

## CHAPTER V

### LUDENDORFF STRIKES

ON March 9th and 10th the shelling of the country immediately behind a considerable part of the British front began noticeably to increase. In the sector of the Australian Corps in Flanders this shelling fell largely in the Douve valley and in the battery areas, which were bombarded with gas. Large Gotha aeroplanes bombed Bailleul, and German long-range guns shelled that town and the dumps and villages behind the lines.<sup>1</sup>

Since December, the transfer of German forces from Russia, and the probability of a vast German offensive in the spring, had been known to the subordinate commanders and to the troops. Haig, and indeed most officers, realised only too well the depressing effect of constant expectation of attack, and by Haig's instructions<sup>2</sup> commanders encouraged their troops to look upon the coming offensive as the hoped for opportunity for inflicting great losses upon the enemy with a view to attacking him later and finishing the war. This was indeed Haig's own attitude throughout. Nevertheless for the troops the expectation involved some strain, discernible even among the Australians, confident as they were; during the early part of the new year the atmosphere had been (as an Australian diarist notes)

very quiet, but *very* electric. Because of the quietness everyone expects an attack . . . Our men don't think the Germans can get through, but they expect a bad time.

The knowledge that division after division of Germans was arriving from the Eastern Front, and that vast numbers of former prisoners must be daily rejoining the enemy, necessarily caused some uneasiness. Nevertheless the morale was strong. It is true that here or there during the Passchendaele offensive some embittered man, or one of weaker fibre, may have said "I'm ready to let Fritz keep what he has got, and to shake hands with him." But when the enemy, during his negotiations with Russia, had offered to confer with the Entente over peace terms, the general feeling in the Australian force

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<sup>1</sup> It was not known at the time that two of these guns were on floats in the River Lys, and were nightly towed into position. They were manned by sailors.

<sup>2</sup> Issued on Dec. 14.

was against any weakening.<sup>3</sup> By February it was certain that no main attack would come against Messines, but there were observed signs that it might be the scene of a subsidiary offensive. An attack at Hollebeke or "Ravine Wood," south of Ypres, also seemed probable.

but not even the officers responsible for that part of the line (says a diarist) expect any real offensive there—they cannot believe, from the signs, that the German will attack there. Some of them rather wish he would.<sup>4</sup>

The desire to ascertain the German intentions led to some raiding by the Australians, but generally, as the following particulars show, it was the attempts by the Germans that still supplied the necessary identifications.

#### AUSTRALIAN OPERATIONS.

*March 10.* A patrol of the 1st Battalion raided a German post at "Bulgar Road," but found it empty.

*March 11* The 5th Division, after bombardment, raided two German posts—

- (a) South of The Windmill. The garrison tried to escape, but 3 men of the 225th R.I.R. were captured; 18 are said to have been killed by the raiders (57th Battalion).

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<sup>3</sup>The diary quoted above states on Dec. 29 "Amongst the two battalions which I visited today, 35th and 34th, most of the officers seem to be sceptical of these terms (the German offer) or against them—a few think they will be discussed. . . . In the last battle one of them (the two battalions) lost all the officers who went over the top, and the other all except one—about half killed and half wounded. So it is a pretty strong conviction, that something in these terms is wrong, that would keep them stubbornly against agreeing to talk them over with a view to a compromise."

<sup>4</sup>Among the orders issued at this time was one which quickly became famous. Lieutenant F. P. Bethune (before enlistment a Tasmanian clergyman, the same who, in the transport *Transylvania*, delivered the sermon mentioned in *Vol. III, p. 70*), then commanding No. 1 section of the 3rd Machine Gun Company in the "Spoil Bank" sector, protested to his commanding officer against an order to Bethune's comrade, Lieutenant J. C. Hoge (Brisbane), and Hoge's section to occupy a position which Bethune believed to be a useless death-trap. As he could not convince his superior, he submitted that, having made the protest, he himself with No. 1 section should be permitted to hold the place. This being agreed to Bethune told his section what he thought of the place and called for volunteers. The whole section volunteered, but on their way up they were ordered to a better position "to be held at all costs." Bethune accordingly issued the following order to each of his men.

"Special Orders to No. 1 Section, 13/3/18.

- "1. This position will be held, and the section will remain here until relieved
- "2. The enemy cannot be allowed to interfere with this programme
- "3. If the section cannot remain here alive, it will remain here dead, but in any case it will remain here
- "4. Should any man, through shell shock or other cause, attempt to surrender, he will remain here dead
- "5. Should all guns be blown out, the section will use Mills grenades, and other novelties
- "6. Finally, the position, as stated, will be held.

