

HOW THE WAR LOOKS NOW

THE loss of Fresnoy is a regrettable interlude, but it is no more than an interlude. Already we hear that portion of the village—if a smoldering heap of ruins can be called a village—has been recovered, that the Canadians have been strongly reinforced, and that there has been a heavy bombardment as the prelude to a new assault. It is easy to understand what happened. The counter attack was brought with overwhelming strength, and so quickly that the Canadians had no opportunity to consolidate their gains. The Germans poured in division after division of fresh troops and a withering artillery fire from ranges already measured. Their determination is evidence of the importance that they attach to their new line and the desperate measures that they will take to save it as the one frail barrier that stands between them and retreat.

The consolidation of a captured position is a term that is often used and it has a wide meaning. First of all, the trench has to be repaired, and it will be badly in need of repair after many days of pounding by big guns. In the second place, the parapets and sandbag shelters must be moved from the west side of the trench to the east. A trench in German occupation would of course have its parapet and sandbag defences on its western edge, that is to say, on the side nearest to its enemies. But with the trench in British hands the parapets and sandbags must be moved to the eastern edge, or the edge nearest to the Germans. The remains of the German wire entanglements must be cleared away from the west of the trench, and new wire entanglements must be erected to the east. And finally, the German communication trenches running at right angles with the fighting trench must be effectually barred and guarded to prevent incursions into the captured trench from the still uncaptured fortifications to the eastward. All this must be done under fire and under the glare of searchlights and star rockets that are quick to disclose the presence of men at work on wire entanglements or the construction of new trenches.

In the meantime we find that the French have met with an almost unchecked success at the southern end of the Hindenburg line. They took Craonne on Friday, May 4. On Sunday, May 6, we learned of another advance along the road from Soissons to Laon over a distance of about four miles. French troops, we are told, have captured all the plateau in the neighbourhood of Czerny and Craonne and the hills dominating the valley of the Ailette River. A glance at the map will show in a moment the importance of this movement. Soissons and Craonne constitute the base of a triangle of which Laon is the apex. From Craonne to Laon is about eight miles and from Soissons to Laon about twenty miles. The Ailette River runs half way between Soissons and Laon. The French are evidently advancing upon Laon from both extremities of the base, that is to say, to the northwest from Craonne, and to the northeast from Soissons. Laon is supposed to be strongly fortified, but we may have our doubts about this, although cities naturally lend themselves to the purposes of defence. Immediately northwest of Laon is La Fere, and both Laon and La Fere are strongholds of the Hindenburg line.

It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of the capture of Craonne. It was one of the critical events of the great battle that is now being waged. Craonne and Laon together constitute the southern of the two hinges that unite that line with the old system of trench fortifications. Vimy marks the northern of those hinges, and while we must wait awhile before saying that they have actually been burst open we may at least believe that the crowbar has been vigorously inserted and that the joints are visibly widening. If Laon is presently taken the southern hinge will be shattered, and the Hindenburg line will exist no longer. It will be in full retreat to the east. A slight further advance by the British will do the same thing to the northern hinge. Indeed it is quite on the cards that the Germans will

By SIDNEY CORYN
Written Especially for the Canadian Courier

Since the change in our going-to-press schedule Mr. Coryn's Argonaut syndicate copy could not arrive from San Francisco in time for simultaneous publication. A new arrangement has been made for special articles by this student of the war, written exclusively for this paper.—Editor.



A GLANCE AT THE MAP

take time by the forelock and begin their retirement at once. It depends on how much confidence they feel in their ability to hold Laon and to maintain their grip on the north of the line.

