

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

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **THE SIEGE AND FALL OF ANTWERP**

In our appreciation of the situation at British Headquarters on October 1st it was considered that the reduction of Antwerp was at this moment the great objective of the enemy. Personally, I had no reason to think that Antwerp was in any immediate danger, and therefore a message which I received from the Secretary of State on October 2nd came as a most disagreeable surprise.

I was informed that a serious situation had been created at Antwerp, which was in grave danger of falling in a short time.

Further information reached me at 3 a.m. on the 3rd from London that the Belgian Government, acting on the advice unanimously given by the Superior Council of War in the presence of the King, had decided to leave at once for Ostend. It was further stated that the King, with the Field Army, would withdraw from Antwerp in the direction of Ghent to protect the coast-line and in the hope of being able to co-operate with the Allied Armies. The message added that the town could hold out for five or six days, and that the decision to evacuate was taken

very seriously as a result of the increasingly critical situation.

It is needless to say that I was perturbed on receipt of this news, It was difficult to understand why the Belgians, who had fought so well at Liége, were unable to do more in defence of a fortress which was much stronger, and situated, moreover, in a position where it could be supported by the British Fleet.

I fully realised the consequence of the capture and occupation of Antwerp by the Germans. It was impossible to say how much of the coast-line the captured *terrain* would include, but there could be no doubt that the Channel ports would be gravely imperilled.

Operating from such a base, there would appear to be no insuperable obstacle to an immediate German advance on Dunkirk, Calais, and Boulogne. The Belgian Army was in no condition to resist such an advance. The occupation of these places and the formation of a defensive line which would include the whole of the Pas-de-Calais, might become *afait accompli* before the troops could arrive from the main theatres to prevent it.

But here, again, we have an example of the over-confidence which for ever possessed that army which set out for "world conquest." As on the Marne, so at Antwerp, they were not prepared to seize the psychological moment and to play boldly for the great stake.

It is seldom that fortune offers another chance to a military leader who has once failed to gather the rich harvest which she has put into his grasp. Yet the German Emperor presents, together with his great General Staff, one of the few instances in history of a Commander-in-Chief so soon being given a splendid opportunity to retrieve such mistakes as those of September 5th and 6th.

With all these tragic possibilities in my mind in these early October days, I redoubled my endeavours to effect a speedy move of the British forces to the north. Added to the other cogent reasons to which I referred in the last chapter was now the most vital of all—the relief of Antwerp.

Lord Kitchener did not make things easy for me.

Keenly desirous to influence the course of operations, his telegrams followed one after another each containing "directions" regarding a local situation of which, in London, he could know very little.

For instance, in one message he told me he was communicating with General Joffre and the French Government, but, as he did not do so through me, I was quite unaware of what was passing between them, yet all the time he was urging me to make what I knew to be impracticable suggestions to General Joffre. This could only lead to misunderstandings and confusion of ideas, and I must repudiate any responsibility whatever for what happened in the north during the first ten days

of October. I was explicitly told by the Secretary of State for War that the British troops operating there were not under my command, as the following telegram shows :

"Have already given Rawlinson temporary rank. I am sending him instructions regarding his action Antwerp. The troops employed there will not for the present be considered part of your force."

Rawlinson, I may remark, had been sent for to meet the 7th Division at Ostend and take command of it.

Had I been left to exercise my full functions as Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in France, I should certainly have made different dispositions with regard to the disposal of these troops. I regret that I must record my deliberate opinion that the best which could have been done throughout this critical situation was *not* done, owing entirely to Lord Kitchener's endeavour to unite in himself the separate and distinct *rôles* of a Cabinet Minister in London and a Commander-in-Chief in France. I feel it only right and in the interest of my country, with a view to any war we may be engaged in in the future, to make this plain statement of fact. The calamity at Sedan was due in part to interference from Paris with the Army in the field, and the American Civil War was more than probably prolonged by the repeated interference on the part of the Secretary of State with the Commanders in the field.

As to the method of employing the 7th Infantry and 3rd Cavalry Divisions, the following telegram will show that the French Commander-in-Chief completely concurred in my views :

"General Commanding-in-Chief to Col. Huguet, October 8th, 8.45 a.m. :

"The Commander-in-Chief has the honour to inform Marshal French that he entirely agrees with the ideas on the subject of employing the whole of the British Forces united.

"He estimates that, in the actual situation of Antwerp, the reinforcement of the garrison by the 7th English Division will not have any effect on the fate of the place.

"In these conditions he believes on the contrary that it is very advantageous that this English Division should unite as early as possible with the main body of the British Forces in the northern zone.

