

SUMMARY OF BIG CANADIAN BATTLES---1915-18.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF OPERATIONS OF THE CORPS

Little Stories of Canada's Part in Great War from Ypres to Mons Compiled from Official Sources by Permission of Dept. of Militia.

The following story of the operations of the Canadian divisions in France and Flanders has been compiled in brief form by the Department of Militia and Defence, and its publication in the Official Record is given with the idea that it may be a handy reference for those who followed the fortunes of Canada's army overseas.

On October 3rd, 1914, the First Canadian Division of 33,000 men left Gaspe Bay, arriving in Plymouth Sound two weeks later. After nearly three months of strenuous training on Salisbury Plain this force proceeded to the front, landing at St. Nazaire on February 11th, 1915. A brief period of trench training in the quiet Sally Sector was followed by a move northwards to the shell-shattered area of Ypres, where one week after their arrival the Canadians were called upon to withstand the second great thrust against that city.

YPRES.

At 5 p.m. on April 22nd, the enemy attacked the front of the 45th French Division, on the left of the Canadians, sending forward great numbers of men behind clouds of poisonous gas. The French troops were compelled to retire, and our men, filling the gap as well as possible, fought for six long days and nights, almost without respite, bearing the brunt of the great attack, until the German armies drew back, disheartened and defeated. That was a job well done, and it brought forth a healthy and well-earned swagger in the bearing of the individual Canadian. The division suffered over 8,000 casualties, but in the words of the British Commander-in-Chief "saved the situation," and by outstanding valour in the face of hitherto unknown weapons of war, shed lustre on the name of Canada.

FESTUBERT.

At the beginning of May, Sir John French began his offensive against the Aubers Ridge, and on the 17th May the Canadian Division moved south to Festubert and the First Army Area.

Here on May 20th our Canadian troops began the sanguinary fighting for La Quinque Rue, K. 5, the Orchard and Rue d'Ouvvert. These positions were captured, at a very heavy cost indeed, but we were unable to progress further, and after ten days of incessant effort and rapidly lengthening casualties lists it was decided to attempt to break through the German defenses at another point.

GIVENCHY.

Accordingly, on May 31st, the Canadian Division was relieved and moved south to La Basse Canal and the Givenchy front. Here the struggle for Rue d'Ouvvert, Chapelle St. Roch, and Violaines was renewed, but little progress was made beyond the capture of local strongholds. The German General Staff had evolved the machine-gun defence scheme which has played so important a part in subsequent operations, and the ground lent itself naturally to such a method of warfare. No great degree of success was secured, sufficient to justify our casualty roll of over 2,000, and at the end of June the Canadians marched north to find much needed rest in the comparative tranquillity of the trenches about Ploegsteert.

July and August passed quietly enough. September, however, was a busy month, for on the 14th the Second Canadian Division arrived at Boulogne, and a couple of days later the veterans of the First Division were welcoming their compatriots in the Hazebrouck Area. On the 14th, too, the Canadian

Corps was formed, Lieut-General Alderson in command, with Major-Generals Currie and Turner commanding the First and Second Divisions respectively. A few days later the Second Division took over the Kemmel front, on the left of the First Division, and the Canadian Corps prepared to give all the help possible in the impending offensive against Loos.

It was a disappointment to the Canadians that they were not asked to play a larger part in the Battle of Loos, but they performed their mildly exciting share in the operations of the 25th by an excellently planned simulation of an offensive on their front, preventing the enemy from moving his reserves to the real point of attack.

Through the months of September and October all ranks worked unceasingly in improving the line, but the first rains of November proved that even incessant labour and the most scientific engineering were hardly sufficient to enable trenches cut in that rozy soil to withstand the stress of winter. Life was not all digging, however, and the wonderfully successful raid, the first of its kind, carried out across the Douve River by the 7th Battalion, suggested future joys to our extremely enterprising men.