F. P. Bethune, Lt  
O/C No. 1 Section"

The post was visited that day by Lieut.-Colonel Milligan of the divisional staff, and Bethune's order thus reached higher altitudes and passed into history; he and his cheery section survived their eighteen days' tenure of this post, encountering nothing worse than gas shelling. Bethune is now farming in Tasmania.

(b) North of the Blauwepoortbeek. The raiders (59th Battalion) captured 3 men of 163rd I.R. (14th Res. Div.).

*March 14.* The 5th Division again raided at two points:

(a) "Rifle" and "July" Farms, where 4 men of the 163rd I.R. were captured by the 60th Battalion.

(b) at "Datum House" near "Kiwi Farm." The 58th Battalion captured 2 men (226th R.I.R.) and reported 10 others killed.

*March 18.* A patrol of the 3rd Brigade found "Moat Farm" (south of "Belgian Wood") strongly held.

#### GERMAN OPERATIONS.

*March 10.* A German officer with two men, reconnoitring east of Deconinck Farm, stumbled upon a post of the 58th Battalion. The post fired, mortally wounding the officer and capturing him and one of his men (163rd I.R.).

*March 13.* Three Germans on patrol approached a post of the 24th Battalion at Warneton. The post killed one man (228th R.I.R.) and in retrieving his body shot another and captured the third.

At 10 p.m. a German raiding party, consisting of 3 officers and 120 men of the 70th I.R. (31st Division), were brought up from a rest area in order to raid the advanced posts of the 1st Australian Division south of the Ypres-Comines canal, near Hollebeke. They attacked at 12, and after driving back a 10th Battalion patrol, entered three posts but secured no prisoner. The 12th Battalion in the posts drove them off. The leader of the German party was killed, and 12 prisoners were taken. The prisoners said that they were raiding in the sector of the 76th I.R. (8th Division), whose commander had pressed for the operation.

*March 15.* A German patrol met one from the 19th Battalion near Moat Farm (opposite Deulemont). Lieut. A. Mainstone,<sup>5</sup> who was killed, was missing, and eight of his men were hit.

*March 19.* Opposite Frélinghien a German patrol came upon a post of the 17th Battalion. The post fired, and a wounded man of the 102nd I.R. was afterwards captured.

On March 19th, for the purpose of harassing the enemy, 700 cylinders containing gas were fired from the 5th Division's front by a special company of the Royal Engineers. The history of the 226th R.I.R. says that 21 of its men were gassed, 9 fatally.

On March 21st, at 3.45 a.m., the 18th Battalion raided near Pont Rouge, but found no Germans in the position attacked. At 5.25 a.m. the general tension, which the German shelling had since about March 9th created on the Second Army's front, culminated in five minutes' "drum-fire," intended to "wake up the front." Under cover of this, raiding parties from most of the German regiments on the front attempted to enter the British lines. On the Australian front the following engagements occurred:

<sup>5</sup> Lieut. A. Mainstone, M.M.; 19th Bn. Power house employee, of Redfern, N.S.W., b. Sydney, 22 March, 1891. Killed in action, 15 March, 1918.

Near "Grass Farm" a party of German raiders approached a post of the 5th Division. A patrol of the 31st Battalion lying in No-Man's Land saw them crossing towards the Australian lines. When they were 20 yards away the patrol opened fire and drove them back.

Near "Spider House" (east of Oostaverne) two parties of Germans, each 30-40 strong, tried to raid a post of the 55th Battalion (5th Division). One of the German parties was caught by Lewis gun and rifle fire on the wire-entanglement; it was reported that 12 were killed, and a wounded man of the 162nd I.R. (17th Reserve Division) was captured. The other party was dispersed by rifle-fire from a neighbouring post before it reached the wire.

South of Hollebeke a party with a machine-gun approached the posts of the 53rd Battalion (5th Division) and opened fire, but did not attack. It was assumed that this was a "dummy" raid.

Near the canal a patrol of the 153rd I.R. (8th Division) was sent out to follow up the bombardment. Four men of the II/153 I.R. were captured by the 11th Battalion (1st Division).

At "Top House" (east of Belgian Wood) the 72nd I.R. (8th Division) raided the 1st Australian Division. That division reported that the Germans attacked feebly and retired as soon as the Lewis guns opened. Nevertheless the enemy captured 4 men of the 2nd Battalion.

During this day the rear villages were sharply bombarded, but the interest of the troops still centred on their sporting competitions. At Neuve Eglise, despite the bursts of shelling, the 13th Battalion's tug-of-war team was engaged in a final practice for the battalion's athletic sports when a shell crashed, and men running to the spot found the whole team and its trainer<sup>6</sup> killed or wounded.

