

1914, by John French, *Viscount of Ypres*

CHAPTER XIII

THE BATTLE OF YPRES

*Fourth and Final Phase, November 11th to the end of
the Battle*

Each of the four phases into which I have divided this very brief and incomplete narrative of the Battle of Ypres is marked by one important and far-reaching crisis.

In the beginning of the battle came the arrest of the German advance on the Channel ports, and the brilliant repulse of the enemy back to the Lys by the cavalry under Allenby and the 3rd Corps under Pulteney. The second phase is distinguished by the crisis of October 31st, while in the third phase occurs the memorable stand of the cavalry and other troops under Allenby on the Wytschaete—Messines ridge.

The great feature of the fourth and last phase was the desperate assaults made against the Ypres salient on the 11th and 12th November, in which the flower of the Prussian Guard participated, having received the Emperor's personal command to make certain of finally breaking our line.

It was in the same conference room at Cassel in which I had been with Foch on the 8th, and where, as I have said, we mutually indulged in day-dreams of imminent victory, that, on the evening of November 10th, I received the reports which warned me that another great crisis was at hand.

Foch informed me that an attack on a great scale had just begun against his line between Ypres and the sea. He had received reliable reports that the enemy had brought up five fresh corps from the south. He said that the Germans had already gained possession of the village of Dixmude, but had not yet crossed the Yser, which French Marines and Belgians were holding against them. He added that he was being heavily pressed and was losing ground near Langemarck, and declared that he must move Conneau's Cavalry Division (holding the line opposite Messines) north to support him, and he asked me to put Allenby in to relieve Conneau. I agreed to this, and gave orders accordingly.

Early on the morning of the 11th, Haig reported that his position was being heavily shelled, and that he was threatened with a powerful attack. Two fresh German Army Corps had come up in his front, namely, the Guard and the XVth.

In short, the Germans were about to deliver their final desperate blow, which they hoped and believed would at last open up to them the road to the sea.

The situation was met by Haig with the same grim determination, steadfast courage and skilful forethought which had characterised his handling of the operations throughout. A volume might easily be written of this day's fighting of November 11th, but it is only possible in these pages to glance at the particular points in the line of battle where the fighting was fiercest, and where the issues were most vital at different hours of the day.

Up the Menin road came the first tremendous onslaught at 9.30 a.m. on the front held by the 1st (Guards), 7th, and 15th Brigades. At the first clash of arms the Germans pierced our line with a rush. This was splendidly disputed by the Royal Fusiliers under McMahan, their devoted and gallant leader, who was killed; while the battalion was almost annihilated. Reserves, however, quickly came up, counter-attacks were organised and delivered, and the line was re-established.

About noon the critical point changed to the right at the canal, where the French were driven out of their trenches and fell back on Verbranden Molen. General Vidal called on our 1st Corps for support and help. The heavy fighting in the neighbourhood of the Menin road had used up most of his reserves, and the enemy were still clinging to the woods in that part of the line and threatening renewed attacks; but, in spite of this, Haig was able to render the French sufficient help to enable them to make a little headway, though the situation in

this part of the line was in doubt and caused anxiety all day.

About 1.30 p.m. a fresh attack of great violence was delivered further north against the 5th Brigade. This was thrown back mainly by our artillery fire.

About 3 p.m. the enemy began to mass in the woods about the Menin road, near the centre of our line. On attempting to advance, however, they were caught between two fires, from the north-east and south-west, the Oxfordshire L.I. and the Northhamptons turning them out of the woods at the point of the bayonet.

Severe fighting went on till nightfall, units becoming much intermixed. The losses were very heavy indeed, the 1st (Guards) Brigade mustering at night only four officers and 300 men.

The final result of this magnificent defence was that the attack was repulsed with terrible loss to the enemy, and the original line practically held throughout, save for the loss of some few and unimportant trenches.

Brigadier-General FitzClarence, V.C., to whom reference has already been made, was killed. His name has justly become famous for many gallant deeds, but more particularly in connection with the crisis of October 31st.

The success of this great defence, like those which preceded it, was due in the first place to the quick grasp of the situation by Sir Douglas Haig, who so skilfully

handled the scanty forces at his disposal, and economised his few reserves with such soldierlike foresight. Mutual support at critical moments was ensured by the wholehearted co-operation of commanders of all units, great and small.

No words can express my sense of the gratitude which the country owes to the young officers, to the non-commissioned officers, and to the rank and file of this invincible army. When all has been said, it was their courage and endurance which spoke the last word.

Whilst we were thus fully occupied about the Menin road, the French were also being attacked all along their line to the north of Ypres, but the enemy was held off.

In accordance with the arrangements made with Foch, the Cavalry Corps took over the line opposite Messines on the morning of the 11th, when Conneau's cavalry marched north. Allenby was reinforced by two battalions of the 8th Division, these battalions being replaced by two Territorial battalions.

