

# THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES

How the Canadians Saved the Day

(By OWEN S. WATKINS, Chaplain to the Forces)

To describe in detail the second battle of Ypres is not possible, and for one who was present it is very difficult to give a general view or get things into their proper perspective. We know what took place in our own little portion of the far flung line, but of the doings of others our knowledge is even less than those at home who read the newspapers diligently. Like the first battle of Ypres, this fight lasted for three weeks—from Thursday April 22nd, to Thursday, May 13th. At the end of that period it "fizzled out," owing to the British attack at Festubert. As in the first case, too, our troops were called upon to face overwhelming odds. It was not merely that the enemy had a crushing preponderance of artillery, threw high explosive shell of the heaviest weight, descended to the use of asphyxiating gas, but their reserves of men seemed inexhaustible. Attack after attack was repulsed, whole German corps were exterminated, but ever their places were taken by fresh troops, who, unlike ours, were not worn and shattered by fighting. For days our fate hung in the balance; our reserves appeared to be exhausted; more and more, like Mac-plaquet, it became a soldiers' fight dependent for victory upon dogged fighting and the invincible spirit of our men.

### Bombardment Begins

On Tuesday April 20th, whilst we were still fighting for the possession of Hill 60, the enemy began a systematic bombardment of Ypres. The city had been rent and torn by the previous bombardment, but still was habitable, and in it were living many thousands of civilians. On Sundays and holidays its streets were black with promenaders and none seemed to heed the light shrapnel which from time to time burst high above the houses, doing little damage except to tiles and windows. Now, however, the Germans were using heavy siege guns: six-inch and eight-inch high explosive shells were the least of our terrors, for they had brought up and were using with deadly effect fifteen-inch and seventeen-inch guns. The bursting of a seventeen-inch shell is like a volcanic eruption; the whole creation rocks; the radius of danger is nearly 1,000 yards. I have seen a hole in the ground made by one of these projectiles which measured fifty feet across and was nearly thirty feet deep. There is nothing I have yet met so calculated to put the fear of death in a man as the German forty-two c. m. gun. The first of these shells which hit the city completely demolished a big three-story house—everybody in it perishing in the ruins—killed fifteen children who were playing in the street, and wounded twenty other people some of whom were more than a quarter of a mile away from the explosion.

By Thursday, April 22nd, the city had become uninhabitable, but still there were so many hundred civilians who preferred to stay in the cellars of their ruined houses to running the gauntlet of the shell-swept streets, and I should judge the greater proportion of these perished in the bombardment. The difficulties of our work were greatly increased by the fact that all the motor ambulances had to pass through the town in order to reach the loading point. Most of the cars were hit; two of the drivers were wounded; several times cars arrived at the hospital covered with the dust of falling houses which had just missed them as they fell. That any got through in safety seemed nothing less than a miracle. The scene of destruction in the doomed city was terrible beyond words—falling houses, debris-blocked streets, buildings in flames, the constant bursting of projectiles, and at intervals of about ten minutes the earth-shaking explosion of the seventeen-inch shells. Those of us who were through it are never likely to forget either the spectacle or the sensations it aroused within us.

### Gathering up the Wounded

Throughout the day the detachment which was running the dressing station in the convent in the Rue de Lille continued its work of gathering in the wounded from the streets. The quiet heroism of their work is one of the things which impressed me most in those days when all were heroes, and there were none who did not come up to one's ideal of highest manhood. Lieut. Chesney (he has since been decorated with the Military Cross) was in command, and it would be impossible to imagine a more nerve-racking task. The first shell which entered the city at dawn burst so near that the windows of the room he was sitting in were blown in and he was covered with the dust of falling masonry. From that time until dark the bombardment continued. The Rue de Lille was the unhealthiest street in Ypres; every house in it was hit, most of them were in flames, and the convent was struck again and again. From dawn until

dark Lieut. Chesney sat in his room waiting for death. A call out into the shell-swept streets to attend to wounded was a positive relief; but as the day crept on these calls became very infrequent, for few living beings were left in the city besides the little band of R. A. M. C. He himself afterwards, speaking of his experiences, said, "The thing that steadied me up like a tonic was the sight of the sisters—there were three of them left in charge of the place. When a shell hit the building, strewing dust and bricks in the corridors, one of them got up from where she was sitting, fetched a broom, and began sweeping up the mess! Who could feel afraid after that? Once early in the day, when there was a rush of work and many injured women and children were brought in, a Belgian Red Cross nurse appeared on the scene and worked with us. Where she came from I don't know, nor did I learn her name. What became of her is also a mystery, for when there was no more work to do she just disappeared; but she was the bravest woman I ever met—always, of course, excepting the sisters of the convent." In this connection it is interesting to note that the Belgian peasantry in the country round Ypres tell of how, during the dreadful days of the bombardment, "the mother of God, dressed as a Red Cross nurse, appeared in the streets of the city, succoring the wounded and pointing the dying to her own dear Son, who gave His life for men." About nine p. m. orders came for the party to withdraw, for the whole city was in flames; no living soul was left within its walls, and there was nothing left that they could do.

