

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

## **CHAPTER XVI**

### **THE OPERATIONS OF DECEMBER 14TH-19TH, 1914**

For the plan sketched out in the last chapter, a certain amount of naval co-operation was secured. The Admiralty were always strongly in favour of my original proposal, and did not at all like the half-hearted operation which Joffre was substituting for it. They urged, with great force and reason, that the risks run by the ships in co-operation on the Belgian coast were increasingly great owing to the powerful fortifications erected by the Germans, and the presence of enemy submarines at Zeebrugge. Whilst, therefore, those risks might well be run in support of a real, strenuous, and powerful endeavour to wrench the coast-line from the enemy's grasp, the Admiralty felt that the Navy could not afford to sacrifice strength in hanging about day after day exposed to such risks, in the sole hope of rendering some slight help to an attack which had no great or decisive object in view. In proof of this, I quote the following telegrams which were received from the Admiralty. On December 20th, 1914, they wired as follows :

"We are receiving almost daily requests from the French for naval support on the Belgian coast. We regret we are unable to comply. The small vessels by

themselves cannot face the new shore batteries, and it is not justifiable to expose battleships to submarine perils unless to support a land attack of primary importance.

"If such an attack is delivered, all the support in my Memorandum forwarded to you through Secretary of State for War will, of course, be afforded. I would be glad if you would explain this to Gen. Foch, as it is painful to the officers concerned to make repeated refusals."

A previous wire had arrived on the 18th, the last few lines of which ran as follows :

"It is not justifiable to expose 'Majestic' to submarine risks unless to support a real movement, in which case every risk will be run and ample support provided."

And before this, on the 12th, the following was received :

"Will you please put us in communication with the French General who will conduct the operation.... Meanwhile, all our preparations as outlined are proceeding, ... but the serious risks to our ships, both from batteries and submarines, ought not to be incurred except in an operation of the first importance."

Admiral Hood, who afterwards fell so gloriously in the hour of victory at the Battle of Jutland, was then in command at Dover. He was responsible for the naval co-operation arranged for, and came to my Headquarters on the 13th to discuss plans. It was arranged that at

daybreak on the 15th the advance from Nieuport was to be supported by two battleships, three monitors and six destroyers.

I urged the Quartermaster-General to do his utmost to provide more machine guns. At that time we had considerably less than one per company, and it was an arm in which the Germans were particularly well found. They must at that time have had at least six or seven to our one.

In the operations now under discussion, this disability was felt very severely. In discussing the progress of the fight with General d'Urbal on the 15th at Poperinghe, he told me that the slight and disappointing advance made by the French was due to their being everywhere held up by machine-gun fire. He said the enemy had received large machine-gun reinforcements, and he was then sending down special guns in armoured motors to endeavour to crush them.

From all parts of the line the same complaint came of the preponderance of the enemy's machine-gun fire.

The operations opened on the morning of the 14th by a combined attack on the line Hollebeke—Wytschaete ridge. It began when it was hardly daylight, at 7 a.m., by heavy artillery bombardment. At 7.45, the French right (five regiments of the 16th Corps) moved forward and captured the enemy's advance trenches on our left flank.

The 2nd Batt. Royal Scots and 1st Batt. Gordons (of Bowes' 8th Brigade, 3rd Division) then advanced

on Petit Bois and Mendleston Farm. The Royal Scots seized and held the wood, which in the evening they entrenched on the eastern side. They captured about sixty prisoners, including some officers.

The Gordons at dusk had captured the enemy's trenches surrounding Mendleston Farm, but were again driven out of them by a powerful machine-gun counter-attack. They had to fall back on their own trenches.

The French 32nd Corps attacked to the north of the 16th on the line Klein Zillebeke—Zillebeke, and advanced some 200 to 300 yards. They repulsed a German counter-attack from Zandvoorde and captured the trenches in front of the château of Hollebeke.

As the French had not established themselves in the position agreed upon, the 3rd Division was unable to advance further, whilst the 5th Division (right of 2nd Corps) and all the 3rd Corps were confined the whole day to demonstration and holding the enemy.

I visited the *Poste de Commandement* of the 3rd Division Commander (Haldane) on the Scherpenberg — a hill near Bailleul, surmounted by a windmill — in the afternoon, and witnessed the fighting for some time. It struck me that the enemy artillery fire was much weaker than ours.

