

**1914, by John French, *Viscount of Ypres***

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THE SAILING OF THE EXPEDITIONARY FORCE**

I left Charing Cross by special train at 2 p.m. on Friday, August 14th, and embarked at Dover in His Majesty's cruiser "Sentinel." Sir Maurice FitzGerald and a few other friends were at the station to see me off, and I was accompanied by Murray, Wilson, Robertson, Lambton, Wake, Huguet and Brinsley FitzGerald (my private secretary). The day was dark, dull and gloomy, and rather chilly for August. Dover had ceased to be the cheery seaside resort of peace days, and had assumed the appearance of a fortress expecting momentary attack. Very few people were about, and the place was prepared for immediate action. The fine harbour was crowded with destroyers, submarines, and a few cruisers; booms barred all the entrances and mines were laid down.

It was the first time since war had been declared that I witnessed the outward and visible signs of the great struggle for which we were girding our loins. Not the least evidence of this was the appearance of the officers and men of the "Sentinel." All showed in their faces that

strained, eager, watchful look which told of the severe and continual daily and nightly vigil. This was very marked, and much impressed me.

We sailed a little before 4 and landed at Boulogne about 5.30 in the evening. I was met by the Governor, the Commandant, and the port officials, and we had a very hearty reception. There were several rest camps at Boulogne, and I was able to visit them. Officers and men looked fit and well, and were full of enthusiasm and cheer.

Boulogne was only a secondary port of embarkation, but I can vividly recall the scene. Everyone knows the curious and interesting old town, with its picturesque citadel, situated on a lofty hill. On all sides were evidences of great activity and excitement. Soldiers and sailors, both British and French, were everywhere. All were being warmly welcomed and cheered by the townspeople.

The declining August sun lit up sinuous columns of infantry ascending the high ground to their rest camps on the plateau to the sound of military bands. From the heights above the town, the quays and wharves, where the landing of troops and stores was unceasingly going forward, looked like human beehives. Looking out to sea, one could distinguish approaching transports here and there between the ever wary and watchful scout, destroyer and submarine, which were jealously guarding the route.

Over all towered the monument to the greatest world-soldier—the warrior Emperor who, more than a hundred years before, had from that spot contemplated the invasion of England. Could he have now revisited "the glimpses of the moon," would he not have rejoiced at this friendly invasion of France by England's "good yeomen," who were now offering their lives to save France from possible destruction as a Power of the first class? It was a wonderful and never to be forgotten scene in the setting sun; and, as I walked round camps and bivouacs, I could not but think of the many fine fellows around me who had said good-bye to Old England for ever.

We left Boulogne at 7.20 the same evening, and reached Amiens at 9. There I was met by General Robert (Military Governor) and his staff, the Prefect and officials. Amiens was the Headquarters of General Robb, the Commander of our Line of Communications, and it was also the first point of concentration for our aircraft, which David Henderson commanded, with Sykes as his chief assistant. Whilst at Amiens I was able to hold important discussions with Robb and Henderson as to their respective commands.

I left Amiens for Paris on the morning of the 15th and we reached the Nord Terminus at 12.45 p.m., where I was met by the British Ambassador (now Lord Bertie) and the Military Governor of Paris. Large crowds had assembled in the streets on the way to the Embassy, and we were received with tremendous greetings by the

people. Their welcome was cordial in the extreme. The day is particularly memorable to me, because my previous acquaintance with Lord Bertie ripened from that time into an intimate friendship to which I attach the greatest value. I trust that, when the real history of this war is written, the splendid part played by this great Ambassador may be thoroughly understood and appreciated by his countrymen. Throughout the year and a half that I commanded in France, his help and counsel were invaluable to me.

We drove to the Embassy and lunched there. In the afternoon, accompanied by the Ambassador, I visited M. Poincaré. The President was attended by M. Viviani, Prime Minister, and M. Messimy, Minister for War. The situation was fully discussed, and I was much impressed by the optimistic spirit of the President. I am sure he had formed great hopes of a victorious advance by the Allies from the line they had taken up, and he discoursed playfully with me on the possibility of another battle being fought by the British on the old field of Waterloo. He said the attitude of the French nation was admirable, that they were very calm and determined.

After leaving the President I went to the War Office. Maps were produced; the whole situation was again discussed, and arrangements were made for me to meet General Joffre at his Headquarters the next day.