In the evening de Lisle's (1st) Cavalry Division was sent to reinforce Haig, to whom were also dispatched the Hertfordshire Territorial battalion and two yeomanry regiments from St. Omer.

The situation north of Hollebeke at the canal (which the Germans had now crossed) was a source of much anxiety to me, and I made strong representations to Foch as to the necessity of strengthening his troops at

that important point. He promised to reinforce Vidal at once with three battalions of chasseurs.

On the evening of the 11th, Field-Marshal Lord Roberts arrived at my Headquarters on a visit, accompanied by his daughter, Lady Aileen (now Countess) Roberts. It is needless to say with what enthusiasm the Field-Marshal was welcomed everywhere.

The martial fire, which was the life-long characteristic of this great soldier, burnt as brightly within him during these last few days of his life as when he earned his Victoria Cross on the eastern battlefields over 60 years before. His presence, particularly at this critical time, in the midst of the army he loved so well—love which they returned to the full—acted as a timely inspiration and incentive to our weary and hard-pressed troops.

That the tremendous energy of the great soldier remained unimpaired to the last was proved to me on the night of his arrival. He dined at my Headquarters' mess, and after dinner I had a long conversation with him on the situation. It was getting late, and I suggested that, as he had a hard day before him on the morrow, he should go to his quarters and get some rest.

He asked me when I generally got to bed. I told him that I took rest when I could, but never knew exactly when it would be possible. I added as an example of this that a conference was fixed for that night between 12 and 1 o'clock, when we hoped all the reports would be

in. Nothing that I urged could dissuade him from remaining up and attending that conference, which he followed with his usual clearness of mind and acute perception, although it lasted into the small hours of the morning.

The early dawn of the next day saw him perfectly fresh, going out to visit his beloved Indians.

On the evening of Friday the 13th the Field-Marshal was suddenly taken very ill on his return home from visiting troops in the front, and he died on Saturday, the 14th, at about 8 p.m.

On the morning of Tuesday, November 17th, a military funeral service was held at St. Omer, which was attended by everyone who could get there. Generals Foch and de Maud'huy represented the French Army. The Indian Princes attached to the Indian Corps were also present, and the Maharajah Sir Pertab Singh took his place on the motor hearse and acted as a personal guard over the remains of the great chief on his last sad journey to England.

General de Maud'huy paid an impressive tribute to the dead Field-Marshal in the following General Order which he issued to the 10th Army, dated November 16th, 1914.

"General Order No 44.

"Lord Roberts, Field-Marshal in the British Army, died yesterday at General Headquarters of the British Army.

"The illustrious conqueror of Afghanistan and South Africa had come, in spite of his great age, to visit the battlefields where at the present time his valiant soldiers are fighting. Up to the moment when death struck him down, he pursued the object to which he devoted his whole life, the greatness of England.

"The General Commanding the 10th Army is voicing the feeling of all ranks under his command, both officers and men alike, when he says to Marshal French and to the General Officer Commanding the Indian Corps, that the 10th Army fully shares in the mourning of our Allies to-day.

"May the example afforded by the famous British Marshal up to the end be understood and felt by us all. Lord Roberts has died in an hour of mighty battles, in the midst of the troops which he loved so well. No end can be more enviable, none more glorious for a soldier.

(Signed) "DE
MAUD'HUY."

During the 12th the enemy attempted renewed attacks on either flank of the 1st Corps, but was repulsed with great loss. Although the troops holding the Ypres salient were hard pressed and got little rest until they were relieved by the French, still it may be said that these attacks were practically the last of the really determined

and nearly successful efforts made by the Germans during the First Battle of Ypres.

The French were able to retake some of the ground they had lost, although the enemy still held on to Dixmude.

From November 12th onwards, the chief anxiety I had was to get relief and rest for the troops which had been fighting so desperately in the Ypres salient, particularly the 1st Corps. I had long interviews with Foch, and represented to him the necessity for French troops to take over the whole of the ground there, at any rate for a time. At first he said there would be a great difficulty in doing this; but finally he promised to meet my wishes and agreed to start carrying out the relief on Sunday, the 15th, at latest.

On this I told Haig that no more troops would be sent to him, but that he would be gradually withdrawn into reserve as he was relieved by French troops. The 1st Corps troops were to be withdrawn before any others, and brought into reserve as quickly as possible.

Foch was as good as his word. On the night of the 15th, the French 9th Corps took over some of Haig's trenches and released two brigades of the 1st Division, as well as some artillery. These all came into reserve on the 16th at Locre and Westoutre.

