may say that the battalion reports of positions were only relatively accurate, and that nothing was clear to Gen. Hull until the weather improved and air reports could be made.

Relief of the 168th Brigade by the 167th, and of the 169th by a composite brigade of the 5th Division, took place, and it was then ascertained that the London Scottish had, as related above, lost direction in their attack and that no one was near the Ginchy—141·7 road. The enemy still held the Quadrilateral in force, and the most advanced troops of the 56th Division were some way from it, though they were strongly established in Bully Trench; and the enemy were still in square 20. But the 56th and Guards Divisions were now in touch and a firm line was held along the Guillemont—Leuze Wood road, and from the cross-roads to Ginchy, which was also firmly held.

The Quadrilateral was the danger-point, and it defied all attempts to take it by bombing, and successfully withstood the Corps heavy artillery.

* * * * * * *

Sir Douglas Haig sums up the situation at this point as follows:

> "… The French had made great progress on our right, bringing their line forward to Louage Wood (just south of Combles), Le Foret, Cléry-sur-Somme, all three inclusive. The weak salient in the Allied line had therefore disappeared, and we had gained the front required for further operations.
>
> Still more importance, however, lay in the proof afforded in the results described of the ability of our new armies not only to rush the enemy's strong defences—as had been accomplished on the 1st and 14th July—but also to wear

down and break the power of resistance by a steady relentless pressure, as had been done during the weeks of this fierce and protracted struggle. As has already been recounted, the preparations made for our assault on the 1st July had been long and elaborate; but though the enemy knew that an attack was coming, it would seem that he considered the troops already on the spot, secure in their apparent impregnable defences, would suffice to deal with it. The success of that assault, combined with the vigour and determination with which our troops pressed their advantage, and followed by the successful attack on the night of 14th July, all served to awaken him to a fuller realisation of his danger. The great depth of his system of fortifications, to which reference has been made, gave him time to reorganise his defeated troops, and to hurry up numerous fresh divisions and more guns. Yet in spite of this he was still pushed back, steadily and continuously. Trench after trench, and strong point after strong point, were wrested from him. The great majority of his repeated counter-attacks failed completely, with heavy loss; while the few that achieved temporary success purchased it dearly, and were soon thrown back from the ground they had for the moment regained.

The enemy had, it is true, delayed our advance considerably, but the effort had cost him dear; and the comparative collapse of his resistance during the last days of the struggle justified the belief that in the long-run decisive victory would lie with our troops, who had displayed such fine fighting qualities and such indomitable endurance and resolution.

Practically the whole of the forward crest of the main ridge, on a front of some 9,000 yards from Delville Wood to the road above Mouquet Farm, was now in our hands, and with it the advantage of observation over the slopes beyond. East of Delville Wood, for a further 3,000 yards to Leuze Wood, we were firmly established on the main ridge; while farther east, across the Combles valley, the French were advancing victoriously on our right. But though the centre of our line was well placed, on our flanks there was still difficult ground to be won.

From Ginchy the crest of the high ground runs northwards for 2,000 yards, and then eastward, in a long spur, for nearly 4,000 yards. Near the eastern extremity of the spur stands the village of Morval, commanding a wide field of view and fire in every direction. At Leuze Wood my right was still 2,000 yards from its objective at this village, and between lay a broad and deep branch of the main Combles valley, completely commanded by the Morval spur, and flanked, not only from its head north-east of Ginchy, but also from the high ground east of the Combles valley, which looks directly into it.

Up this high ground beyond the Combles valley the French were working their way towards the objective at Sailly-Saillisel, situated due east of Morval, and standing at the same level. Between these two villages the ground falls away to the head of the Combles valley, which runs thence in a south-westerly direction. In the bottom of this valley lies the small town of Combles, then well fortified and strongly held, though dominated by my right at Leuze Wood, and by the French left on the opposite heights. It had been agreed by the French and myself that an assault on Combles would not be necessary, as the place could be rendered untenable by pressing forward along the ridges above it on either side.

The capture of Morval from the south side presented a very difficult problem, while the capture of Sailly-Saillisel, at that time some 3,000 yards to the north of the French left, was in some respects even more difficult. The line of the French advance was narrowed almost to a defile by the extensive and strongly fortified wood of St.

> Pierre Vaast on the one side, and on the other by the Combles valley, which, with the branches running out of it and the slopes on either side, is completely commanded, as has been pointed out, by the heights bounding the valley on the east and west....
>
> The general plan of the combined Allied attack which was opened on the 15th September was to pivot on the high ground south of the Ancre and north of the Albert-Bapaume road, while the Fourth Army devoted its whole effort to the rearmost of the enemy's original systems of defence between Morval and Le Sars.
>
> Should our success in this direction warrant it, I made arrangements to enable me to extend the left of the attack to embrace the villages of Martinpuich and Courcelette. As soon as our advance on this front had reached the Morval line, the time would have arrived to bring forward my left across the Thiepval Ridge. Meanwhile our Allies arranged to continue the line of advance in close co-operation with me from the Somme to the slopes above Combles; but directed their main effort northwards against the villages of Rancourt and Frigicourt, so as to complete the isolation of Combles and open the way for their attack on Sailly-Saillisel."