In the evening I dined quietly with Brinsley FitzGerald at the Ritz, and here it was curious to observe how Paris, like Dover, had put on a sombre garb of war. The

buoyant, optimistic nature of the French people was apparent in the few we met; but there was no bombastic, over-confident tone in the conversation around us; only a quiet, but grim, determination which fully appreciated the tremendous difficulties and gigantic issues at stake. The false optimism of "À Berlin" associated with 1870 was conspicuously absent. In its place, a silent determination to fight to the last franc and to the last man.

We left Paris by motor early on the 16th, and arrived at Joffre's Headquarters at Vitry-le-François at noon. A few minutes before our arrival a captured German flag (the first visible trophy of war I had seen) had been brought in, and the impression of General Joffre which was left on my mind was that he possessed a fund of human understanding and sympathy.

I had heard of the French Commander-in-Chief for years, but had never before seen him. He struck me at once as a man of strong will and determination, very courteous and considerate, but firm and steadfast of mind and purpose, and not easily turned or persuaded. He appeared to me to be capable of exercising a powerful influence over the troops he commanded and as likely to enjoy their confidence.

These were all "first impressions"; but I may say here that everything I then thought of General Joffre was far more than confirmed throughout the year and a half of fierce struggle during which I was associated with him. His steadfastness and determination, his courage and

patience, were tried to the utmost and never found wanting. History will rank him as one of the supremely great leaders. The immediate task before him was stupendous, and nobly did he arise to it.

I was quite favourably impressed by General Berthelot (Joffre's Chief of Staff) and all the Staff Officers I met, and was much struck by their attitude and bearing. There was a complete absence of fuss, and a calm, deliberate confidence was manifest everywhere. I had a long conversation with the Commander-in-Chief, at which General Berthelot was present. He certainly never gave me the slightest reason to suppose that any idea of "retirement" was in his mind. He discussed possible alternatives of action depending upon the information received of the enemy's plans and dispositions; but his main intention was always to attack.

There were two special points in this conversation which recur to my mind.

As the British Army was posted on the left, or exposed flank, I asked Joffre to place the French Cavalry Division, and two Reserve Divisions which were echeloned in reserve behind, directly under my orders. This the Commander-in-Chief found himself unable to concede.

The second point I recall is the high esteem in which the General Commanding the 5th French Army, General Lanrezac, which was posted on my immediate

right, was held by Joffre and his Staff. He was represented to me as the best Commander in the French Army, on whose complete support and skilful co-operation I could thoroughly rely.

Before leaving, the Commander-in-Chief handed me a written memorandum setting forth his views as he had stated them to me, accompanied by a short appreciation of the situation made by the Chief of the General Staff.

We motored to Rheims, where we slept that night. Throughout this long motor journey we passed through great areas of cultivated country. All work, it seemed, had ceased; the crops were half cut, and stooks of corn were lying about everywhere. It was difficult to imagine how the harvest would be saved; but one of my most extraordinary experiences in France was to watch the farming and agriculture going on as if by magic. When, how, or by whom it was done, has always been an enigma to me. There can be no doubt that the women and children proved an enormous help to their country in these directions. Their share of the victory should never be forgotten. It has been distilled from their sweat and tears.

On the morning of the 17th I went to Rethel, which was the Headquarters of the General Commanding the 5th French Army. Having heard such eulogies of him at French G.H.Q., my first impressions of General Lanrezac were probably coloured and modified in his favour; but, looking back, I remember that his personality did not convey to me the idea of a great

leader. He was a big man with a loud voice, and his manner did not strike me as being very courteous.

When he was discussing the situation, his attitude might have made a casual observer credit him with practical powers of command and determination of character; but, for my own part, I seemed to detect, from the first time my eyes fell upon him, a certain over-confidence which appeared to ignore the necessity for any consideration of alternatives. Although we arrived at a mutual understanding which included no idea or thought of "retreat," I left General Lanrezac's Headquarters believing that the Commander-in-Chief had over-rated his ability; and I was therefore not surprised when he afterwards turned out to be the most complete example, amongst the many this War has afforded, of the Staff College "pedant," whose "superior education" had given him little idea of how to conduct war.

On leaving Rethel, I motored to Vervins, where I interviewed the Commanders of the French Reserve Divisions in my immediate neighbourhood, and reached my Headquarters at Le Cateau late in the afternoon.

