

1914, by John French, *Viscount of Ypres*

CHAPTER XV

A REVIEW OF THE ALLIED PLANS IN THE WEST AT THE CLOSE OF THE FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES.

At this time all our ideas in regard to the framing of plans in the West were evolved and guided almost entirely by the progress of the campaign in Poland and Galicia.

After the battle of the Marne, when we were at the Aisne, we were still hopeful of effecting a great flanking movement which should lead to more or less decisive results, or at least clear Northern France and Belgium of the enemy's troops. It has been shown how the development of events obliged us to modify our hopes and anticipations until, at the close of the first battle of Ypres, we certainly felt at our own G.H.Q. that the Allied Forces in Great Britain, France and Belgium, could effect nothing of importance unless and until one of two things happened.

Either there must be a considerable augmentation of our forces, including a vastly increased supply of heavy artillery, machine guns, trench artillery and ammunition — or, the enemy's forces on the Western front must be so weakened by the necessity of sending troops to stem the Russian advance in the East, as to enable the Allies

with their available forces to assume the offensive with success.

Now the only resources in regard to *personnel* upon which the Allies at that time had to depend for any considerable accession of strength was the British "New Army," whose entry into the line of battle must perforce be gradual. It could not be expected to make its weight felt for a long time to come.

After the fall of Antwerp I realised that, by taking up our position on the extreme left flank we should find ourselves very near to the coast, and a good opportunity would be afforded of gaining the co-operation of the Fleet. In other words, the paramount thought in my mind was that the British and Belgian forces, co-operating with the British Fleet, should constitute in themselves the left flank of the Allied line in the West.

Whilst on the Aisne I had a visit from Mr. Winston Churchill, who was then First Lord of the Admiralty. He arrived on the night of September 26th and left on the 28th. Winston Churchill had been for several years one of my most intimate friends. I saw much of him during the South African War, but it was not until about 1905 or 1906 that I really got to know him well. His complex character is as difficult to describe as it is to analyse. To those who do not understand him, the impetuous disposition, which is one of his strongest characteristics, is apt to throw into shadow the indomitable courage, tireless energy, marvellous perspicuity and quick virile

brain-power which are the main features of Winston Churchill's extraordinary personality.

His experience and knowledge of public affairs must be unrivalled; for, at an age when most men are undergoing the grinding drudgery which falls to the lot of nearly all successful statesmen, lawyers, soldiers or ecclesiastics, he was holding the highest offices in the Government; and not even his most inveterate enemies can say that he has failed to leave his mark for good on every department he has supervised.

Possessing a combative nature, he engages constantly in political strife which is marked by the sharpest controversy, and it is, therefore, perhaps only his intimate friends who know the real manly, generous kindness of his disposition and his perfect loyalty.

The perspective of history will show the part he has played throughout the Great War to have been consistently constructive and of direct value to the nation.

His visit to my Headquarters at this time was productive of great good. The Government were getting nervous of the military situation and of the arrest of our forward advance. With his characteristic energy and activity, Churchill visited and examined every part of the battlefield, and what he saw and heard put him in a position to send reassuring information to his colleagues.

I discussed with him fully my views as to the desirability of establishing the British Forces in a theatre where they could co-operate with the Navy and link up with the troops in Belgium. We examined the possibility of a failure to effect a decisive turning movement, and agreed in thinking that, in the last resort, we might still be able, with the flank support of the Fleet, to snatch from the enemy's possession the Belgian coast-line as far, at any rate, as Zeebrugge.

When he left me on September 28th it was with a complete understanding that he would prepare the Navy to fulfil this *rôle*, and a few extracts from letters which I subsequently received from him will show how well he redeemed his promise.

On October 26th he writes :

"... But, my dear friend, I do trust you will realise how damnable it will be if the enemy settles down for the winter along lines which comprise Calais, Dunkirk, or Ostend. There will be continual alarms and greatly added difficulties. We must have him off the Belgian coast even if we cannot recover Antwerp.

"I am getting old ships with heavy guns ready, protected by barges with nets against submarines, so as to dispute the whole seaboard with him. On the 31st inst. the "Revenge," with four 13-1/2-in. guns, can come into action if required, and I have a regular fleet of monitors now organised, which, they all say, have hit

the Germans hard this week, a fleet which is getting stronger every day.

"If you could gain a passage off to the left, I could give you overwhelming support from the sea, and there you will have a flank which certainly they cannot turn...."

In a letter dated November 22nd, again :

"... If you push your left flank along the sand-dunes of the shore to Ostend and Zeebrugge, we would give you 100 or 200 heavy guns from the sea in absolutely devastating support. For four or five miles inshore we could make you perfectly safe and superior. Here, at least, you have their flank, if you care to use it; and surely, the coast strip, held and fed well with troops, would clear the whole line out about Dixmude and bend it right back, if it did not clear it altogether.