### The Awful 17-Inch Shells

Meanwhile the main body of the ambulance had been ceaselessly gathering the wounded from the neighborhood of Hill 60 and the Ypres-Commines Canal, and gathering them in such numbers that the Women's Asylum was filled to overflowing, and that in spite of the fact that the cars of the motor ambulance convoy were continually plying between the ambulance and the clearing hospitals at railhead. The strain upon the commanding officer, Col. Crawford, was tremendous; hundreds of wounded crowded the building, whilst hour after hour the systematic bombardment of the city proceeded, and the great seventeen-inch shell ever drew nearer and nearer, until the glass in the windows was broken by the concussion, and great fragments of steel were hitting the front of the building, one huge piece missing Lieut. Grenfell by inches. What it would mean if one of those huge projectiles were to hurtle into our midst, as it might at any moment, baffled imagination to picture. Constantly Col. Crawford urged the motors to greater speed. Magnificently the drivers, who had not slept for several days, responded to his appeal, and towards evening we began to hope that in a few hours we should have evacuated and be ourselves able to trek to safety.

Going into the open air for a few moments' relief from the stifling atmosphere of the wards, our attention was attracted by very heavy firing to the north, where the line was held by the French. Evidently a hot fight and, eagerly we scanned the country with our field-glasses, hoping to glean some knowledge of the progress of the battle. Then we saw that which almost caused our hearts to stop beating—figures running wildly and in confusion over the fields. "The French have broken," we exclaimed. "We hardly believed our own words. It seemed so impossible, so inconceivable. For a while we almost thought that the whole French army was in retreat. Gun-limbers passed at the gallop, Zouaves and Turcos clinging to them. In a few minutes the road in front of the asylum was choked with fugitives—soldiers and panic-stricken peasantry from the farms and villages round. The story they told we could not believe; we put it down to their terror-stricken imaginations: "A greenish grey cloud had swept down upon them, turning yellow as it travelled over the country, blasting everything it touched, shrivelling up the vegetation. No human courage would face such a peril. "We can fight, but the good God would not have us stay and be poisoned like rats in a sewer." Then there staggered into our midst French soldiers, blinded, coughing, chests heaving, faces an ugly purple color, lips speechless with agony, and behind them in the gas choked trenches we learned they had left hundreds of dead and dying comrades. The impossible was only too true; the enemy, in violation of every law of war, of civilization and of Christianity, had descended to the use of asphyxiating gases.

### The Heroic Canadians

The immediate result was a four-

mile breach in our line, and through this gap the Germans were pouring in their thousands. A wilder battle has seldom been fought, and the prodigies of valor displayed are almost without parallel. The story of how the Canadian Division flung themselves into the gap has already been told by abler pens than mine. Overwhelmed by superior numbers, both of men and guns, sick to death with the poison-gas fumes, they fought such a fight as the world has rarely, if ever, witnessed before. In the small hours of the Friday morning reinforcements reached them, and they began to "make good." At one critical period the 13th Brigade, the shattered remnants of which had been drawn out from Hill 60, had to be thrown into the fight to assist the hard-pressed Canadians, and in spite of depleted numbers and exhausted men performed magnificently the task assigned to them. Later the Northumbrian Division—Territorials who had arrived from England only three days before—came to their assistance, and these untired troops proved themselves in every way the equals of the veterans by whose side they fought. But when all have received their meed of praise, the fact remains that but for the Canadian Division we should have had to record a terrible disaster instead of a hard won victory. For a solid week they fought, sometimes without food, for it was impossible to get it to them, always faced by overwhelming numbers, subject to a shell fire such as no troops had ever been called upon to face before, and constantly choked and poisoned by the asphyxiating gas-bombs, or the poison gas which the Germans pumped into them. Small wonder that a thrill of pride ran through the Empire as the tale was told, and that Canada rejoiced even in her sorrow—she had lost the very flower of her manhood, but they died like heroes, and in their dying added untold glory to her name.

Throughout that night of dreadful fighting the ambulance worked, striving to evacuate the wounded, so as to be able to move to a safer place. Ypres was now empty and in flames; ever the falling shells crept nearer, each moment we expected the explosion in our midst; but we were chained to the spot by the hundreds of shattered, helpless men who were in our keeping. The suspense and responsibility were intolerable. Men who had passed through the horrors of Hill 60 and were apparently unmoved found this the last straw which broke down their endurance and self-control, and man after man collapsed utterly. It was 2 p. m. before the last of the wounded were away and we ourselves were able to move on; and none too soon, for we had hardly left the building when a seventeen-inch shell crashed in, utterly wrecking the wing that we had been occupying. The headquarters of the ambulance took up its quarters in the village of Reninghelst, but an advanced dressing-station, under the command of Major Hannafin, occupied a small farmhouse on the outskirts of Ypres, whilst yet another dressing station was established in dug-outs near the foot of Hill 60. Sunday came but to hold services was impossible the fight still raged on, and in a continuous stream the wounded passed through the dressing stations. Still the anxiety was lessening, we were holding our own; reinforcements were arriving—amongst others the Indian troops, who, after a long, forced march, were at once thrust into the fight; their losses were terrible, but they did magnificently. That Sunday was also a red-letter day for me, as it was then that the Rev. H. V. Griffiths arrived to share with me the duty of caring for the Wesleys in the Fifth Division. Fresh from England, he was plunged into the horrors of this great fight, and at once found his feet, adapted himself to the extraordinary conditions, displaying a coolness and courage which any veteran might envy. What it has meant to me to have such a colleague it would be impossible to say, and in the weeks that have followed Mr. Griffiths has won for himself a position in the affection and confidence of both officers and men of the division which is second to none.