The first news I got was of the sudden death of my dear old friend and comrade, Jimmie Grierson (General Sir James Grierson, Commanding the 2nd Army Corps). He was taken ill quite suddenly in the train on his way to his own Corps Headquarters, and died in a few minutes. I had known him for many years, but since 1906 had been quite closely associated with him; for he

had taken a leading part in the preparation of the Army for war throughout that time. He possessed a wonderful personality, and was justly beloved by officers and men alike. He was able to get the best work out of them, and they would follow him anywhere. He had been British Military Attaché in Berlin for some years, and had thus acquired an intimate knowledge of the German Army. An excellent linguist, he spoke French with ease and fluency, and he used to astonish French soldiers by his intimate knowledge of the history of their regiments, which was often far in excess of what they knew themselves. His military acquirements were brilliant, and in every respect thoroughly up-to-date. Apart from the real affection I always felt for him, I regarded his loss as a great calamity in the conduct of the campaign.

His place was taken by Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, although I asked that Sir Herbert Plumer might be sent out to me to succeed Grierson in command of the 2nd Corps. As a matter of fact, the question of Sir James Grierson's successor was not referred to me at all. The appointment was made at home. Although I knew Sir Horace to be a soldier who had done good service and possessed a fine record, I had asked for Sir Herbert Plumer because I felt he was the right man for this command.

Lord Kitchener had asked me to send him a statement of the French dispositions west of the Meuse. I sent him this in the following letter:—

"Headquarters,  
"Le Cateau,  
"August 17th, 1914.

"MY DEAR LORD K.

"With reference to your wire asking for information as to the position of French troops west of the line Givet—Dinant—Namur—Brussels, I have already replied by wire in general terms. I now send full details.

"A Corps of Cavalry (three divisions less one brigade), supported by some Infantry, is north of the River Sambre between Charleroi and Namur. This is the nearest French force to the Belgian Army, and I do not know if and where they have established communication with them, nor do the French.

"One French Corps, with an added Infantry Brigade and a Cavalry Brigade, is guarding the River Meuse from Givet to Namur. The bridges are mined and ready to be blown up.

"In rear of this corps, two more corps are moving—one on Philippeville, the other on Beaumont. Each of these two corps is composed of three divisions. In rear of them a fourth corps assembles to-morrow west of Beaumont. Three Reserve divisions are already in waiting between Vervins and Hirson. Another Reserve division is guarding the almost impassable country between Givet and Mézières.

"Finally, other Reserve formations are guarding the frontier between Maubeuge and Lille.

"I left Paris on Sunday morning (16th) by motor, and reached the Headquarters of General Joffre (French Commander-in-Chief) at 12. They are at Vitry-le-François. He quite realises the importance and value of adopting a waiting attitude. In the event of a forward movement by the German Corps in the Ardennes and Luxemburg, he is anxious that I should act in echelon on the left of the 5th French Army, whose present disposition I have stated above. The French Cavalry Corps now north of the Sambre will operate on my left front and keep touch with the Belgians.

"I spent the night at Rheims and motored this morning to Rehel, the Headquarters of General Lanrezac, Commander 5th French Army. I had a long talk with him and arranged for co-operation in all alternative circumstances.

"I then came on to my Headquarters at this place where I found everything proceeding satisfactorily and up to time. I was much shocked to hear of Grierson's sudden death near Amiens when I arrived here. I had already wired asking you to appoint Plumer in his place, when your wire reached me and also that of Ian Hamilton, forwarded—as I understand—by you. I very much hope you will send me Plumer; Hamilton is too senior to command an Army Corps and is already engaged in an important command at home.

"Please do as I ask you in this matter? I needn't assure you there was no 'promise' of any kind.

"Yours sincerely,  
"(Signed)J. D. P.  
FRENCH.

"P.S.—I am much impressed by all I have seen of the French General Staff. They are very deliberate, calm, and confident. There was a total absence of fuss and confusion, and a determination to give only a just and proper value to any reported successes. So far there has been no conflict of first-rate importance, but there has been enough fighting to justify a hope that the French artillery is superior to the German."

It was on Tuesday, August 18th, that I was first able to assemble the Corps Commanders and their Staffs. Their reports as to the transport of their troops from their mobilising stations to France were highly satisfactory.