"... We could bring men in at Ostend or Zeebrugge to reinforce you in a hard south-eastward push. There is no limit to what could be done by the extreme left-handed push and swoop along the Dutch frontier.... In a few hours I could have fifty 12-in. guns and seventy 6-in. firing on the enemy's right and rear. It is difficult for submarines to attack because of the sandbanks...."

On December 7th the First Lord was again my guest at G.H.Q. We discussed the situation, and were completely in agreement as to the advisability of my projected coastal advance and close co-operation with

the Fleet. I told him there was fear of disagreement with the French, and that political difficulties would certainly arise. He said he did not think that they were insuperable, and shortly after our conversation he left for England, promising to arrange everything with the Prime Minister and Kitchener.

Then came his letter, despatched on December 8th, after he had seen his colleagues in the Cabinet:

"... Kitchener agrees entirely with your view. We held an immediate conference with the Prime Minister and Sir Edward Grey, and, as the result, the strongest possible telegram is being drafted. The Admiralty attach the greatest importance to the operation and will aid in every way. We are already making the necessary preparations on an extensive scale. Later I will let you have very full and clear details. The combination must be perfect.

"Kitchener proposes to let you have the 27th Division in time ... I hope you will continue to press the new plan hard, both here at home and on the French Generals."

I quote in full Sir Edward Grey's telegram, dated December 9th, to Sir Francis Bertie at Bordeaux:

"The military situation points to the advisability of shortly taking steps to prevent the Germans withdrawing their best first-line troops from the Western theatre for employment against Russia and replacing them by second-rate troops.

"As some forward movement to achieve this object may be decided on, I desire to bring to the serious attention of the French Government the very strong opinion held by His Majesty's Government that British troops should be so placed in the line as to advance along the coast in immediate co-operation with our Fleet, and thus enable us, if necessary, to land further forces at any critical juncture during the operation.

"To obtain this result a slight change in the present position of Sir John French's forces in the line would be necessary.

"The British troops would have to be moved to the left of the Allied line, being replaced in their present position by the French troops now on the left. They would thus be again taking up the position in the line they held after moving from Soissons.

"I would point out to the French Government that the people of this country realise that the Belgian coastal positions are now held by Germany as a menace to Great Britain. They would, therefore, regard any losses entailed by an active offensive taken by our troops against these coastal positions as fully justified. British public opinion will even demand that the menace should be removed, for the forts on the coast of Belgium are being prepared as a base of operations by sea and air against Great Britain especially, and this may in time hamper the safe transport of fresh troops from England to France.

"Moreover, we feel sure that our co-operation with any contemplated French effort to drive the Germans back from their present positions would be rendered much more effective, and lead to more decisive and far-reaching results, if this preliminary step in the redistribution of the troops were now taken and our troops subsequently used in the manner indicated.

"His Majesty's Government consider it most urgent and important that this step should be taken, and you should ask the French Government to agree to it and to arrange with Gen. Joffre for carrying it out."

The French Government received these proposals very coldly. It was quite evident that they had no intention of leaving the British Forces in sole charge of the Allied left, but for the moment they agreed to regard the question as a military one and to refer it to General Joffre.

I had several conversations with him on the subject, but there appeared to be no disposition on his part to acquiesce in my plans.

This attitude on the part of the French was evidently well known in London, for, on December 13th, I received a letter from Winston Churchill in which he said: "Of course, we are disappointed here with the turn events have taken, but we shall do our best to help the French."

This meant that Joffre had rejected my scheme, but had substituted the idea of another kind of attack, to be

made chiefly by the French, with fewer troops, in a different direction and with quite another objective. I will return to this presently, for such an operation actually took place and proved to be a very feeble substitute for what I had intended.

Yielding thus to French representations, our Government began to weaken. Churchill adhered to his views throughout, but was not supported.

The terms of Sir Edward Grey's communication of December 9th were unanswerable. Everything which subsequently happened in the course of the war has proved it. The possession by the Germans of that strip of Belgian coast-line has been the sharpest of all thorns with which they have succeeded in pricking us. It has been one of the main causes of the prolongation of the war. Their vigorous and successful defence against all our attacks in the autumn of 1917 showed the value which they attached to the retention of this coast-line.

Lord Kitchener addressed a Memorandum to me in January, 1915, from which I quote *in extensor* :

"The questions raised in your recent Memorandum of January 3rd, 1915" — he wrote — "and in your appreciation of the situation in the various theatres of war, were considered by a War Council presided over by the Prime Minister, on Thursday, January 7th, and Friday, January 8th.