The operations were continued on the 15th, and I again spent some time on the Scherpenberg watching the progress of the fight, so far as the weather permitted any view; we were again prevented from advancing owing

to the delay of the French on our left. Our joint plan was that successive points had to be taken from north to south. It is obvious that the movement had to commence on the French left, but from the first our Allies failed to execute their task and we had to wait for them.

The weather was terrible and the ground simply quagmire, whilst the rain, cold, and the awful mud of the holding soil paralysed any energetic attempt to drive the enemy back. A desultory fire was kept up at all points along the line; but no great activity appeared to be possible. The *rôle* of the 2nd Corps was quite plain and clear: it had to wait for the 16th French Corps to reach its allotted points.

Later in the day I went round to the 3rd Corps Headquarters and there met the Corps Commander (Pulteney), Du Cane, his Chief of Staff, and Allenby, Commanding the Cavalry.

I discussed the general course of the operations with them. I had in my mind the possibility of giving some impetus to the general advance by making an attack with troops of the 3rd Corps across the River Douve, and thus directly supporting an advance by Smith-Dorrien's right, perhaps supported by the cavalry. The mud and water in the valley of that river, however, presented insuperable difficulties.

During the night of the 15th-16th, troops of the 5th Division captured some trenches to the south of Messines.

I was much perturbed at the slow progress we were making, as no better reports came from anywhere along the whole of the Allied line.

On the 16th I again visited the Scherpenberg, where I was met by Smith-Dorrien and Haldane. Smith-Dorrien assured me that the understanding between himself and the Commander of the 16th French Corps on his left (General Grosetti) to provide for mutual support and co-operation had been complete.

As our great aim was now to reduce the enemy's machine-gun fire, I directed Smith-Dorrien to send his pack artillery, which had recently been given him, close down behind the trenches and dig them well in.

De Maud'huy's attack north of Arras was begun on the 16th by a heavy artillery bombardment. The infantry attack followed on the 17th, but the results were disappointing, although a little ground was gained near Notre Dame de Lorette. Some slight progress was made by the French 21st Corps.

I tried to see Foch, but he was away from his Headquarters with de Maud'huy. I sent Henry Wilson after him to explain my views, namely, that our present plan must be modified, owing largely to the fact that we had considerably under-estimated the enemy's strength, particularly in the matter of machine guns. Foch sent Wilson back to tell me that he agreed in thinking that the present operations had not proved a success. He proposed to break them off as soon as we could

reconsider our arrangements. He begged me, however, to continue demonstrating all along my front as much as possible, with a view to supporting the attack upon which de Maud'huy was now embarked.

It was at this time that one of the many instances occurred of the evils which attend divided command. There was undoubtedly a great opportunity on and about December 18th for a powerful attack opposite Wytschaete. I proposed to mass the 16th French and 2nd British Corps at this point, when I discovered that the 16th Corps was practically melting away on my left flank. Two brigades had been despatched to the north, and other units had been sent away to support de Maud'huy's attack on Arras. I was in complete ignorance of these moves until they were accomplished facts. I therefore had to give up all idea of a joint attack on any large scale for the present, and issued orders to Corps Commanders enjoining them to demonstrate on their immediate front, to keep the enemy occupied and seize any opportunity which might offer to capture hostile trenches.

Colonel Thomson (liaison officer with General de Castelnau) told me that the 2nd French Army had made some progress, the first line of the enemy trenches near Albert had been taken and the ground made good. Progress was also made near Roye.

Captain Spiers (11th Hussars), who was now my liaison officer with General de Maud'huy, came to me. He told me that a German counter-attack on Notre

Dame de Lorrettehad regained all ground lost by the enemy on the day before, but that the attack on Givenchy-les-La Bassée had succeeded only to the extent of capturing a trench west of the village, and that progress was being slowly made to the north. The ground won at St. Laurent was retained in spite of repeated German counter-attacks. Some trenches north of Notre Dame de Consolation (east of Vermelles) were also taken and held.

I have had occasion to mention Spiers' name before. He has since deservedly risen to much higher rank. In my mind I always used to class him with Captain Colquhoun Grant of Peninsular fame — one of Wellington's most trusted scouting officers.

I have a most vivid and grateful recollection of the invaluable services performed by this intrepid young officer. He is possessed of an extremely acute perception, and is able to express himself and deliver his reports in the clearest and most concise terms. He was always exact and accurate, and never failed to bring me back the information I most particularly wanted. I seldom knew him at fault. He was a perfect master of the French language and was popular with the staffs, and made welcome by the various generals to whom he was attached. His unflinching tact, judgment and resource were very marked. His reckless, daring courage often made me anxious for his safety, and, indeed, he was severely wounded on at least five separate occasions.



