

THE GALLANT CANADIANS IN THE YPRES FIGHT

Correspondent Tells London Times the Heroic Story of the Second Battle at That Point—Three Whole Weeks on the Shell-Swept Wastes of Flanders—Grim Struggle of the British Line and the Deadly Gas Attacks—The Filling of the Gap.

(By John Buchanan in London Times.)

The heroic story of the Second Battle of Ypres that raged across the shell-swept wastes of Flanders through three whole weeks is told below in graphic detail by John Buchanan, whose articles from the front have already appeared in The Times.

The grim struggle of British Line and Territorial regiments against gas attacks and terrible bombardments; the immortal stand of the Canadians; the brilliant charges of dismounted cavalrymen, who took the place of infantry; the countless deeds of individual valor, make up a story that will live along in our military history, side by side with that of the First Battle of Ypres, the greatest struggle of the second phase of the war in the West.

The first battle of Ypres, the greatest and most critical struggle of the Western war—began on October 30 and ended with the repulse of the Prussian Guard on November 11. The battle front stretched from Bixchoote in the north to Armentieres in the south over a broad salient whose first apex was Becelaere and second Gheluvelt. In it we opposed numbers which were never more than 120,000 to an enemy whose strength was at least half a million. During the worst part of the fighting we had three infantry divisions and some cavalry to meet five army corps, three of the first line. We had to face not only a perpetual bombardment by superior artillery, but a succession of attacks by massed infantry delivered with desperate resolution. The German aim was the road to Calais; their assault was a deliberate and sustained offensive comparable to their first sweep from the Sambre and the Meuse or von Hindenburg's November thrust against Warsaw. Its failure marked the end of the second phase of the war in the West.

The second battle of Ypres belongs to a different category. It was confined to the northern segment of the salient, between the Ypres Canal and the Menin road. Probably the Germans had no elaborate offensive purpose, the start being the battle for local control. The battle began with local counter-attacks in return for our efforts at Hill 60; and when this attack prospered it was pushed beyond its original aim. A proof is that there was no great massing of troops as in the autumn battle. Local reserves were brought up, but the German line was more than a mile back. In two respects the battles are akin. The second lasted almost exactly as long as the first—from Thursday, April 22, to Thursday, May 13, when it slackened owing to the British thrust from Festubert. Like the first, too, it was fought against heavy odds, and the use of poison gas were more deadly assets than any weight of numbers. For days our fate hung in the balance, dispositions became involved in the fog of war, and it became a soldiers' battle, like Malplaquet and Albuera, where the men fought for their lives, and we won by the dogged fighting quality of our men.

The Salient of Ypres.

A glance at the map will show the peculiar difficulties of the Ypres salient. Its nominal base is the line St. Eloi-Ypres-Bixchoote, but the real base is the town of Ypres itself. Ypres is like the hub of a wheel from which all the communications eastward radiate like spokes. One important road crosses the canal at Steenstraete, but all the main routes run through Ypres—to Pilkem, to Langemark, to Poperinghe, to Bixchoote, to Gheluvelt and Menin, besides the railway to Roulers. Virtually all the supplies and reserves for the troops holding the salient must go through the neck of the bottle at Ypres. Now, early in November the Germans won gun positions in the southern segment which enabled them to shell the town and the bombardment was continued intermittently throughout the winter. A serious cannonade would gravely interfere with our communications, and we had the salient with this menace perpetually before us. We could assume that a heavy shelling of Ypres would be a preliminary to any German attack.