On the 13th our front on the Ypres salient was heavily shelled from 10 a.m., and infantry attacks commenced at 1 p.m. up the Menin road and against the 6th and 7th

Brigades (1st Batt. The King's (Liverpool) Regt.,
2nd Batt. S. Staffs Regt., 1st Batt. R. Berks Regt.,
1st Batt. K.R.R. and 3rd Batt. Worcester Regt.;
2nd Batt. S. Lancs, 1st Batt. Wilts Regt., and
2nd Batt. R. Irish Rifles). The latter had their line
broken, but it was restored by a counter-attack. The
enemy lost heavily.

Heavy attacks were made early on the 14th against the
9th Brigade (1st Batt. Northumberland Fusiliers,
4th Batt. Royal Fusiliers, 1st Batt. Lincs Regt. and
1st Batt. R. Scots Fusiliers) in the same area, and later
these developed along the whole front, but the Germans
were everywhere driven back.

On the 15th the Indian Corps became heavily engaged
between Armentières and La Bassée. Some trenches
were lost and regained during the day, and the enemy
made no progress.

On the early morning of this day a very gallant piece
of work was carried out on our Ypres front by a
storming party which was led by Co.-Sergt.-
Major Gibbon of the 5th Battn. Northumberland
Fusiliers. On the previous evening the enemy had
gained possession of some buildings within our line. A
gun was brought up by a cleverly-concealed route to the
closest range, the buildings were battered down and our
position restored at the point of the bayonet.

On the 17th the Ypres salient was again the scene of
heavy encounters. There was severe fighting, but we

had a very successful day, inflicting great loss on the enemy south of the Menin road.

The 21st marked the end of the Battle of Ypres, and I had the satisfaction of seeing our troops completely evacuate the Ypres salient. The whole of the 1st Corps and the cavalry were in reserve. The fourteen battalions of the 2nd Corps, which had been moved up to support the 1st Corps in the north, marched to rejoin their Corps north of Bailleul.

I cannot close the narrative of this great battle without particularly emphasising the part which was played by the 1st Corps. They were thrown in suddenly to fill up the gap through which the Germans were preparing to pour in troops in order to seize the Channel seaboard. They were called upon to advance and make good their ground in the teeth of numbers three or four times their own strength and against a much more powerful artillery. For five weeks they fought day and night continuously against vastly superior forces, and against artillery always far above their own in strength and numbers.

In the great campaigns of the past we find special units singled out and handed down to fame, such as "The Light Division" under Crawford in the Peninsular War or "The Brandenburg Corps" under Prince Frederick Charles of Prussia in the Franco-German War of 1870. I think we may rest assured that history will label the 1st

British Corps in this war with some such distinguished sobriquet. Well and truly did they earn it.

I append the record of the losses of the 1st Corps in the battle up to November 21st, when they were relieved. It speaks more eloquently than any words of mine of the great *rôle* it played in this tremendous struggle.

FRANCE.
CASUALTIES OF THE FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES.
FIRST CORPS' LOSSES

	Killed (including Died of Wounds and Died other causes)		Wounded		Missing (including Prisoners)		Total	
	Off.	O.R.	Off.	O.R.	Off.	O.R.	Off.	O.R.
1st Corps (1st and 2nd Divisions), Oct 15th to Dec 21st, 1914, inclusive.	127	1,666	316	7,669	74	3,663	517	12,998
7th Division (Oct 27th to Nov 7th, 1914), inclusive.	49	425	114	1,328	83	1,644	246	3,397 +11 731 +12 765
7th Brigade (less 3rd Worcesters, but including 1st Gordons), Nov 5th to 20th, inclusive.	8	91	12	315	—	94	20	500 +31 327
9th Brigade (less 1st Scots Fusiliers, but including 2nd K.O.S.B.), Nov 5th to 20th; 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers, Nov. 10th to 20th.	3	110	16	358	4	393	23	861 +11 310 +15 131
15th Brigade (viz., 1st Bedfords, 1st Cheshires, with 2nd Duke of Wellington's added Nov. 5th to 20th; 1st R.W. Kent and 2nd K.O.Y.L.L., Nov. 12th to 20th).	10	128	18	420	5	275	33	823
56th Field Coy Divisional Mounted Troops of 3rd and 5th Divisions, Nov. 12th to 20th.	—	4	—	27	—	—	—	31
Total	197	2,424	476	10,117	166	6,069	839	18,610 +2,264

C2 Cas—6/11/17.

Footnote 1: 2nd Scots Fusiliers, unclassified, 27/10 to 4/11/14.

Footnote 2: 1st S. Staffs, unclassified, 20/10 to 7/11.

Footnote 3: 2nd S. Lancs, unclassified, 20/10 to 24/10.

Footnote 4: 4th Royal Fusiliers, unclassified, 11/11/14.

Footnote 5: 1st Scots Fusiliers, unclassified, 10 to 12/11.