

Haig's Northern Hammer

(Concluded from page 8.)

A retirement over a small area implies a bulging of the lines, and consequently a thinning of the defending force, which must now be spread over a longer line with a consequent decrease of strength and an increase to the danger of penetration. The bulge must then either be strengthened by reinforcements, or it must be straightened by a corresponding retirement of the lines above and below it. The effect of such a bulge may therefore be a very extensive one. It may easily involve a hundred miles of line. Hindenburg fell back from the Noyon angle, not because he was pushed back—he was not—but because of the bulge caused by, and threatened by, the battle of the Somme. Another such retirement would bring him to the Belgian frontier. He was compelled to retire a hundred miles of his line because of an assault at the extreme north of that line. If he had stood fast his line would have been pierced, and then there would have been a debacle.

All these movements on the western front are easily to be understood if we once grasp the fact that the object of the Allied commanders is not to push back the German lines, but to pierce them, or by the threat of piercing them to compel a general withdrawal. The German experts fully understand this, and this explains their invariable claim to success on the ground that "the attempt to pierce our lines failed," even though they were compelled to save themselves by retirement. And, in a sense, they are right. Whatever the immediate object may be of the Allied attacks, whether to gain a ridge or a city, the ultimate objective is to pierce the German lines, to break a gap in the defensive forces. A little exercise of the imagination will show at once what this means. It means that a flood of cavalry would be poured through the gap, and that the German lines, assailed in front and in rear, would be rolled up like a strip of stair carpet. No retreat is possible after the line has once been pierced, no matter though the gap be only a mile wide. The advancing force, unhampered by heavy artillery, or hospital equipment, or wounded, and consisting mainly of cavalry, would move at ten times the speed of the retreating force, which must carry the whole of its equipment with it. But in such an event there would probably be no attempt at retreat. Nothing but surrender of the whole line would be possible. Doubtless those who can see nothing in the war but the taking of successive lines of trenches will continue to amuse themselves with their rather childish measurements and calculations, but actually these have no bearing upon the problem, which is the piercing and not the pushing back of the German lines. That the German lines will not permit themselves actually to be pierced is likely enough. They will fall back in order to prevent such a calamity as that. But the result is the same. The result will be discomfiture and defeat and we may say now with some confidence that such a result is close at hand, and that Germany in all probability is about to receive a blow that is likely to bring the actuality of defeat very close home to German minds.



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