From the middle of November to the end of January the salient was held by the French. On Feb. 1 part of the French were withdrawn, and General Bullfinch's division was brought north to replace them. On Feb. 20 the German front was as follows: From the canal through Bixchoote, to just east of Langemark and covering the latter place was a French division. On the right of the French to a point northeast of Zonnebeke lay the Canadian division, from northwards to Zonnebeke to the southeast corner of the Polygon Wood was the eastern division. At the corner of the Polygon Wood was Princess Patricia's Regiment of the southeastern division, which continued the front east of Veldhoek along the line almost to Hill 60. The trenches we had were not good, especially in the section held by the Canadians. They were very wet and to improve them was a difficult task. Had it been possible it would have been better to construct a wholly new line. Further south the situation was better and the troops there were more comfortably entrenched. Against this section was the left wing of the army of Wurttemberg, whose headquarters were at Thiel. Opposite the British were the 28th and 27th corps, reserve formations composed of mixed Saxons and Wurttembergers, and the right of the 15th corps from Alsace, the heroes of Zabern. Other detachments appeared during the battle, including a battalion of marines.

Hill 60.

To understand the significance of the events which began on April 22 it is necessary to go back to what happened on the 17th. The operations at Hill 60 were not strictly a part of the Ypres battle, but they were a link in the chain of causes. Hill 60 is only a hill to the eye of faith, being no more than an earth-heap from the cutting of the Ypres-Lille railway. Its advantage is that it gives a position from which the whole German front in the neighborhood of Helebeke Chateau can be commanded. It is just west of the hamlet of Zwartelien, where the Household Brigade made their decisive charge on the night of Nov. 10. About 7 on the evening of April 17, however, seven mines on the hill, which played havoc with the defence, blowing up a trench line and 150 men. We won the top, entrenched ourselves in the shell crater, and brought up machine guns. Next day, Sunday, at 6.30 the Germans made a counter-attack in mass formation, which resulted in a desperate struggle at close quarters. Our machine guns

in where they were allowed. The right of the German assault was beyond the canal in several places, and bearing hard on the French remnants on the eastern bank. To their eternal honor the left Canadian brigade did not break. Overwhelmed with numbers of men and guns and sick to death with the poisoned fumes, they did all that man could do to stem the tide. The 16th Battalion (48th Highlanders), who bore the brunt of the gas, recovered them after the first retreat and regained their position. The 18th Battalion (Royal Highlanders) did not give ground at all. Major Norworthy, though badly wounded, rallied his men till he got his death wound. Captain McCune, who had received a crippling wound, insisted that he should be left behind so as not to encumber his men. And all the while there was the ravaging rent on our left which gave the enemy a clear way to Ypres. Strangely enough they did not push their advantage. In the first battle of Ypres they broke our line but could do nothing in the breach.

The Filling of the Gap.

Very early in the small hours of Friday morning the first British reinforcements arrived in the gap. They came from the Eastern Division, which, as we have seen, was holding the line from east of Zonnebeke to the southeast corner of the Polygon Wood. A company from each battalion holding the front of this part of the line was sent to reinforce the Canadian line. This accounts for the strange mixture of units in the subsequent fighting. In addition the Eastern Division had five battalions in reserve. These five battalions, under the command of Colonel Geddes, of the Buffs, took up position in the gap, and acted along with the 10th and 16th Canadian battalions who had conducted the first counter-attack. This force varied from day to day—almost from hour to hour—in composition, and for convenience we may refer to it as Geddes's Detachment. It is picked up, the fighting went on, some strange auxiliaries. Sunday, for example, was added to it two officers and 120 men of the Northumberland Fusiliers. They were the Grenadier company of that battalion, who had been lent to Hill 60, and had already been eight days in the British line. They were hungry, this company, marching barefoot to rejoin their division, fell in with Geddes's Detachment, and took their place in its firing line. That night the old fighting Bill lived up to its name. The situation was desperate. The South Eastern right Division was in its old position, as was the Eastern, save that the latter was much depleted by the supports which it had dispatched westward, and was strung out in trenches like a string of beads. One man to every twelve yards. The Canadian right brigade was intact, but the left brigade was bent back so as to cover St. Julien, whence the supporting Canadian battalions and Geddes's detachment carried the line to the canal at Bixchoote. North of this the French held in the main the east bank, but the Germans had crossed at various points and had taken Lierne and Het Saet, and were threatening Steenstraete. The British cavalry were being hurried up to support the French west of the canal. The day there was a severe artillery bombardment all along the front of the eastern division, the Canadians, and Geddes's detachment, especially from the heavy guns on the Passchendaele ridge. But the fighting was heaviest against the Canadian left brigade, which by now was in desperate straits. Its losses had been huge and the line was weak from the effects of the gas. No food could reach it for twenty-four hours, and then only bread and cheese. Holding a salient it suffered fire from three sides, and by the evening was driven to a new line through St. Julien. One company of the Buffs, who had been sent to support it, was altogether destroyed. There were gaps in all its western front, and the Germans succeeded in working round the left of this brigade and even getting their machine guns behind it. From the left of the Canadian line Geddes's detachment extended to the French line.