Just before Christmas, 1915, authority was received for the formation of the Third Canadian Division. In November the Princess Patricia's Light Infantry had re-joined the Canadian Corps, and early in January, 1916, the 7th and 8th Brigades were taking their turn in the trenches, under the command of Major General Mercer.

The fighting had been steadily working northwards, and in March the Canadian Corps relieved the V Corps before St. Eloi, where the 3rd (British) Division had exploded a series of huge mines.

ST. ELOI.

On the night of April 3rd began the terrible fighting for the St. Eloi mine craters, fighting of the most bitter description, for not only had our men to guard themselves against the German bullets, but before them always they had the constant threat of suffocation in the sea of mud that covered our positions. Throughout the month, the Second Division strove to maintain our shattered line, but the German artillery was too strong; our make-shift defences slipped back into the muddy morass in which they were constructed, and eventually our troops were forced from the craters we had paid so dearly to hold. The Second Division lost 4,000 men in this action.

HOOGHE AND SANCTUARY WOOD.

The month of May found the Canadian Corps, under the command of General Sir Julian Byng, still holding the south-eastern sector of the Ypres salient, which allowed our battered soldiers but brief respite from close fighting. With June came the pressing Germans, and on the 2nd a third attempt was carried forward in force, preceded by the heaviest artillery preparation hitherto experienced. This time the Third Division bore the weight of the assault. So heavy was the preliminary bombardment, and our casualties so numerous, that it was found impossible to hold our positions about Hooge and Sanctuary Wood. For a time the whole Ypres salient was in the most imminent danger. General Mercer had been killed, and only the supreme fortitude and gallantry of the 7th and 8th Brigades saved a very serious disaster. As it was, on June 6th the Germans had occupied so great a portion of the heights about Ypres that the situation was vital, and it was not until the 13th that an heroic attack by

fresh troops of the First Division swept back the enemy and established once more our line of defence. Canadian casualties for the eleven days of fighting numbered over 11,000.

Throughout July, 1916, the Canadian Corps was busy refitting and assimilating drafts, and in the middle of August the Fourth Division arrived, very necessary additional strength in view of the demands shortly to be made upon the Corps. At the end of the month the First, Second and Third Divisions moved south to the Somme to take part in the greatest allied offensive yet conceived.

THE SOMME.

Each action throughout the war excelled all previous battles in the development of artillery support, and behind our men on the Somme lay the greatest array of guns ever gathered together, with the Germans not far behind in their defensive preparations.

Early in September the First Canadian Division was employed in numerous important operations resulting in the brilliant exploits in the vicinity of Mouquet Farm, and on September 15th the Second Canadian Division gained the notable victory of Courcellette. On September 26th the First Canadian Division captured portions of Hessian and Kenora trenches—an advance of far-reaching consequences. Then ensued the relentless struggle for Regina Trench. Canada paid a very heavy price for Regina Trench. For weeks the close battle swung backwards and forwards across the battered quarter-mile of trenches, and it was not until November 11th, after the first three divisions of the corps had left the Somme, that the Fourth Canadian Division made good our footing. Desire Trench was carried on the 18th, and then the Fourth Division moved north and joined the Canadian Corps on the Arras-Lens front. The corps lost 22,000 men on the Somme, but the vigour with which our men carried out raids and destructive sorties on the new front remained unimpaired.

EQUANCOURT AND GUYENCOURT.

Meanwhile the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, attached to the XV Corps, distinguished itself in some fighting in March, 1917. An attack was planned on a quiet sector, and met with great success. Three villages, Longasvesnes, Lieramont and Equancourt were captured on the 26th, and on the following day three more, Villers Faucon, Saulcourt and Guyencourt, were delivered from the hands of the enemy. Considering the material gains of the operation, our casualties were surprisingly light.

VIMY RIDGE.

Opposite the centre of the new front of the Canadian Corps lay Vimy Ridge, high ground coveted by our higher command. Historians have written greatly of prehistoric earth-works, but the work of the Canadians about Vimy will bear comparison. On April 9th, 1917, all four Canadian Divisions carried out perhaps the most carefully planned enterprise of the war—capturing the whole of the ridge in an attack that swept all resistance before them.