That much was hoped from the big attack, to take place on the 15th, there can be no doubt. Brigades resting in the rear of the divisional area could see quantities of cavalry still farther back. It suggested big results.

The limits of the Fourth Army attack were Combles Ravine and Martinpuich, and it was to capture Morval, Les Bœufs, Gueudecourt, and Flers. The Cavalry Corps was to have its head on Carnoy at 10 a.m., and as soon as the four villages had been captured it would advance and seize the high ground round Rocquigny, Villers-au-Flos, Riencourt-les-Bapaume, and Bapaume.

And it was the first battle in which Tanks were employed! [The battle of Flers-Courcelette.]

Even in the midst of the struggle round about the Quadrilateral a steady bombardment had been going on, in preparation of a further attack, since the 12th September. Day firing commenced at 6 a.m. and went on until 6.30 p.m., when night firing started. During the night bombardment lethal shells were used.

On Z day the preliminary bombardment was to be the same as on former days, with no increase until zero hour. When the intense fire, or barrage, commenced, there were gaps left in it for the advance of Tanks.

For the XIV Corps there were, taking part in this attack, fifteen Tanks. Nine were allotted to the Guards Division, three to the 6th Division, and three to the 56th Division.

The instructions given to Tanks were that they should start their attack at a time which would enable them to reach the first objective five minutes before the infantry. When they had cleared up the first objective, a proportion of them was to push forward a short way, to prearranged positions, and act as strong points. Departure from this programme to assist any infantry held up by the enemy was left to the discretion of the Tank Commander.

On the second objective Tanks and infantry would advance together and pace was to be regulated to "tank pace," which was given as from 30 to 50 yards a minute. For the third and fourth objectives there would be no creeping barrage, and Tanks would start in time to reach the objectives before the infantry. In all cases their action was to be arranged so as to crush wire and keep down hostile rifle and machine-gun fire.

Signals between Tank and infantry were arranged for by means of coloured flags—a red flag meaning "out of action," and a green flag "am on objective."

The main task of the 56th Division was to clear Bouleaux Wood and form a strong protective flank, covering all the lines of advance from Combles and the valleys running from the north-east of Combles. The 167th Brigade were ordered to advance as far as the bit of Beef Trench running through Bouleaux Wood, and to Middle Copse on the left of the wood; a flank was also to be formed to the south-east and clear of the wood. The 168th Brigade were to pass through the 167th and carry

on the advance by further bounds. The 169th Brigade were to hold the line through Leuze Wood and the left of square 27, and to capture the well-known trench (Loop Trench) to the south-east of the wood which runs into the sunken road to Combles.

One Tank was to advance on the right of Leuze Wood and assist the 169th Brigade to drive the enemy beyond the sunken road; it would then establish itself in the Orchard as a strong point. This Tank was called the Right Tank.

Two Tanks were to work from the north of Leuze Wood along the left of Bouleaux Wood and assist the 167th and 168th Brigades. These were known as the Centre and Left Tanks, and were eventually to proceed to a railway cutting north-east of Bouleaux Wood, which promised to be a point of some difficulty.

The Right Tank, having seen the 169th Brigade safely in its objectives, was to move along the south-east of Bouleaux Wood and take up a position on the cutting in the top end of square 22.

In the XIV Corps area the Tanks were by no means a success. It is only right to say that this was not the fault of their crews. Every excuse must be allowed, for the Tank was not only a new invention, and, like most new inventions, somewhat clumsy in the first design, but the ground was absolutely vile. We have not alluded to the weather, which, however, was a most important factor just now. The field of battle was a field of mud; the resting area of the division was a field of mud; the roads and tracks were rivers of mud; anyone can paint a picture of the battle of the Somme provided he can paint miles of mud. And the Army had simply blasted its way forward so that the shell-holes cut one another in the mud.

The scene round Leuze Wood, Guillemont, and Ginchy was a nightmare. There had been little time to devote to the burial of the dead, and corpses lay literally in heaps where the fighting had been severe. One has only to imagine the results of repeated and obstinate attempts to capture a position to realise what it must look like before it is finally taken. An attack is launched and fails. Why does it fail? Perhaps twenty men of a company get back to the trench from which they attacked, and where are the others? On the ground. After five or six attacks, each going out strong and coming back weak, each heralded by a “barrage,” what will the place look like?

