

INTRODUCTION

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men had sat down so long under direct observation of the enemy on that ridge above them. Kemmel Hill, which had been under fire in our lines for three years, became a health resort for Australian boys whose turn to fight had not yet come, and they sat on top of the old observation-post where men had hidden below ground to watch through a slit in the earth, staring through field-glasses at the sweep of fire from Oostaverne to Pilkem, and eating sweets, and putting wild flowers in their slouch hats. Dickebusch lost its horror. The road to Vierstraat was no longer bracketed by German shells, and there was no further need of camouflage screens along other roads where notice-boards said: *Drive slowly—dust draws fire*. On the morning of battle after the capture of the ridge an Irish brigadier sat outside his dug-out on a kitchen chair before a deal table, where his maps were spread. "It's good to take the fresh air," he said. "Yesterday I had to keep below ground." All that made a difference on the right of the salient, but Ypres was still "a hot shop," as the men say, and the roads out of Ypres—the Lille road and the Menin road—were as abominable as ever, and worse than ever when at the end of July the battles of Flanders began.

The Wytschaete—Messines Ridge is the eastern spur of that long range of "abrupt isolated hills," to use the words of Sir Douglas Haig, which divides the valleys of the Lys and the Yser, and links up with the ridges stretching north-eastwards to the Ypres—Menin road, and then northwards to Passchendaele and Staden. One of the objects of our campaign in 1917 was to gain the high ground to Passchendaele and beyond. A mere glance at a relief map is enough to show the formidable nature of the positions held by the enemy on those slopes which dominated our low ground. When one went across the Yser Canal along the Menin road, or towards the Pilkem Ridge, those slopes seemed like a wall of cliffs barring the way of our armies, however strongly our tide of men might dash against them. The plan to take them by assault needed enormous courage and high faith in the mind of any man who bore the burden of command, and his faith and courage depended utterly on the valour of the men who were to carry out his plan against those frowning hills. The men did not fail our High Command, and for three and a half months those troops of ours fought with a heroic resolution never surpassed by any