"Will the Marshal be kind enough to inform Lord Kitchener of the Commander-in-Chief's views of the situation?"

"He will ask the President of the Republic to confirm these views to the British War Minister."

As to the confusion of ideas to which I have referred, the following telegram which I found it necessary to address to the Commander of the 7th Division, Sir

Henry Rawlinson, will show that it existed up to the 11th instant :

"Your message No. 19, addressed to Lord Kitchener and repeated to me, received. I really do not understand whether you regard yourself as under my orders or not; but if you do, please be good enough to explain your situation clearly without delay, as I have no knowledge of any necessity for your re-embarkation or of your intention to do so.

"Hazebrouck will be in occupation of the 3rd Corps tomorrow morning.

"Be good enough to answer me by some means at once, as my own and General Joffre's plans are much put out and perhaps compromised by all this misunderstanding."

To this Rawlinson replied that he was under my orders, and proceeded to give me the information I requested.

Such, then, was the general atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty in which I had to work after the fall of Antwerp until towards the 10th of the month (October), when at length the Secretary of State for War consented to allow me full liberty of action to direct the movements of all British Forces in France.

Some 3,000 marines had been landed in Dunkirk towards the end of September and, when Antwerp was threatened, Lord Kitchener—saying nothing of it to

me—arranged with General Joffre that the latter should send one or two French Territorial Divisions to join them and act with them.

The first intimation I had of this was a wire from Lord Kitchener, received late at night on October 3rd, which ran as follows :

"I do not know when the two Divisions promised by the French Government from Havre will be able to start.

"Could you ascertain this and let me know your views on the situation and how you contemplate acting ?"

To this I replied in the early hours of the 4<sup>th</sup> :

"I do not know what has passed direct between English and French Governments, but French General Headquarters told me positively in answer to repeated enquiry that they are only sending one Territorial Division from Havre to Ostend, which they say is to start at once by sea.

"With reference to the last sentence in your message 1315, please refer to my message F272 dispatched last night at 7.30. I shall get report from officer I sent yesterday to Bruges and Antwerp directly and will wire again."

That part of my message F272 (referred to above), which bears on the subject, runs as follows :

"French wish us to use Boulogne for 7th Division and Cavalry to disembark.... I am strongly averse to sending

any troops inside the fortress (of Antwerp) even if they could be got there."

General Joffre's telegram for me of October 8th has already been quoted, and I had previously been in constant communication with him on this subject. When I dispatched telegram F272 I knew that Joffre's views accorded with my own.

That the wishes of the Allied Commanders were ignored in London is further shown by the following message received by me from the Secretary of State for War at 2.30 p.m. on October 4<sup>th</sup> :

"I am embarking 7th Division and portion of Cavalry Division to-day, but I cannot get report from Antwerp on the military situation from which I can decide where they should be disembarked.

"My present opinion is Zeebrugge, where there are good landing facilities. Can you send Rawlinson by motor to Antwerp to take charge and study the situation before the troops arrive ?"

This message was amplified by the following message which was sent later in the day :

"I am arranging following Expeditionary Force for relief Antwerp :

#### BRITISH FORCE:

"7th Division, under Gen. Capper, 18,000 men, 63 guns; Cavalry Division, under Gen. Byng, 4,000 men,



12 guns. To arrive at Zeebrugge October 6th and October 7th.

"Naval detachments under Gen. Alston, 8,000 men, already there; also naval and military heavy guns and detachments already sent. Headquarters Staff will be subsequently notified.

#### FRENCH FORCE:

"Territorial Division, Gen. Roy, 15,000 men, proper complement guns and two squadrons to arrive Ostend October 6th to October 9th; Fusiliers Marins Brigade under Rear-Admiral Ronarch, 8,000 men; grand total, 53,000 men. Numbers are approximately correct."

In order to summarise the situation as it was reflected in my mind at this time, I will quote two more telegrams.

Lord Kitchener wired on the early morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> :

"Please let me have a telegraphic appreciation of the situation of the Allied Forces for information of the Government."

To which the following reply was sent :

"Allied line extends from La Bassée, about 14 miles south-west of Lille on the left, through Arras, east of Albert, Bray-sur-Somme, west of Roye, Ribécourt, Nampcelle, Nouvron, Soissons, north of Bray-en-Laonnois, Craonnelle, Berry-au-Bac, then south

of Rheims, then east to Verdun, then south to St. Mihiel, then east to Thiaucourt.

"On the extreme left is the 21st French Corps, with two Cavalry Corps operating between Carvin and Lens.