At 9.59 a.m. news arrived at Australian Corps Headquarters—where Major-General White, chief of the general staff, was acting in charge, General Birdwood being on leave in England—that at 4.43 that morning an intense bombardment had fallen along the whole sectors of the Third and Fifth British Armies and upon the French front, but that no attack had yet occurred. At night came further news that an attack had been delivered at about 8 a.m.,<sup>7</sup> and had reached the front line of the battle-zone at Lagnicourt, Doignies, and certain other places, but was held on the flanks. G.H.Q., it was said, considered the situation satisfactory. Similar *communiqués*

<sup>6</sup> Lieut. N. J. Browne, M.C.; 13th Bn. Station hand; of Albury, N.S.W.; b. Thurgoona, N.S.W., 1891. Died of wounds, 22 March, 1918. (The shell was a British one, fired from a gun recently captured in Russia—part of the armament which Great Britain had by great effort sent to Russia, as the troops bitterly reflected.)

<sup>7</sup> Actually, in some parts the preliminary bombardment lasted for five hours, from about 4.40 to 9.35 a.m. The German infantry advanced at different times in different sectors.



9. GERMAN RESERVES MASSSED IN ST. QUENTIN, FOR THE GREAT BATTLE, MARCH 1918

*German Official Photo reproduced by courtesy of the Reichsarchiv  
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TO THE MAIN STREET AT RIBFONT BARRICADED AGAINST THE  
GERMAN INVASION

Similar barricades were made as a precaution by the British in most villages immediately ahead of the enemy's advance. The old man was a veteran of the 1870-1 war, who refused to leave his home

*Aust War Memorial Office! Photo No. E1047  
Taken on 29th March, 1918*

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were published in England. They were so restrained that the general public realised only with difficulty that the great battle of the war had begun.

But every soldier on the Western Front knew. And in Flanders, although long-range guns continued to bombard Bailleul, Dranoutre, Neuve Eglise, and other centres of traffic behind the lines, and for several days a local attack was expected, the chief attention of the troops, Allied and enemy, was focussed upon the momentous events taking place east of Amiens, particularly in the well remembered country east of Bapaume, Péronne, and the old Somme battlefield.

The first feelings of many British observers not on the actual battle-front were similar to those of Haig. The diary of an Australian, then in London, says:

My heart and spirits jumped one hundred degrees—so the German was attacking after all—he was really going to do it. The bombardment was on a front of 50 miles! . . . I cannot say how relieved I felt . . . One has been hoping almost beyond hope that Ludendorff and Hindenburg were (as they were) so confident of their strength that they would commit Germany to a great offensive, in order to justify . . . the mailed fist method, . . . by which they and their system stand or fall. One hoped almost beyond hope that they would fling themselves upon our army [*i.e.*, on the Western Front], in order to justify their boasts to their people and [try to] end the war by an offensive this year. And they are doing it. One does not for a moment believe that they will succeed. The attack always loses more men than the defence; they will get 5, 10, perhaps 15 miles. They may very likely take Bapaume. But at the end of it their army will be brought up against an unbroken wall—a wall pushed back a few miles, but still barring them; and the German people (and the soldiers) will begin again to cry louder—“To what end? You have killed and wounded and wasted a million of our people, and what have you given us?” That is the best thing that could happen for us. Our men will be hammered—but at least they will lose less in defence than in attack. It is not an easy time for the actual battalions in the line. But it is better than an offensive. It is possible, of course, that a bigger attack will follow against the French; or an attack with tanks. But one cannot help rejoicing that the best has happened.

The news which arrived during the next few days, however, was such that, in spite of the hopeful tone of the *communiqués*, confidence began to give way to anxiety. There appeared in the daily bulletins village-names that were household words with the Australian Corps, scenes of famous fights in 1917 and 1916, far behind the British line recently held. On March 22nd it was stated that the Germans had broken through at Beaumetz, and were trying to pierce the line at

Vaulx-Vraucourt; the Fifth Army was falling back on the Somme south of Péronne. The enemy's progress seemed surprisingly rapid. The Australian divisions, particularly the two—3rd and 4th—which were out of the line resting, began to strain on the leash which held them idle in the north. "Somehow or other," says the diary of an Australian officer,<sup>8</sup> "we all had the feeling that, if we could only get down there, it would be all right. Each man was confident that a call upon his division to hurry south could only be a matter of days, possibly of hours." Many of the leaders, including Birdwood, Monash, Glasgow, and Rosenthal, who were on leave, began to hurry back. General Birdwood came over by aeroplane.<sup>9</sup> In particular the 3rd Australian Division, which had never yet fought in the Somme area, was excited by the prospect of going there.

