

4 FROM BAPAUME TO PASSCHENDAELE

had been cut down and some of the graves ransacked for their lead. There had been no mercy for historic little towns like Bapaume and Péronne, and in Bapaume the one building that stood when we entered—the square tower of the Town Hall—was hurled up a week later when a slow fuse burnt to its end, and only a hole in the ground shows where it had been. The enemy left these slow-working fuses in many places, and “booby-traps” to blow a man to bits or blind him for life if he touched a harmless-looking stick or opened the lid of a box, or stumbled over an old boot. One of the dirty tricks of war.

We followed the enemy quickly to Bapaume northwards towards Quéant, but with only small patrols farther east, where he retired in easy stages with rear-guards of machine-guns to his Hindenburg line behind St. Quentin. The absence of large numbers of British soldiers in this abandoned country scared one. Supposing the enemy were to come back in force? It was difficult to know his whereabouts. We were afraid of running our cars into his outposts. “Can you tell me where our front line is,” asked a friend of mine to a sergeant leaning against a ruined wall and chatting to a private who stood next to him. The sergeant removed his cigarette from his mouth and with just the glint of a smile in his eyes said, “Well, sir, I am the front line.” It was almost like that for a week or two. I went down roads where there was no sign of a trench or a patrol and knew that the enemy was very close. One felt lonely. Sir Douglas Haig did not waste his men in a futile pursuit of the enemy. He wanted them elsewhere, and decided that the Germans would not return over the roads they had destroyed by mine-craters to the villages they had laid waste. He was concentrating masses of men round Arras for the battles which had been planned in the autumn of '16.

The Commander-in-Chief has explained in one of his dispatches how the general plan of campaign for the spring offensive was modified because of the German retreat which relieved us of another battle of the Ancre. It was readjusted also, as he has written, in order to meet the wishes of the French Command, so that the attack on the Messines Ridge, to be followed by operations against the Flanders ridges towards the coast, had to be made secondary to the actions around Arras and the Scarpe. They were intended to hold a number of German divisions while the French undertook their own great