The nation owes a deep debt of gratitude to the Naval Transport Service and to all concerned in the embarking and disembarking of the Expeditionary Force. Every move was carried out exactly to time, and the concentration of the British Army on the left of the French was effected in such a manner as to enable every unit to obtain the requisite time to familiarise troops with active service conditions, before it became necessary to make severe demands upon their strength and endurance.

My discussion with the Corps Commanders was based upon the following brief appreciation of the situation on that day. This was as follows:—

"Between Tirlemont (to the east of Louvain) and Metz, the enemy has some 13 to 15 Army Corps and seven Cavalry Divisions. A certain number of reserve troops are said to be engaged in the offensive of Liége, the forts of which place are believed to be still intact, although some of the enemy's troops hold the town.

"These German Corps are in two main groups, seven to eight Corps and four Cavalry Divisions being between Tirlemont and Givet. Six to seven Corps and three Cavalry Divisions are in Belgian Luxemburg.

"Of the northern group, it is believed that the greater part—perhaps five Corps—are either north and west of the Meuse, or being pushed across by bridges at Huy and elsewhere.

"The general direction of the German advance is by Waremme on Tirlemont. Two German Cavalry Divisions which crossed the Meuse some days ago have reached Gembloux, but have been driven back to Mont Arden by French cavalry supported by a mixed Belgian brigade.

"The German plans are still rather uncertain, but it is confidently believed that at least five Army Corps and two or three Cavalry Divisions will move against the French frontiers south-west, on a great line between Brussels and Givet.

"The 1st French Corps is now at Dinant, one Infantry and one Cavalry Brigade opposing the group of German Corps south of the Meuse.

"The 10th and 3rd Corps are on the line Rethel—Thuin, south of the Sambre. The 18th Corps are moving up on the left of the 10th and 3rd.

"Six or seven Reserve French Divisions are entrenched on a line reaching from Dunkirk, on the coast, through Cambrai and La Capelle, to Hirson.

"The Belgian Army is entrenched on a line running north-east and south-west through Louvain."

My general instructions were then communicated to Corps Commanders as follows:—

"When our concentration is complete, it is intended that we should operate on the left of the French 5th Army, the 18th Corps being on our right. The French Cavalry Corps of three divisions will be on our left and in touch with the Belgians.

"As a preliminary to this, we shall take up an area north of the Sambre, and on Monday the heads of the Allied columns should be on the line Mons—Givet, with the cavalry on the outer flank.

"Should the German attack develop in the manner expected, we shall advance on the general line Mons—Dinant to meet it."

During these first days, whilst our concentration was in course of completion, I rode about a great deal amongst the troops, which were generally on the move to take up their billets or doing practice route marches. I had an excellent opportunity of observing the physique and general appearance of the men. Many of the reservists at first bore traces of the civilian life which they had just left, and presented an anxious, tired appearance; but it was wonderful to observe the almost hourly improvement which took place amongst them. I knew that, under the supervision and influence of the magnificent body of officers and non-commissioned officers which belonged to the 1st Expeditionary Force, all the reservists, even those who had been for years away from the colours, would, before going under fire, regain to the full the splendid military vigour, determination, and spirit which has at all times been so marked a characteristic of British soldiers in the field.

I received a pressing request from the King of the Belgians to visit His Majesty at his Headquarters at Louvain; but the immediate course of the operations prevented me from doing so.

The opening phases of the Battle of Mons did not commence until the morning of Saturday, August 22nd. Up to that time, so far as the British forces were concerned, the forwarding of offensive operations had complete possession of our minds. During the days which intervened, I had frequent meetings and discussions with the Corps and Cavalry Commanders.

The Intelligence Reports which constantly arrived, and the results of cavalry and aircraft reconnaissances, only confirmed the previous appreciation of the situation, and left no doubt as to the direction of the German advance; but nothing came to hand which led us to foresee the crushing superiority of strength which actually confronted us on Sunday, August 23rd.

This was our first practical experience in the use of aircraft for reconnaissance purposes. It cannot be said that in these early days of the fighting the cavalry entirely abandoned that *rôle*. On the contrary, they furnished me with much useful information.

The number of our aeroplanes was then limited, and their powers of observation were not so developed or so accurate as they afterwards became. Nevertheless, they kept close touch with the enemy, and their reports proved of the greatest value.

