

The Canadians at Ypres

(From the Canadian Record Officer)

ON April 22 the Canadian Division held a line of, roughly, 5,000 yards, extending in a north-westerly direction from the Ypres-Roulers Railway to the Ypres-Poelcapelle road, and connecting at its terminus with the French troops. The division consisted of three infantry brigades, in addition to the artillery brigades. Of the infantry brigades the First was in reserve, the Second was on the right, and the Third established contact with the Allies at the point indicated above.

The day was a peaceful one, warm and sunny, and except that the previous day had witnessed a further bombardment of the stricken town of Ypres, everything seemed quiet in front of the Canadian line. At 5 o'clock in the afternoon a plan, carefully prepared, was put into execution against our French allies on the left. Asphyxiating gas of great intensity was projected into their trenches, probably by means of force pumps and pipes laid out under the parapets. The fumes, aided by a favorable wind, floated backward, poisoning and disabling over an extended area those who fell under their effect.

The result was that the French were compelled to give ground for a considerable distance. The glory which the French Army has won in this war would make it impertinent to labor the compelling nature of the poisonous discharges under which the trenches were lost. The French did, as every one knew they would do, all that stout soldiers could do, and the Canadian Division, officers and men, look forward to many occasions in the future in which they will stand side by side with the brave armies of France.

The immediate consequences of this enforced withdrawal were, of course, extremely grave. The Third Brigade of the Canadian Division was without any left, or, in other words, its left was in the air. Rough diagrams may make the position clear.

It became imperatively necessary greatly to extend the Canadian lines to the left rear. It was not, of course, practicable to move the First Brigade from reserve at a moment's notice, and the line, extending from 5,000 to 9,000 yards, was naturally not the line that had been held by the Allies at 5 o'clock, and a gap still existed on its left.

It became necessary for Brig. Gen. Turner, commanding the Third Brigade, to throw back his left flank southward to protect his rear. In the course of the confusion which followed upon the readjustments of position, the enemy, who had advanced rapidly after his initial successes, took four British 4.7 guns in a small wood to the west of the village of St. Julien, two miles in the rear of the original French trenches.

The story of the second battle of Ypres is the story of how the Canadian Division, enormously outnumbered—for they had in front of them at least four divisions, supported by immensely heavy artillery—with a gap still existing though reduced, in their lines, and with dispositions made hurriedly under the stimulus of critical danger, fought through the day and through the night, and then through another day and night; fought under their officers until as happened to so many, those perished gloriously, and then fought from the impulsion of sheer valor because they came from fighting stock.

The enemy, of course, was aware—whether fully or not may perhaps be doubted—of the advantage his breach in the line had given him, and immediately began to push a formidable series of attacks upon the whole of the newly-formed Canadian salient. If it is possible to distinguish when the attack was everywhere so fierce, it developed with particular intensity at this moment upon the apex of the newly formed line, running in the direction of St. Julien.