"The principal questions discussed were :

1. The proposed advance to Zeebrugge.
2. The organisation of the New Armies.
3. The possibility of employing British Forces in a different theatre to that in which they are now used.

"With regard to the proposed advance to Zeebrugge, the First Lord's telegram, No. 2623, sent to you on January 2nd, explained the difficulties imposed on the Admiralty by the development of Zeebrugge as a base for submarines, and the War Council realised that one of your principal motives in suggesting an offensive to effect the capture of Ostend and Zeebrugge was to ease the naval position.

"On a general review, however, of the whole situation, naval and military, the Council came to the conclusion that the advantages to be obtained from such an advance at the present moment would not be commensurate with the heavy losses involved, as well as the extension that would be thus caused to the lines of the Allies in Northern Flanders.

"The Council was also influenced in this conclusion by the following considerations. The first of these was that the reinforcements of 50 battalions of Territorial troops, which you considered indispensable, could only be supplied at a considerable dislocation of the organisation of the future reinforcements to be sent to you. It must be borne in mind that the original organisation of the Territorial Force included no provision for drafts. Great difficulties have already been

encountered in providing drafts for the 24 battalions already in your command; and, although arrangements for the necessary machinery to create a special reserve for the Territorials are in hand, it would not at present be possible to supply 50 more battalions with drafts without an entire reorganisation of the forces allotted to Home Defence, and this would modify the programme for reinforcements to join our Army in the future.

"The second consideration was that it is impossible at the present time to maintain a sufficient supply of gun ammunition on the scale which you considered necessary for offensive operations. Every effort is being made in all parts of the world to obtain an unlimited supply of ammunition; but, as you are well aware, the result is still far from being sufficient to maintain the large number of guns which you now have under your command adequately supplied with ammunition for offensive purposes.

"You have pointed out that offensive operations under the new conditions created by this war require a vast expenditure of artillery ammunition, which may, for even 10 or 20 days, necessitate the supply of 50 or 100 rounds per gun per day being available, and that, unless the reserve can be accumulated to meet expenditure of this sort, it is unwise to embark on extensive offensive operations against the enemy in trenches. It is, of course, almost impossible to calculate with any accuracy how long offensive operations, once undertaken, may last before the object is attained; but it

is evident that the breaking off of such operations before accomplishment, owing to the want of artillery ammunition, and not on account of a successful termination or a convenient pause in the operations having been reached, might lead to a serious reverse being sustained by our forces.

"The abandonment of the Zeebrugge project does not prevent you from co-operating to the utmost extent, compatible with your present resources, with any offensive movement contemplated by Gen. Joffre, and your previous instructions in this sense are in no way modified.

"The Council further thought that there were certain indications, which should not be neglected, of German reinforcements reaching their Armies in the Western theatre in the near future, which may lead German Commanders to undertake a fresh attempt to force the lines you and the French Army hold. If this movement should develop, it could probably be better met and defeated by holding your present lines of prepared positions than by extending the line to the Dutch frontier and placing the Belgian Army in probably a more exposed position than they now occupy. You may rest assured that, as they become available, fresh troops will be sent to you with the least possible delay to strengthen your forces as far as is practicable. The 28th Division have already received orders to leave for France on the 14th inst."

The telegram from the First Lord of the Admiralty, dated January 2nd, referred to in the above memorandum, ran as follows : "The battleship 'Formidable' was sunk this morning by a submarine in the Channel. Information from all quarters shows that the Germans are steadily developing an important submarine base at Zeebrugge. Unless operations can be undertaken to clear the coast, and particularly to capture this place, it must be recognised that the whole transportation of troops across the Channel will be seriously and increasingly compromised. The Admiralty are of the opinion that it would be possible, under cover of warships, to land a large force at Zeebrugge in conjunction with any genuine forward movement along the shore to Ostend. They wish these views, which they have so frequently put forward, to be placed again before the French Commander, and hope they may receive the consideration which their urgency and importance require."

It will be seen from this that Mr. Churchill was not in accord with the views expressed in Lord Kitchener's memorandum.

The situation was well known to the Cabinet before the despatch of Sir Edward Grey's telegram of December 9th. It is clear that the points raised in the memorandum of January 9th were excuses used as a veil to screen the disinclination of the British Government to taking a firm stand against the attitude adopted by the French. But there was something more.

Lord Kitchener's objections can be easily answered. They may be generally stated thus :

(1) That the seizure from the Germans of this strip of sea coast would not be an adequate return for the heavy losses likely to be incurred in the operation.