Whilst at this time, as I have said, aircraft did not altogether replace cavalry as regards the gaining and collection of information, yet, by working together as they did, the two arms gained much more accurate and voluminous knowledge of the situation. It was, indeed, the timely warning they gave which chiefly enabled me to make speedy dispositions to avert danger and disaster.

There can be no doubt indeed that, even then, the presence and co-operation of aircraft saved the very frequent use of small cavalry patrols and detached

supports. This enabled the latter arm to save horseflesh and concentrate their power more on actual combat and fighting, and to this is greatly due the marked success which attended the operations of the cavalry during the Battle of Mons and the subsequent retreat.

At the time I am writing, however, it would appear that the duty of collecting information and maintaining touch with an enemy in the field will in future fall entirely upon the air service, which will set the cavalry free for different but equally important work.

I had daily consultations with Sir William Robertson, the Quartermaster-General. He expressed himself as well satisfied with the condition of the transport, both horse and mechanical, although he said the civilian drivers were giving a little trouble at first. Munitions and supplies were well provided for, and there were at least 1,000 rounds per gun and 800 rounds per rifle. We also discussed the arrangements for the evacuation of wounded.

The immediate despatch from home of the 4th Division was now decided upon and had commenced, and I received sanction to form a 19th Brigade of Infantry from the Line of Communication battalions.

At this time I received some interesting reports as to the work of the French cavalry in Belgium. Their *morale* was high and they were very efficient. They were opposed by two divisions of German cavalry whose patrols, they said, showed great want of dash and

initiative, and were not well supported. They formed the opinion that the German horse did not care about trying conclusions mounted, but endeavoured to draw the French under the fire of artillery and jäger battalions, the last-named always accompanying a German Cavalry Division.

At 5.30 a.m. on the 21st I received a visit from General de Morionville, Chief of the Staff to His Majesty the King of the Belgians, who, with a small staff, was proceeding to Joffre's Headquarters. The General showed signs of the terrible ordeal through which he and his gallant army had passed since the enemy had so grossly violated Belgian territory. He confirmed all the reports we had received concerning the situation generally, and added that the unsupported condition of the Belgian Army rendered their position very precarious, and that the King had, therefore, determined to effect a retirement on Antwerp, where they would be prepared to attack the flank of the enemy's columns as they advanced. He told me he hoped to arrive at a complete understanding with the French Commander-in-Chief.

On this day, August 21st, the Belgians evacuated Brussels and were retiring on Antwerp, and I received the following message from the Government:—

"The Belgian Government desire to assure the British and French Governments of the unreserved support of the Belgian Army on the left flank of the Allied Armies with the whole of its troops and all available resources,

wherever their line of communications with the base at Antwerp, where all their ammunition and food supplies are kept, is not in danger of being severed by large hostile forces.

"Within the above-mentioned limits the Allied Armies may continue to rely on the co-operation of the Belgian troops.

"Since the commencement of hostilities the Field Army has been holding the line Tirlemont—Jodoigne—Hammemille—Louvain, where, up to the 18th August, it has been standing by, hoping for the active co-operation of the Allied Army.

"On August 18th it was decided that the Belgian Army, consisting of 50,000 Infantry rifles, 276 guns, and 4,100 Cavalry should retreat on the Dyle. This step was taken owing to the fact that the support of the Allies had not yet been effective, and, moreover, that the Belgian forces were menaced by three Army Corps and three Cavalry Divisions (the greater part of the First Army of the Meuse), who threatened to cut their communications with their base.

"The rearguard of the 1st Division of the Army having been forced to retire after a fierce engagement lasting five or six hours on August 18th, and the Commander of the Division having stated that his troops were not in a fit state to withstand a long engagement owing to the loss of officers and the weariness of the men; and, moreover, as the Commander of the 3rd Division of the

Army, which was so sorely tried at Liége, had similarly come to the conclusion, on August 19th, that the defence of the Dyle was becoming very dangerous, more especially in view of the turning movement of the 2nd Army Corps and 2nd Cavalry Division, it was definitely decided to retreat under the protection of the forts at Antwerp.

"The general idea is now that the Field Army, in part or as a whole, should issue from Antwerp as soon as circumstances seem to favour such a movement.

"In this event, the Army will try to co-operate in its movements with the Allies as circumstances may dictate."