"Hard fighting north of the Oise, where strength of French Force equivalent to 12 Corps and six Cavalry Divisions. Comparative quiet on the Aisne; British forces in progress of evacuating positions and moving north of the Somme near Abbeville; move should be completed by the 20th instant.

"The German line extends from about Lille, roughly parallel to the Allies, west of Bapaume, Chaulnes, Roye, south of Noyon, thence along the hills north of the Aisne to Craonne, Brimont, Nogent-l'Abbesse, Somme Py, north-east of Verdun, where it turns south to Fresnes-en-Woevre, then to near St. Mihiel, Thiaucourt, and east of Thiaucourt.

"The strength of the Germans north of the Oise is probably 11 Corps and nine Cavalry Divisions in position. In addition to the above forces, one Brigade was detraining at Cambrai yesterday, and reserve troops are holding entrenched positions about Mons and Valenciennes, numbers variously reported from 50,000 to 70,000.

"The object of the Allies is to bring about a retirement of the Germans from their present line by turning their north flank, and at the same time to hold in this theatre of operations as many German Corps as possible.

French General Headquarters anticipated that the northern turning movement would have been facilitated by the close co-operation of the Belgian Field Army.

"So far as I am able to have an object apart from the general French view of the situation, I place the relief of Antwerp as of first importance as regards forces under my command."

Lord Kitchener had dispatched these troops *en route* to Antwerp itself before he even asked me for an appreciation of the general situation.

The history of the rapid investment and fall of Antwerp, the evacuation of Ostend and Zeebrugge and the retreat of the Belgians to the Yser, is very well known now, and it is not my intention to go over the ground again here; but I feel sure that, had the views of the Commanders in the field (Joffre and myself) been accepted, a much better and easier situation would have been created.

It is perfectly clear that the operations for the relief of Antwerp should never have been directed from London.

It should have been left entirely in the hands of the French Commander-in-Chief (or in mine acting with him) to decide upon the dispositions and destination of the troops immediately they left British shores. We alone were in a position to judge as to the best methods by which to co-ordinate the objectives and distribute the troops between the northern and southern theatres.

As things actually turned out, the troops which were landed at Ostend and Zeebrugge had (to quote from General Joffre's wire to Huguet on October 8th) no influence on the fate of the fortress, and what help they were in protecting the retreat of the Belgians and saving that Army from destruction might have been equally well rendered from a safer and more effective direction. This would not have necessitated that dangerous and exhausting flank march, costing such terrible loss, by which alone they were able eventually to unite with the main British forces.

Dispatched from England on October 5th or 6th, and disembarking at Calais or Boulogne (Dunkirk could have been used if the Belgian Army had required more help), they would have deployed six or seven days later in the valley of the Lys south of the 3rd Corps, and Lille might have been saved.

It is quite possible also to conceive a situation starting from these preliminary dispositions, which would have resulted in saving Ostend, even Zeebrugge and that line of coast, the possession of which by the enemy, dating from October, 1914, was a source of such infinite trouble to us.

Although I was given no voice in these Antwerp dispositions, and was left in partial ignorance of what was going on, which, in my position as Commander-in-Chief, was deplorable—I took what steps I could to keep in close touch with the progress of events.

Colonel Bridges of the 4th Dragoon Guards was with his regiment in the Cavalry Division. He had formerly been Military Attaché in Brussels and understood the Belgians well. He had already greatly distinguished himself in earlier battles, and I sent for him.

Bridges commenced the War as a squadron commander, and it will always be a matter of deep gratification to me that I was enabled to see him in command of a Division before I gave up the Army in France.

Of tall and spare figure, his face has always struck me as that of an ideal leader of men. He has an absolute contempt of any personal danger, and was constantly putting himself in the most exposed positions, so that I was often in dread of losing him. I know he was hit slightly once or twice and said nothing about it, but on another occasion he was so severely wounded that for a day or two his life was in danger. He was calm, quiet and very deliberate in all situations, and his reports were of the utmost value. He never appeared to want anything in the way of personal comfort, was quite indifferent in any weather as to whether he slept on a bed or on the ground, and had a happy knack of seeming delighted to start on any mission however difficult and dangerous, or for any place however distant, with nothing but the clothes he stood up in.

I wish I could describe Tom Bridges better. He is a typical fighting soldier and leader, and I have entertained the deepest regard for him ever since we

first met many years ago. I certainly had hoped ere this to have seen him in command of an Army Corps.