This was followed by the capture of Hill 145 on the 10th, after an unsuccessful attack on the previous day, and on the 12th by the carrying of the Pimple, a strong high point which had greatly retarded our previous progress. The whole action, and the subsequent extensions of the operations, were most successful. During April and May, 1917, the Canadian Corps captured nine villages, over 5,000 prisoners, 64 heavy guns and howitzers, 106 trench mortars, and 126 machine guns. The casualties were 10,000.

LENS AND HILL 70.

The capture of Vimy Ridge opened the way to many projects that had long been cherished by the higher command, and through June and July the Canadians maintained a vigorous offensive against the German defences of Lens. First Army instructions were to capture Lens with a view to an attack on Lille from the south. Accordingly on August 15th the First and Second Canadian Divisions captured Hill 70 and made

excellent progress towards the town. The attack was pushed still closer home on the 21st by the Second and Fourth Canadian Divisions. The fighting was very severe; reported, indeed, to have been the fiercest that our troops had yet experienced. The corps lost 9,100 men in this action.

In September arrangements were made for the capture of the Mericourt-Sallaumines Ridge, but this operation was postponed as the Second Army requested the services of the Canadian Corps in an attack upon Passchendaele, on the old Ypres front.

PASSCHENDEALE.

As Sir Douglas Haig stated in his fourth despatch, the positions held by the allies in the Ypres Salient since May, 1915, were far from satisfactory. Not only were they completely overlooked by the enemy, but their defence involved a considerable strain on the troops occupying them, while they were certain to be costly to maintain against a serious attack, in which the enemy would enjoy all the advantages in observation and in the placing of his artillery. These positions had been greatly improved by the capture of the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge, and it was proposed to extend the improvement still further by the capture of the high ground which extends thence north-eastwards for some seven miles, and then trends north through Broodseinde and Passchendaele.

The British Second and Fifth Armies had secured some successes in the preliminary stages of this offensive scheme. The fourth phase was carried out upon October 9th, when the Forty-ninth and Sixty-sixth British Divisions, attached to the Second Anzac Corps, attacked Passchendaele.

It has been stated by German prisoners of high rank that Passchendaele, and the rough hilly country about the town, constituted the gateway to the German positions on the high ground east of Ypres. Whether this was so or not, the resistance of the enemy proved the value placed upon the position by the German Higher Command. The attack of October 9th failed, though pushed forward with the utmost gallantry.

The position was vital to the operations in hand, and on April 12th the New Zealand and the Third Australian Divisions made another gallant attempt to gain ground towards Passchendaele. Again the concentrated resistance of the enemy prevented the capture of the objective, though our front line was slightly advanced.

Collectively, the troops on this front were severely exhausted after the terribly heavy fighting of the previous weeks. Several conferences had been held at Headquarters to decide the best means of carrying on the operations. The British Higher Command did not consider that any great strategical results were likely to be gained by following up a success upon the Arras front, beyond the capture of the immediate objectives. Undoubtedly the capture of Passchendaele was a very necessary preliminary to the extension of the original Flanders scheme.

Accordingly, the attack about Lens was postponed—the Canadian Corps was ordered to the Ypres Sector—and on October 18th General Currie took over the command of the Passchendaele front. On the 22nd the Third and Fourth Canadian Divisions relieved the New Zealand and Third Australian Divisions in the trenches before Passchendaele.

The operations were carried out in four distinct phases, October 26th and 30th, by the Third and Fourth Divisions, and November 6th and 10th, by the First and Second Divisions. The final attack gave us possession of the high ground northeast of Passchendaele, leaving the town itself well within our lines. The conditions under which this most successful operation was carried out were indescribable, and the Canadian losses were very heavy. Passchendaele cost the Canadian Corps 14,867 men, killed, wounded and missing. Some 1,200 prisoners were taken.

[Continued on page 10.]