VIMY and Craonne are the two extremities of the Hindenburg line, which constitutes the third side of the great triangle of which the other two sides are the lines evacuated by the Germans in their great retirement early in February. Vimy was taken by the Canadians, but the full results of their success were delayed by the construction of a second German line immediately to the east, about fifteen miles in length, and extending from Drocourt to Queant. This is the Wotan Line, and it is so close to the old Hindenburg Line immediately before it that it served to bridge the gap caused by the loss of Vimy. This line is now being attacked in force, and considerable results have already been achieved, although the momentary loss of Quesnoy has delayed the British advance. None the less the enveloping movement around Lens continues, and its fall cannot be far off. But the French success at Craonne is of the utmost moment because it bids fair actually to sever the Hindenburg Line from its support to the east and to threaten it either with envelopment or with compulsory retirement. Without a precise knowledge of the topographical situation it is impossible to state the imminence of the danger to which the Hindenburg Line is now exposed. In other words, we cannot say if the hinge has actually been pried loose, or if the screws are still maintaining an uncertain hold. But the danger to that line is a real one and a great one. It is increasing every day. A similar success by the British in the north, the capture of Lens or of Cambrai, would seal its fate. The whole line would have to fall back, and with it would go the old established lines from Arras to the North Sea, and from Rheims to Verdun and Metz. We may reasonably believe that this is what we are about to see.

It will be noticed that every fresh blow struck by the British and the French is at some new point on the immediate battle line. Rarely do we find two successive assaults directed against the same objective. The reason for this is fairly obvious if we consider the manner in which these attacks are brought. The first stage is an artillery bombardment, not only against the point selected for attack, but along the whole front of the line. In this way the Germans are kept in doubt as to the actual area to be assailed, and they are thus unable to mass troops for its defence. But secrecy of this kind would be impossible, or at least difficult, without a command of the air. The prying aeroplanes would quickly detect the movement of large bodies of men, and it would know exactly what it portended. So essential is it to guard against the aeroplane that men in the trenches are ordered not to look up at the machines passing overhead lest the gleam of white faces should betray their presence and numbers. The intensity of the air combats that so often precede a battle is due to the determination of one side to discover the point that is to be attacked, and the determination of the other side to hide that knowledge. The assault is carried out as soon as the bombardment is considered sufficient to clear away the wire entanglements, to isolate the enemy from reinforcements and supplies, and to break his morale by the incessant explosions. However successful the attack may be it will usually be found that the speed of the advance gradually diminishes, that the fighting fades away, and that quiet is presently restored until some new attack is brought elsewhere. This, of course, is due to the rushing of reinforcements to the threatened spot until a balance of force is attained. It is due also to the necessity of bringing up new supplies to the advancing lines, moving the guns into new positions and finding the new ranges, massing fresh stores of ammunition for defence and attack, and consolidating the captured positions. It is now a cardinal principle with the British armies, and of course with

the French armies also, never to allow advancing troops to outstrip the supporting guns, no matter how great the temptation to advance may be.

The success of the Allies against the Hindenburg line, although slow, has been continuous. In the early days of the war there was always the expectation of German victory. In these later days there is the same expectation of Allied victory. There are very few checks. An attack by the French or the British means almost invariably an advance. The explanation, so far as the mechanism of war is concerned, is obvious. It is to be found in the superiority of the Allied artillery and in the abundance of the munition supply. We learn that the Germans are using guns that they took from the Russians two years ago, and that can be fired only about a dozen times a day. This does not mean that there is an actual shortage of guns in the German army, but undoubtedly there is a relative shortage in comparison with those that are at the service of the Allies. And there is something more than a relative shortage of the ammunition supply. Orders of the day found on German prisoners contain strong recommendations to economy, while the Germans seem less often to resort to the barrage and the curtain fire that have proved so tremendously efficacious against them. But it is in the calibre of their men that the Allies are now demonstrating their superiority. Man for man, the Frenchman and the Briton are superior in fighting power to their opponents. They have more initiative, they have more military intelligence, and they have the morale that comes with the dignity of political freedom. So long as the French and British were relatively unsupported by an adequate military equipment they were liable to be worsted, but now that the energy and the skill of their people are behind them they are showing the mastery that is accorded to them by superiority of morale and intelligence.

It may be that the battle for the Hindenburg line is by no means over. The issues are so great that