### Ypres, A Heap of Ruins

The days now became monotonous in their horror; the desperate fighting continued. Ypres, though nothing but a heap of ruins, was still constantly shelled, and the neighboring towns and villages of Vlamertinghe, Dickebusch, Ouderdom and Poperinghe were also bombarded. Poperinghe was the only considerable town in Belgium which had not been shelled, and it was considered so safe that clearing hospitals had been established in it. But the mile or so of ground which had been gained by the Germans had enabled them to bring up long range guns which they used with deadly effect. A Belgian hospital, crowded with civilian wounded, was badly hit, and several of the nuns and patients were killed. All the hospitals had to be moved hurriedly out of range of the guns and the town itself was evacuated. The chaplain's work was found in the dressing stations, where the stream of wounded

never ceased, and amongst the regiments which from time to time were drawn out of the fight for a brief rest. With these last some wonderful open-air services were held, and all the chaplains realized the greatness of the opportunity which was given to them. In the first ten days 3,000 casualties including eighty-three officers, passed through the hands of the 14th Ambulance alone, and during that period we had twenty stretcher-bearers wounded and two motor-ambulance drivers disappeared into space in a shell explosion, and three others were hit. These figures speak for themselves, and witness to the heroism of those days and nights of strenuous labor.

Sunday, May 2nd, is a day that will long live in my memory, for it was then that I was really brought face to face with the effects of the devilish German poison-gas. When the French were gassed we had seen something of it, but only the slighter cases had passed through our hands; now we were to see it at its worst. Finding they could not win Hill 60 by fair means they tried foul; asphyxiating shells were thrown, and then, favored by the wind, they pumped their poison gas into us. In a solid bank it rolled down upon our trenches; our men did not break, but bravely faced it, with the result that they were overpowered by hundreds. Those that fell in the bottom of the trench never got up again; scores died in the trenches; over a hundred died in the regimental aid posts and the ambulance dressing stations; whilst of the men we sent to the clearing hospitals a very large number had no chance of recovery. When I found it full to overflowing—houses, out-houses, stables, and on the ground in the yard and garden, they lay to the number of 300. Faces purple, twisting and writhing in agony, dying by long-drawn-out torture, their piteous eyes asking for help, and there was none that we could give. It was the most fiendish, wicked thing I have ever seen; the ghastliest wounds were sweet and pleasant beside it. To add to the horror we were being bombarded. Heavy shells were falling in Ypres, in the field in front of us, in the field behind us; splinters of shell were hitting the house, and we were in constant fear of having our patients wounded where they lay. In that black day the only bright spot is a little service held amongst the men of the Cheshire Regiment, whom I found resting in their dug-outs. Lying down behind a bank so that the splinters of shells should not get us, we sang the old familiar hymns and worshipped the God we love. It was an unconventional service, and I think the first occasion on which I have preached lying down; but it was none the less a season in which we found God very near.

### The Poisonous Gas

On Wednesday, May 5th again the gas swept down upon us, and Hill 60 was lost. Immediately after breakfast Capt. Beddows, R. A. M. C., and myself had started to ride to the advanced dressing-station. It was a glorious morning, and we had a delightful canter over the fields, but as we drew near Ypres, to our horror we found men lying all along the road gasping out their lives, and with sinking hearts we recognized the deadly effects of the German gas. At 8.30 the death-cloud had swept down upon them, the men had not been able to face it—these had run gasping until they fell, black in the face and dying; some had run three miles. "We can fight, sir," the men panted; "we don't mind shot and shell, but to be poisoned like rats—it ain't war, it's murder." All along the road we met them, until at last the dressing-station was reached. I wish I could forget that night; but I never shall. For the first time in my life I felt my heart hot with bitter hate; nothing seemed bad enough for the men who had done this thing. As on the previous Sunday, the place was full to overflowing, and still they streamed in upon us—walking, crawling, helped along by comrades, lying in wagons and on gun-limbers. Major Hannafin and his helpers were at their wits' end; in twenty hours they had over 1,200 cases to deal with; more than 100 died in the dressing-stations, and in one regiment alone they had over 100 deaths. Towards evening the hill was retaken by the 11th Brigade, only

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