Exhaustive reconnaissances and intelligence reports admitted of no doubt that the enemy was taking the fullest advantage of his violation of Belgian territory, and that he was protected to the right of his advance, at least as far west as Soignies and Nivelles, whence he was moving direct upon the British and 5th French Armies.

In further proof that, at this time, no idea of retreat was in the minds of the leaders of the Allied Armies, I received late on Friday, the 21st, General Lanrezac's orders to his troops. All his corps were in position south of the Sambre, and he was only waiting the development of a move by the 3rd and 4th French Armies from the line Mézières—Longwy to begin his own advance.

As regards our own troops, on the evening of the 21st, the cavalry, under Allenby, were holding the line of the Condé Canal with four brigades. Two brigades of horse artillery were in reserve at Harmignies. The 5th Cavalry Brigade, under Chetwode, composed of the Scots Greys, 12th Lancers, and 20th Hussars, were at Binche, in touch with the French.

Reconnoitring squadrons and patrols were pushed out towards Soignies and Nivelles.

I visited Allenby's Headquarters in the afternoon of the 21st, and discussed the situation with him. I told him on no account to commit the cavalry to any engagement of importance, but to draw off towards our left flank when pressed by the enemy's columns, and there remain in readiness for action and reconnoitring well to the left.

The 1st Army Corps, under Sir Douglas Haig, was in cantonments to the north of Maubeuge, between that place and Givry. The 2nd Corps, under Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, was to the north-west of Maubeuge, between that place and Sars-la-Bruyère. The 19th Infantry Brigade was concentrating at Valenciennes.

Turning to our Ally, the 6th and 7th French Reserve Divisions were entrenching themselves on a line running from Dunkirk, through Cambrai and La Capelle, to Hirson. The 5th French Army was on our right, the 18th French Corps being in immediate touch with the British Army. Three Divisions of French cavalry under General Sordet, which had been operating

in support of the Belgians, were falling back behind the 18th Corps for rest and refit. The 3rd and 4th French Armies, comprising 8-½ Corps, three Cavalry Divisions and some reserve Divisions, were between Mézières and Longwy. The French troops further south had taken the offensive and marched into Alsace. Liège still held out. Namur was intact. The Belgians seemed secure behind the fortifications of Antwerp.

Before going further it would be as well to give some account of the country in which the two opposing forces faced one another on the night of Friday, August 21st, the area Condé—Cambrai—Le Nouvion—Binche:—

- *Distances.*— Cambrai to Condé 24 miles.
  - Condé to Binche 26 miles.
  - Cambrai to Le Nouvion 26 miles.
  - Le Nouvion to Binche 31 miles.

This region forms part of the Belgian province of Hainault and the French Departments of the Nord and the Aisne, lying approximately between the upper valleys of the Rivers Scheldt and Sambre. Its northern boundary is formed by the basin of the River Haine. This river, formed from three streams which rise in the neighbourhood of Binche, passes Mons and flows into the Scheldt at Condé after a course of 30 miles. Close to its left bank, from Mons to Condé, a canal connects the former place with the Scheldt. Prior to the construction of this canal, the Haine was navigable by means of

locks. Several small parallel streams run into it from the south, along sunken valleys in an undulating plateau, over which lie scattered the various mines of the Bérinage coalfield.

West of Mons the valley of the Haine forms a long, low plain, covered with meadows, through which the river meanders in broad bends as far as the Scheldt. Numerous water ditches, cut in the peaty soil and marked out by poplars and willows, drain the land and render the movement off the roads of any troops but infantry quite impracticable.

On the northern boundary of the valley of the Haine, a belt of sand gives rise to a tract of rough uncultivated land which is in many places covered with woods. On its southern boundary the ground rises steeply on the east, and more gently on the west, to the Franco-Belgian frontier, over a rocky subsoil in which the affluents of the river have cut deep valleys.

The Mons-Condé Canal has a length of 16- $\frac{1}{4}$  miles, 12- $\frac{1}{4}$  of which are in Belgian territory. It has a surface width of 64 feet and its maximum depth is 7 feet. The canal is crossed by 18 bridges, all of which, with the exception of the railway bridge east of St. Ghislain and the railway bridge at Les Herbières, are swing bridges. A metalled towing-path runs along each bank.

The principal passages across the valley of the Haine are at Mons from Brussels,

at St. Ghislain from Ath, and  
near Pommerœul from Tournai.