We may mention here that the stretcher-bearers worked with eight men to each stretcher, and each ambulance required six horses to drag it through the mud.

Just before 1 a.m. one of the Tanks allotted to the 56th Division broke down on its way to the assembly position. This accident left the division with one Tank working on either side of the Bouleaux Wood.

The assault commenced at 6.20 a.m., and was followed by some of the fiercest fighting in the history of the war. On the right of the division the 2nd London Regt. succeeded, after some hours of gallant and determined effort, in driving the enemy from the greater part of Loop Trench, the enemy clinging to the junction with the sunken road. The Tank, which was some time before reaching the sunken road, gave valuable assistance, but was set on fire by a direct hit from a field gun. The fight then turned to the sunken road and the trench on the far side of it; but the enemy was strong and no less determined than the men of the 169th Brigade. No further advance was gained in this direction.

On the left of the division the 167th Brigade attacked, with the 1st London Regt. in line and the 7th Middlesex in support in Leuze Wood. The 1st London Regt. captured that portion of Beef Trench outside Bouleaux Wood and, together with the 7th Middlesex—who were to advance through them, but both units became mixed—occupied Middle Copse.

So far as the 56th Division was concerned, the result of the day’s fighting remained with the advance on the south-east of Leuze Wood as far as the Combles road, and on the north-west of Bouleaux Wood to Beef Trench and Middle Copse. The enemy retained the whole of Bouleaux Wood and the trenches to the north of the Combles road, and the road itself. But the action, certainly of the 167th Brigade, was influenced by the fortunes of the divisions on the left.

The centre of the horseshoe which had been formed from the east of Ginchy to the cross-roads east of Guillemont, and then to the north of Leuze Wood and along Bully Trench, and which was prevented by the Quadrilateral from being a complete circle, can scarcely have been an enviable place for the Germans who were there. As fighters, these Germans deserve the highest praise. They were of the 21st and 7th Bavarian Regts., of the 5th Bavarian Division. They were well wired in, and had in the Quadrilateral deep dugouts in their front lines and others in the ravine behind the position. But though we grant them a perfect position and well-constructed defences, we must also admit they performed a fine feat of arms. Those in the Quadrilateral had resisted all efforts of the 56th and Guards Divisions to bomb them out, and those in the horseshoe had repulsed the 16th Division and the 6th Division, which attacked them on the 13th. They had actually been under severe artillery fire and subject to repeated assaults since the 9th September, and on the 15th, in spite of Tanks, of creeping barrages, and of the heavy artillery, they remained immovable.

The worst kind of luck had attended the Tanks of the 6th Division—only one managed to reach the jumping-off line. This Tank went on with the infantry for a short way, had all its periscopes shot away, was pierced by most of the bullets which hit it (and a perfect stream of fire was directed on it), and, the driver being badly wounded, it retired through the ranks of the 6th Division. Had the three Tanks attacked, something might have been done, anyhow with the enemy to the south-west of the Quadrilateral; but with only one, the barrage, arranged with gaps for three, became ineffective, and a concentrated fire on the one Tank soon put it out of action—it also drew attention to the infantry attack. Briefly, the 6th Division failed.

There was still a chance that the Guards would advance and render the position of the Bavarians impossible. But this chance was not realised. The Quadrilateral was a mass of machine guns, and, taking the Guards Division in flank, inflicted fearful casualties. The first objective was taken and held —on the left the second objective was reached—but already the assaulting troops were being shot in the back by the Bavarians, and no further progress was made. Tanks do not seem to have helped in that direction either.

With this state of affairs on the left of the 56th Division, the attacking brigades were not likely to progress very far in the building up of a flank facing Combles. Until the Quadrilateral was taken the 167th Brigade could not possibly move. The 7th Middlesex had lost a lot of men from machine guns firing into their left rear as they advanced behind the assault of the 1st London Regt. And finally their Tank had broken down and was being attacked by the enemy.

By 11 a.m. the two reserve battalions of the 169th Brigade were moved forward to be used as reinforcements before the 168th Brigade was sent into action. Gen. Hull was determined to clear Bouleaux Wood, which had resisted so long. But at 1.30 p.m. the Corps Commander, Lord Cavan, telephoned him that the Guards had not made as much progress as he had thought, and that the operation against Bouleaux Wood would not be practicable. But before this order could reach them the 8th Middlesex made a further attempt to get into the wood and failed. All attention was then centred on the Quadrilateral, which was holding up the advance of no less than three divisions.

The division was ordered to consolidate where it stood, but during the night bombing attacks were carried out by the 169th Brigade on the sunken road and end of Loop Trench, and by the 167th Brigade on the trench in Bouleaux Wood—neither met with success.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.