The Second Gas Attack.

About 3 o'clock on the morning of Saturday, the 24th, a violent artillery cannonade began. At 3.30 there came the second gas attack. The gas was pumped from cylinders and, rising in a cloud, it travelled rapidly the distance between the lines. Our men had still no knowledge of it and were provided with no prophylactics, but instinct taught some of them what to do. A wet handkerchief wrapped round the mouth gave a little relief. That day, the 24th, saw the height of the Canadians' battle. The much-tried left brigade, now gassed for the second time, could no longer keep its place. It was sent back well to the southwest of St. Julien, gap opened up in its front, and the right brigade was left in much the same position as that of the left brigade on Thursday evening. Its left was compelled to swing south to conform, but Colonel Lipsett's 8th Battalion, which was the pivoting point on the second gas attack, the extreme eastern point of our salient—did not move an inch. Although heavily gassed they stayed in their trenches for two days until they were relieved. The left brigade, temporarily forced back, pressed against itself and regained much of the lost ground.

About mid-day the great German attack began against the village of St. Julien and the section of our line immediately east of it. The left Canadian brigade was withdrawn some 700 yards to a new line south of the village and just north of the hamlet of Fortuin. The remnants of the 18th and 14th battalions could not be withdrawn, and remained a few hundred men—in the St. Julien line, fighting till far on in the night their desperate battle with a gallantry which has shed eternal lustre on their Motherland. Scarcely less fine was the stand of Colonel Lipsett's 8th Battalion at Gravenstafel. Though their left was in the air the ynever moved, and at the most critical moment held the vital point of the British front.

Had the Gravenstafel position gone, the enemy would in an hour have pushed behind the 28th Division, and the whole eastern section. It is told how one machine gun officer of the 7th, Lieutenant Bell, with a defiant laugh stuck on his bayonet point a German paratrooper, fought his machine gun till it was smashed to pieces and then continuing the struggle with relays of rifles. Far on the west the French counter-attacked from the canal and made some progress, but the Germans were still strong on the west bank and took Steenstraete, though the Belgian artillery succeeded in destroying the bridge between them. Meanwhile British battalions were being rushed up as fast as they could be collected. A brigade took up position west of Geddes's Detachment between the canal and the Pilkem road, and they were supported by a brigade of a North-country Territorial division, which had arrived only three days before. Another brigade was coming up to support the left Canadian Brigade south of St. Julien. To support the critical point at Gravenstafel the 8th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry and the 1st Hampshire took their place between the 8th Canadians and the left of the Eastern Division. The Canadians were gradually being withdrawn; the left Brigade had already gone and the Durham Light Infantry and various battalions of the Eastern Division were actually charged across the German trench. The result was that the Northern Division, assisted by the 4th Hussars, succeeded in holding their ground. Many deeds of courage were reported for that day and for the following morning, but history is not made of the actual fighting. Not one of the battalions, however, was actually charged across the German trench. The result was that the Northern Division, assisted by the 4th Hussars, succeeded in holding their ground. 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