(2) That the line then to be held would be unduly extended.

(3) That the reinforcement of the additional troops demanded "would only be supplied at a considerable dislocation of the organisation of the future reinforcements to be sent you."

(4) That the supply of gun ammunition on the scale demanded would be impossible.

(5) That embarking on such an enterprise would prejudice our power of resisting a possible German counter-offensive in the immediate future.

My answer to (1) is this : Had we been in possession of the Belgian coast-line between Nieuport and the Dutch frontier in the early part of 1915, and had we maintained it to the end of the war, the Germans would have been deprived in a great measure of the power they have exercised throughout with such success, to prosecute their submarine campaign. Any price we might have had to pay in the way of losses would have been well worth the object attained.

In a lesser degree this may be said of the enemy's aircraft enterprises. I claim that the naval history of this war clearly bears out my contention.

As to (2), the extent of the line to be held would depend upon the degree of success attained by the operations. If we had been able to make good our advance from the left flank (between Nieuport and Dixmude) by means of powerful naval support from the sea, the least we should have effected would have been to clear the Germans out of the triangle Nieuport — Dixmude — Zeebrugge.

If the operation had then to be suspended, we should have had to hold the line Dixmude — Zeebrugge instead of Dixmude — Nieuport. In actual distance the former space is about double the latter. But our position at Zeebrugge would have afforded a large measure of naval support, and the country to the south-west of that place lends itself to inundations. This would have enabled us to occupy the north-eastern portion of the line in much less strength. Further, it was just in anticipation of such a necessity that the extra troops were asked for.

Inasmuch, however, as such a situation would have forced upon the enemy the necessity of holding a dangerous and exposed salient which could be reached on the north side by our guns from the Fleet, it is more than possible that he would have effected such a retirement as would have considerably shortened our line.

(3) This contention is disputed; but even if it were true, it is no sound military argument against embarking on an operation which promised such valuable results.

(4) There is a complete answer to this objection. Some two or three months later, large trainloads of ammunition — heavy, medium, and light — passed by the rear of the Army in France *en route* to Marseilles for shipment to the Dardanelles.

(5) The best possible means of warding off an attack is to take a strong and powerful initiative.

I cannot characterise these reasons for rejecting my plans as other than illogical, and I feel sure they must really have appeared so to their authors.

Perhaps the true explanation which underlay all this is to be found in the following Memorandum of the War Council of January 9th, 1915. It runs as follows :

THE POSSIBILITY OF EMPLOYING BRITISH FORCES IN A
DIFFERENT THEATRE THAN THAT IN WHICH THEY ARE
NOW USED.

"The Council considered carefully your remarks on this subject in reply to Lord Kitchener's letter, and came to the conclusion that, certainly for the present, the main theatre of operations for British forces should be alongside the French Army, and that this should continue as long as France was liable to successful invasion and required armed support. It was also realised that, should the offensive operations

subsequently drive the Germans out of France and back to Germany, British troops should assist in such operations. It was thought that, after another failure by Germany to force the lines of defence held by the French Army and yours, the military situation in France and Flanders might conceivably develop into one of stalemate, in which it would be impossible for German forces to break through into France, while at the same time the German defences would be impassable for offensive movements of the Allies without great loss of life and the expenditure of more ammunition than could be provided. In these circumstances, it was considered desirable to find some other theatre where such obstructions to advance would be less pronounced, and from where operations against the enemy might lead to more decisive results.

"For these reasons, the War Council decided that certain of the possible projects for pressing the war in other theatres should be carefully studied during the next few weeks, so that, as soon as the new forces are fit for action, plans may be ready to meet any eventuality that may be then deemed expedient, either from a political point of view, or to enable our forces to act with the best advantage in concert with the troops of other nations throwing in their lot with the Allies."

In fact, the idea became fixed in the minds of the War Council that a condition of stalemate was bound to occur on the Western front, and therefore other theatres

which might afford greater opportunities of prosecuting a successful offensive must be sought.

I was asked for my views as to this, and I gave them in full. Space does not allow me to quote my memorandum on the subject *in extenso*, but my ideas will be gleaned from the concluding paragraphs, which run as follows :

"Assuming however, that all the foregoing arguments are brushed aside, it remains to be seen where any effective action could be taken. The countries to be considered are the following :

"(a) *Russia*. — Impossible, as there is no means of sending an Army there, the Baltic being closed. Archangel shut in winter and unsuitable at other seasons, and Vladivostok much too far away.

"(b) *Denmark* and (c) *Holland*. — One or other of these countries would have to declare war on Germany unless her neutrality were violated, and in both cases the overseas communication would be so vulnerable to mine or torpedo attack as to be in the highest degree insecure.