The Scheldt, rising near Le Catelet at an altitude of 360 feet above the sea, soon approaches the St. Quentin Canal and runs alongside it as far as Cambrai, where the river and canal flow in one channel and form a navigable connection between the Scheldt and the Somme. Below Cambrai, the now canalised river flows on to Valenciennes, receiving on the way on its left bank the Sensée river and canal, and on its right bank the Ereclin, Selle, Ecaillon, and Rhonelle streams, which flow down in parallel courses from the watershed close to the left bank of the Sambre. From Valenciennes the Scheldt runs to Condé, where, as stated above, it is joined by the Mons-Condé Canal and the River Haine. Immediately afterwards it enters Belgian territory, where it becomes the great river of the Flemish part of the country, just as the Meuse may be said to be the great river of the Walloon portion.

There are 14 locks between Cambrai and Condé, each providing a means of passage over the river. The general breadth of the canalised river is 55 feet and its maximum depth 7 feet. The towing-path follows sometimes one bank and sometimes another. The principal points of crossing of the Scheldt between Cambrai and Condé are at Cambrai, Bouchain, Louches, Denain, Bouvignies, Thiant, Trith, St. Légers, Valenciennes, and Condé.

While the Scheldt as it grows older flows through country which is for the most part little above sea level, in its upper reaches it cuts through an upland plateau on its way to join the Belgian central plains.

Rising near Fontenelle, 9 miles south-west of Avesnes, the Sambre flows through Landrecies, where it becomes navigable, and where it is connected with the Oise by the Sambre Canal. Flowing past Maubeuge it enters Belgium below Jeumont and traverses thence, in a north-easterly direction, one of the most important industrial districts of Belgium. The country through which the river flows from its source to Charleroi forms a plateau cut up by numerous dales and deep valleys.

Below Landrecies the depth of the river is from 6 to 7 feet, while its breadth is 50 feet; it is nowhere fordable. A towing-path runs in places on the left bank, in places on the right bank. Nine locks regulate the depth of the canal between Landrecies and Jeumont, and afford a means of passage for pedestrians. Communication is amply supplied for wheeled traffic by 22 road and railway bridges, of which the most important are those at Landrecies, Berlaimont, Hautmont, Louvroil, Maubeuge, Jeumont, Erquelines, Merbes-le-Château and Lobbes.

South of Landrecies important road bridges cross the Sambre Canal at Catillon and near Oisy.

The principal tributaries of the Sambre, in the area under view, flow into the river from the eastern foothills

of the Ardennes; the streams which join it on its left bank are few and insignificant. On the right bank the Rivière, the Helpe Mineure, the Helpe Majeure, the Tarsy and the Solre, flowing in parallel courses in a north-westerly direction, lie in deeply cut valleys which broaden out as they reach the main stream. The high ground between these streams offers a succession of defensive positions against an enemy advancing from the north in a south-westerly direction.

The area under review may be divided into two portions. A northern or industrial, with all the inconvenience to military operations characteristic of such a district, and a southern or agricultural with unlimited freedom of movement and view, resembling in many respects the features of Salisbury Plain. The dividing line of these two portions may be taken as a line running through Valenciennes and Maubeuge.

With the exception of the thickly populated Bérinage coalfield, west and south of Mons, the country is open, arable, and undulating. Extensive views are obtainable, the villages, though numerous, are compact, and movement across country is easy.

A notable feature in the southern portions of the area is the Forêt de Mormal and in its neighbourhood the Bois l'Évêque.

The Forêt de Mormal, which is 22,460 acres in extent, is situated on the summit and slopes of the high ground bordering the left bank of

the Sambre between Landrecies and Boussières. It is crossed by one first-class road from Le Quesnoy to Avesnes, and several second-class roads.

The forest is also traversed by two railways; that from Paris to Maubeuge, which follows its southern boundary from Landrecies to Sassegnies, and that from Valenciennes to Hirson, which runs from north-west to south-east and joins the former line at Aulnoye. On account of its thick undergrowth, its streams and marshy bottoms, the forest is not passable for troops except by the above-mentioned roads.

Le Bois Levesque (1,805 acres), situated between Landrecies and Le Cateau, may be considered as an extension of the Forêt de Mormal, from which it is only about 2-½ miles distant. It is traversed by the railway line from Paris to Maubeuge, by the road from Landrecies to Le Cateau, and the country road from Fontaine to Ors.