In accordance with my instructions he arrived at my Headquarters during the night of October 3rd-4th. I dispatched him at 5 a.m. on the 4th by motor to Brussels, instructing him to get into immediate communication with the Belgian General Staff and endeavour to persuade them to hang on to Antwerp, promising support from us so soon as we could possibly get to them.

Colonel Sykes was at that time second to Sir David Henderson in command of the Royal Flying Corps. I sent him by aeroplane in the same direction, telling him to find out all he could and bring me back a report from Bridges.

I directed Sir David Henderson to establish air reconnaissances towards Antwerp, which he did.

Finally, I did my utmost to expedite the move of all the British Forces to the northern theatre. It appeared likely that there might be considerable delay in relieving the 1st Corps. I therefore dispatched Henry Wilson to General Joffre with the following note, dated October 4th, 1914 :

"With reference to Sir John French's note and the importance, therein dwelt upon, of the earliest possible relief of the 1st Corps from its present position, he suggests to His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief the possibility of an extension by the 18th Corps of its line

to the left, as far as the point where the Aisne Canal passes through the line of entrenchment occupied by the 1st Corps in the neighbourhood of Bray.

"In this connection Sir John French would particularly bring to the notice of His Excellency the greatly increased strength of the entrenchment by reason of the work which has been carried out during the long time it has been under occupation by the 1st Corps. He would also point out that the enemy is now much weaker than before, and that such feeble attempts as he makes on the line of entrenchment are entirely in the nature of reconnaissances, with a view to discover whether the entrenchment is still held or not. Another consideration of importance is that the line now held by the 18th Corps and French troops attached to it is much less in extent than that occupied by the British 1st Corps.

"In these circumstances Sir John French trusts that His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief will be able to give such orders as will ensure the troops occupying the portion of the line extending from the right of the British entrenchment to the canal being relieved by troops from the 18th Corps, the change to be carried out on the night of 6th-7th October."

To this General Joffre replied as follows :

"General Wilson has been good enough to convey the desire expressed by His Excellency Marshal French to see the whole of the British Army follow the move of the 2nd Army Corps to the left wing of the Allies line.

"The Commander-in-Chief has the honour to state that he will endeavour to satisfy this request, but as already stated in Note No. 159 of October 1st the movement of the British troops can only be carried out in succession.

"The heavy task with which the railway service is at present burdened, and the difficulty of immediately replacing on the front all the British units employed there, render it impossible to contemplate the simultaneous withdrawal of all the British forces.

"A French Division will arrive to-morrow in the area of Soissons. Its billeting area is fixed by the G.O.C. 6th Army and it is intended to relieve the 3rd Army Corps. When this Corps has been withdrawn from the front it will march to the area Compiègne—Longueil—Pont Ste. Maxence, where it will entrain in its turn. The route to be followed can be decided upon by agreement with the G.O.C. 6th Army. Admitting that the relief can be carried out on the night, October 5th-6th, the 3rd Corps, taking three days to march to the neighbourhood of Pont Ste. Maxence, will be ready to entrain on October 9th.

"With regard to the movement of the 1st Army Corps it is impossible at present to decide the date at which its withdrawal can be carried out. Indeed, its withdrawal will depend on the general situation, the difficulty of bringing up other troops to be taken from the front to replace the 1st Army Corps, and finally on the tasks imposed on the railway service, but the Commander-in-



Chief begs once more to assure Marshal French that he will make the greatest efforts to concentrate the whole of the British Army in the north. He takes note that the Commander of the British troops wishes to see his forces concentrated with all speed.

"The 1st Cavalry Division will move by march route as has already been done by Gen. Gough's Division.

"Regarding the detrainment area, Lille was first of all regarded as the centre, but in view of existing circumstances it appears difficult to determine as yet in what area the 2nd Corps now in course of transport can be detrained. This Corps will have finished detraining on the 8th and will be ready to act on the 9th. The most favourable area for detraining appears to be that of St. Omer-Hazebrouck.

"The 3rd Corps, having been withdrawn from the front on the 6th and entraining on the 9th, will be detrained on the 12th in the same area. It will be ready to act on the 13th.

"Lastly, the Commander-in-Chief reiterates the request already made in the note of October 1st that the 7th British Division may be disembarked at Boulogne with the least possible delay. As soon as this Division has been assembled, it will move by march route to join the 2nd and 3rd Corps. No precise indications can be given as to the date on which this junction will be effected, as it will depend on the date of arrival in France of the 7th

Division, which date the Commander-in-Chief is not in a position to decide.

"The Indian Divisions will join the British Army as soon as desired by Marshal French.