The 3rd Division therefore received a chilling disappointment when, on March 22nd, it was ordered to move towards Ypres, where it was required as army reserve in case the German activity there was followed by a local attack. Next day the 4th Division was ordered south, but only into the First Army area at Busnes, behind the Portuguese Corps.<sup>10</sup> But that day (23rd) Lieutenant-Colonel Jess, chief-of-staff of the 3rd Division, who in his general's absence was arranging its movements to Steenvoorde, happening to call in at Second Army Headquarters while passing, was hailed with excitement. The division was to move south. Jess hurried to Ebblinghem, intercepted some trains carrying part of the 10th Brigade, and, to the delight of the troops notwithstanding the fatigue involved, sent the battalions marching towards their new entraining area near St. Omer. Next day, March 24th, when the artillery and transport of both divisions, going by road, were already on the move, the destination of the 4th Division also was altered. It was now to go to Hermaville, north-west of Arras, in the Third Army's area. As the enemy's

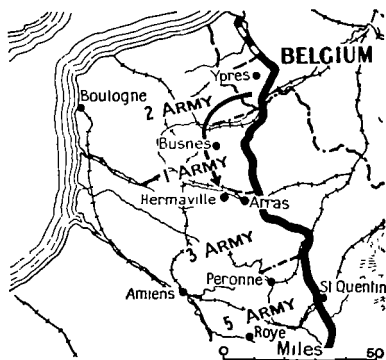
<sup>8</sup> Lieut. K. H. McConnell, 1st Bn. Architectural student; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 5 July, 1896.

<sup>9</sup> On March 25. The journey by air was a comparatively rare one—something of an adventure—in those days, except for members of the air force. Winston Churchill, when Minister for Munitions, flew over the Channel on a number of occasions.

<sup>10</sup> The 12th (Army) Brigade of Australian Field Artillery also was ordered to this district.

systematic bombardment of the back areas had just broken the railway bridge at Chocques, the division was to be sent by bus; even this destination was afterwards changed, as will be presently told. These rapid changes were to cause the utmost discomfort to the troops, but the reason for them quickly became apparent.

First, it became generally understood that although the Third Army, on the northern half of the front attacked, was resisting strongly, the Fifth had given way. This was assumed to be the ground for Haig's special order, read to the troops on March 24th, but issued by him the night before:



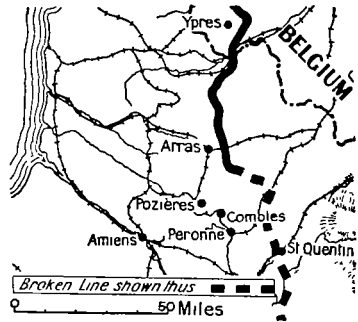
*The arrow shows the move ordered for the 4th Division.*

We are again at a crisis in the War. The enemy has collected on this front every available division and is aiming at the destruction of the British Army. We have already inflicted on the enemy in the course of the last two days very heavy loss, and the French are sending troops as quickly as possible to our support. I feel that everyone in the army, fully realising how much depends on the exertions and steadfastness of each one of us, will do his utmost to prevent the enemy attaining his object.

Second, on the evening of the 24th the troops were electrified by the news that the enemy was across the Somme south of Péronne, and next day by word that, north of it, he had reached the old Somme battlefield. Bouchavesnes, Combles, Sailly-Saillisel, familiar ruins, all within five miles of Pozières ridge where the A.I.F. had fought its bloodiest battle, were in his hands. In the mind of every man of the old I Anzac the same question arose: "Will he retake Pozières?" On the 25th came word of fighting in High Wood. High Wood was within rifle-shot of Pozières crest.

To the men of the two divisions, which (though few knew that both were going) were already on the move, the orders came as a direct summons, quite different from any previously made on them, to act decisively for the winning of the war

At Fromelles and Pozières, at Bullecourt, even at Messines and Third Ypres, the troops had been called on for supreme efforts on the assurance of the higher command that these efforts were achieving valuable ends, and afterwards had been half-consoled for the immense cost and slight apparent result by asseverations that those ends had been partly attained. But here was a situation in which it was obvious that every effort must help directly towards beating the Boche. This, at last, was the job



for which they had come oversea. The battalions as they marched towards their entraining or embussing points, with the regimental bands playing "Colonel Bogey," or the men singing the old marching songs, swung along with a new spirit. "Australia is going to count for something, this time." On the morning of the 25th Brigadier-General McNicoll of the 10th Brigade gathered the brigade's officers round him on the road at Campagne in Flanders, and, to quote the history of the 40th Battalion,

with his map before him, he put the position plainly. He told us that the Fifth Army had been driven back, and were retreating everywhere, and that the British front was broken and the British and French armies were in danger of separation; that the German divisions were pushing forward with great rapidity; and he added the surprising information that a long-range gun was shelling Paris. He finished by saying that we would entrain the following morning, and would go straight into action, and that we would have the fight of our lives as the fate of the war now hung in the balance.