In conclusion, let us glance at the principal places of strategic importance in this region which witnessed the opening stages of the retreat from Mons.

In the beginning of the war, *Maubeuge*, with 20,000 inhabitants, belonged to the second class of French fortresses, which possessed a limited armament and which were destined to act as *points d'appui* for mobile forces acting in their vicinity. The strategic value of Maubeuge is due to the fact that the main lines from Paris to Brussels via Mons, and to northern

Germany via Charleroi and Liège, pass through the town, while from it runs a line towards the eastern frontier via Hirson and Mézières, with branch lines leading to Laon and Châlons. It is also a junction of main roads from Valenciennes, Mons, Charleroi, and Laon.

The fortress has a circumference of about 20 miles. The forts, which lie in open country, are mostly small. Shortly before the outbreak of the War the defences of Maubeuge had been strengthened to meet the increased effect of high explosives, and various redoubts and batteries had been constructed in addition to the above-mentioned works.

*Mons*, the capital of Hainault, had a pre-war population of 28,000 inhabitants, and is situated on a sandhill overlooking the Trovillon. It is the centre of the Bérinage, the chief coal-mining district of Belgium. Main roads from Brussels, Binche, Charleroi, Valenciennes and Maubeuge have their meeting place here, while the railway from Paris to Brussels passes through it. It is also the junction point of the canal from Condé and the Canal Du Centre, which connects the former with the Charleroi Canal and the Sambre.

The town of *Binche* (12,000 inhabitants), lying 15 miles east-south-east of Mons, is a centre of roads from Charleroi, Brussels, Mons, Bavai, and Beaumont. Through it passes a double line of railway coming from Maubeuge on its way to Brussels.

*Condé*, a small and old fortified town, owes its military value to its position at the confluence of the Scheldt and the Haine, and to its canal communications with Mons. A single railway line connects it on the north with Tournai and on the south with Valenciennes. The main road from Audenarde to Valenciennes and Cambrai passes here.

The strategical importance of *Valenciennes*, a town of 32,000 inhabitants, is due to its being the meeting places of main roads from Cambrai, Lille, Tournai, Condé and Mons. It is also the junction point of the main lines from Paris *viâ* Cambrai, Hirson, and the north. Its position on the canalised Scheldt has been already referred to.

*Cambrai* (28,000 inhabitants), lying on the right bank of the Scheldt, which first becomes navigable here, is the centre of main roads from Péronne, Bapaume, Arras, Douai, Valenciennes, Bavai and Le Cateau. It is also important as being the junction point of railways from Paris to Valenciennes and from Douai to St. Quentin.

*Le Cateau*, where, as I have already said, I established my first General Headquarters in France, is situated on the Selle. Before the War its population numbered 10,700 and it possessed important woollen mills. It is the junction point of main roads connecting Valenciennes with St. Quentin and Cambrai with Le Nouvion. It also stands on the main line from

Paris to Maubeuge, while single-line railways connect it with Cambrai, Valenciennes, and Le Quesnoy.

Lastly, with regard to communications throughout the area, they were good and ample. The principal roads from north to south are those from Condé, through Valenciennes, to Cambrai, Le Cateau, and Landrecies, and from Mons to Binche, to Le Cateau via Bavai and to Landrecies through Maubeuge. Numerous second-class roads afford good lateral communications between the above-mentioned roads.

Such, then, was the region in which, on the night of Friday, August 21st, the British Expeditionary Force found itself awaiting its first great trial of strength with the enemy. That night we went to sleep in high hopes. The mobilisation, transport, and concentration of the British Army had been effected without a hitch. The troops had not only been able to rest after their journey, but a few days had been available for practice marches and for overhauling equipment. The condition of the reservists, even those who had been longest away from the colours, was excellent and constantly improving.

The highest spirit pervaded all ranks, and the army with one accord longed to be at grips with the enemy. The cavalry had been pushed well to the front, and such engagements as had taken place between detachments of larger or smaller patrols had foreshadowed that moral superiority of British over German which was afterwards so completely established, and proved of such enormous value in the retreat, the Battles of

the Marne and the Aisne, and in the opening phases of the first Battle of Ypres. The French troops had already secured minor successes, and had penetrated into the enemy's territory. The Allied Commanders were full of hope and confidence.