"In order to strengthen the forces in this part of the theatre of operations the request made to the French Government by His Excellency Lord Kitchener has been responded to by sending to Dunkirk two Territorial Divisions, one going from Havre by sea and the other railed from Paris without in any way retarding the movement of the British Army.

"These are the dispositions that have been made with regard to the movements to be carried out in the immediate future. The Commander-in-Chief, however, wishes to lay particular stress on the following considerations. The operations in progress necessitate the constant reinforcement of our left wing by troops taken away from different portions of the front. The movements carried out at Marshal French's request, which can only be effected in succession will result :

- "*Firstly*.—In temporarily dividing the British Army in two.
- "*Secondly*.—In preventing for nearly ten days all movement of French troops to the north and, in consequence, creating a serious delay in the realisation of the operations contemplated.

"Now it is of capital importance for the success of the operations that all movements made to the north, either English or French, should immediately contribute to the same object, viz., to arrest and outflank the German right wing. The result will certainly not be achieved should His Excellency Marshal French propose to defer his action until all his forces are concentrated. It would be advantageous to have time enough to complete the English movement so that the British Army could be engaged all at once, but it appears certain that events will decide otherwise.

"The Commander-in-Chief may be forced to ask Marshal French to co-operate with British Divisions as they detrain and without waiting for the whole of the detrainment to be carried out. He would be obliged to consider the case of the retreat of the left wing, the extent of which he would not be in a position to limit, if with the object of carrying out a concentration which, though certainly advantageous, is not indispensable, some Divisions remained inactive at the time when the fate of the campaign was being decided; moreover, it is to be noted that the enemy on his side engages as he detrains; we cannot act differently.

"The Commander-in-Chief feels sure that His Excellency Marshal French will be good enough to examine this question of capital importance with all the attention it deserves, and will take the necessary action without which the gravest consequences must be faced.

"To sum up, the Commander-in-Chief has the honour to submit to His Excellency Marshal French the following points on which he begs His Excellency may be good enough to give a prompt reply :

"1. Transport of the 2nd Army Corps to the same area, Hazebrouck, completed the 9th.

"2. Transport of the 3rd Corps to the same area, completed the 13th.

"3. Lastly, and this is the essential point, without which the fate of the campaign may be compromised, the possibility of engaging the British Divisions in the north as they arrive, without waiting for the British Army to be concentrated.

"The task of the British Army now in the general operations should, therefore, be constantly to prolong the general line as it detains, in order to outflank the enemy and thus to join hands with the Belgian Army.

"The support of our Cavalry Corps operating in the northern area will always be given."

I answered thus :

"Sir John French has duly received His Excellency's note 791 for which he begs to offer him his best thanks.

"The arrangements therein proposed are perfectly satisfactory, and the *rôle* which the British Army can fulfil on the left flank of the Allied Force will, Sir John

French hopes and believes, tend best to the efficient progress of the campaign.

"He can assure His Excellency of the very best support of the British Army at all times; and, should necessity arise, the various units, as they arrive in the new area, will on no account be held back to await a general concentration, if and when their immediate action is demanded by the exigencies of the campaign.

"Sir John French would like to point out particularly to His Excellency that the possibility of his having to engage his forces, unit by unit, before the entire force is concentrated, offers another great reason why it is most essential that the relief of the 1st Army Corps from its present position should be effected with the least possible delay.

"Whilst feeling quite assured that His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief will do his utmost to effect this, Sir John French feels that it is most necessary to insist upon the vast importance of the presence of all the British Forces on the left flank at the earliest possible moment.

"His Majesty's Government feel great anxiety as to the condition of the Fortress of Antwerp, the fall of which stronghold would have far-reaching consequences, political, material and moral.

"Sir John French is now in close daily communication with the Belgian Commandant of the Fortress, and if he can daily assure him that there is no delay in a

movement which must have the ultimate effect of relieving the situation at Antwerp, so long as that place is able to hold out, it should prove a great encouragement to the garrison.

"Sir John French will address another note later on to His Excellency on the subject of the Indian Divisions.

"Sir John French wishes to call His Excellency's attention to the fact that the 2nd Corps will not complete its detrainment until the evening of the 9th instant, and therefore will not be ready to act until the 10th instant. In his memorandum His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief states as follows, referring to the 2nd Corps: This Corps will have finished detraining on the 8th and will be ready to act on the 9th."

Antwerp fell on the 9th October and was followed by the retirement of the Belgian Army to the line of the Yser.

The 7th Infantry and 3rd Cavalry Divisions were not placed under my orders until October 10th. From that date, however, I will commence to chronicle their doings.