"(d) *North German Coast*. — Communications would be equally vulnerable.

"(e) *Italy*. — Assumes that Italy is a friendly belligerent, in which case she would probably not require the assistance of British troops, as her own action should be sufficient to finish Austria. It is unlikely that Italy would be induced to join in simply by

the offer of troops which her military intelligence must know would be better employed elsewhere.

"(f) *Istria and Dalmatia.* — A very dangerous line of communication, and one which would be impossible in the face of a hostile Italy. The islands on the Dalmatian seaboard are specially favourable for the action of defending submarines and torpedo craft, while mines might render any approach to the coast out of the question. With an actively friendly Italy an advance through her territory would be more practicable, but, as stated in preceding paragraph, unnecessary.

"(g) Through Greece to Servia, presumably *viâ*, Salonika, presumes Greece to be a friendly belligerent. Probably the least objectionable of any possible proposal, but necessitating the strict neutrality of Bulgaria, as otherwise the land communications would be very open to attack. A hostile Italy would also jeopardise the whole force.

"(h) *Gallipoli, Asia Minor, Syria.* — Any attack on Turkey would be devoid of decisive result. In the most favourable circumstances it could only cause the relaxation of the pressure against Russia in the Caucasus and enable her to transfer two or three Corps to the West — a result quite incommensurate with the effort involved. To attack Turkey would be to play the German game and to bring about the end which Germany had in mind when she induced Turkey to join in the war, namely, to draw off troops from the decisive spot, which is Germany itself.

"To sum up, my opinions are :

"(1) That the impossibility of breaking through the German line in Flanders has not been proved, and that that operation is feasible provided a sufficiency of high-explosive shells and of guns is provided.

"(2) That, even if it were proved impossible to break the German line, so large a margin of safety is needed that troops could not be withdrawn from this theatre. It is to be remembered that the Allies are in a much better position to await the outcome of events. Time is against Germany; she will not sit for ever behind her entrenchments, and the Allies must be prepared with an adequate force to strike her whenever she may attempt to break out or withdraw.

"(3) That there are no theatres, other than those in which operations are now in progress, in which decisive results could be attained.

"I have not gone into details in considering the question of the employment of forces in other theatres, as such operations were considered by the M.O. Directorate of the War Office when I was C.I.G.S., and I have no doubt that a full record of the conclusions which were reached are filed there."

General Joffre's final opinion is expressed in a memorandum, dated January 19th, 1915, of which the following is a summary :

"1. I wish to call your particular attention to the following points :

"2. The French General Staff consider a German offensive possible — even probable—in the near future. The Germans are certainly making new formations; the 38th Corps has been identified in Bavaria.

"3. Our front must therefore be made absolutely secure. If broken, for example, about Roye and Montdidier, the consequences for the Allies would be of the most serious description.

"4. In addition to (3) we must place ourselves in the position of being able to assume the offensive.

"5. Because of (3) and (4), reserves are absolutely necessary.

"6. For these reasons, I am anxious for a rapid release of the Corps north of the British line.

"7. We must never lose sight of the decisive result, and all secondary operations must give way.

"8. Operations towards Ostend — Zeebrugge, though important, are, for the moment, secondary, and in my opinion should follow rather than precede the principal action, viz., the Collection of Reserves.

"To resume :

(a) To beat the enemy it is necessary to have Reserves.

(b) These Reserves can only come from the north, as British reinforcements set them free.

(c) The German menace, not a vain thing, makes it necessary to collect these Reserves in the shortest possible time.

(d) The main object, viz., the defeat of the enemy, makes it necessary to delay the offensive towards Ostend—Zeebrugge."

I always disagreed with these views, and remain convinced that my plans should have been accepted and tried. I will only add, as a further argument against embarking upon operations in other theatres of war, that our military forces at that time, and for at least fifteen months afterwards, were not sufficient to enable us to carry on great operations in more than one theatre with the necessary power and energy required for success. They could only have resulted in what actually happened in 1915, viz., the series of feeble and on the whole unsuccessful attempts to break through the German line in France, and an absolute failure, compelling ultimate withdrawal of our troops, in the Dardanelles.

I have dealt at perhaps wearisome length with the strategic alternatives and the problems which presented themselves for solution after the close of the First Battle of Ypres. It has been necessary to do so in order that my countrymen may understand the situation as it actually existed at the time, and that they may appreciate what seemed to me conclusive reasons why greater progress was not made in 1915.

Divided counsels lead to half measures and indecisive action. Such counsels have always had, and always will have, the most deterrent and disadvantageous effect on any vigorous prosecution of a war, great or small.