I remember well his coming back to report to me late one evening. He spoke with his usual confidence and decision, and the information which he gave me proved to be very important and accurate, but I noticed that his voice was weak and he looked very tired and worn in the face. I sent him away to his quarters as quickly as possible, thinking he wanted rest. All this time he had a bullet in his side, and in that condition he had travelled back several miles to make his report. He fainted after leaving my room, and lay in considerable danger for several days.

To resume my narrative. The 3rd, 4th, and Indian Corps were all energetic in carrying out my latest orders, and demonstrated with considerable activity. On the 19th the 8th Division captured some trenches at Neuve Chapelle, and the 7th Division at Rouges Bancs, but of the latter, the 2nd Batt. Scots Guards, in the 20th Brigade, were driven back by a counter-attack; as also were the Devons.

Attacks were made very early in the morning by the Garhwal, Sirhind, and Ferozepore Brigades. Each was successful, and parts of the enemy's trenches were captured.

The Garhwal Brigade captured two machine guns and some prisoners, but had to return to their own trenches in the evening.

The 11th Brigade of the 4th Division, under Hunter Weston  
(1st Batt. Somerset L.I.,

1st Batt. E. Lancs Regt., 1st Batt. Hampshire Regt., 1st Batt. Rifle Brigade), made a concerted attack on the morning of the 19th on the edge of Ploegsteert Wood. Some houses were captured, but the mud and the wet made progress difficult. However, they maintained their position well.

The success of the Indian Corps was destined to be of but short duration. During the night of the 20th the enemy regained all the trenches they had taken except some sap-heads near Givenchy. The Germans attacked at daybreak all along the line between Givenchy-les-La Bassée and la Quinque Rue. The Sirhind Brigade were driven back on Festubert, and Givenchy was lost, but retaken in the afternoon.

On the front of the Meerut Division only the Garhwal Brigade on the left held its ground, and in the evening the situation was serious, the Germans occupying nearly all our line between Givenchy and Richebourg, whilst the Corps reserves were all engaged. In the evening the three brigades of the Indian Cavalry Corps were thrown into the fight.

At night Sir James Willcocks reported his troops as much exhausted, and urged their immediate relief; the 1st Corps was therefore ordered to send two brigades (1st and 3rd) up to the line occupied by the Indian Corps.

At 2.35 p.m. these two brigades advanced and partially restored the situation on the front Givenchy—Festubert,

driving the enemy out of Givenchy. The 2nd Brigade (2nd Batt. R. Sussex Regt., 1st Batt. N. Lincs, 1st Batt. Northants Regt., 2nd Batt. K.R.R.) had now also been ordered up, and advanced in support of the Lahore Division.

On the evening of the 21st the 1st Corps were ordered to take over the Indian Corps' line. In the early hours of the 22nd the 1st Brigade (1st Batt. Coldstream Guards, 1st Batt. Scots Guards, 1st Batt. Black Watch, 1st Batt. Cameron Highlanders) made Givenchy secure. The 3rd Brigade (2nd Batt. R. Munster Fusiliers, 1st Batt. S. Wales Borderers, 1st Batt. Gloucester Regt., 2nd Batt. Welsh Regt.) was unable to re-establish the original line on the left of the 1st Brigade, but occupied a line thrown slightly back.

The 2nd Brigade endeavoured to gain the old line at la Quinque Rue, but was unable to do so, and secured a position with its right in touch with the Meerut Brigade and in front of Festubert.

At 1 p.m. on the 22nd Sir Douglas Haig (commanding the 1st Corps) assumed command in this area.

On the 23rd the 27th Division, which had been despatched from England, completed its detrainment and concentrated in the area about Arques (near St. Omer).

On the 17th I received a letter from Kitchener from which I gleaned that the Cabinet were much perturbed by rumours of a contemplated invasion by the enemy,

which apparently emanated from the Admiralty. The authorities at home were far from happy about the whole situation on the Western front, and it was greatly feared that our line might still be broken through by a determined German offensive.

I received orders to go home and consult with the Cabinet, and arrived at Folkestone about 11 a.m. on Sunday the 20th. Lord Kitchener met me there with his motor and we drove together to Walmer Castle, where the Prime Minister (Mr. Asquith) was then staying. I had not seen Kitchener since our memorable meeting at Paris, early in September, but he met me in the most friendly manner, and said many kind things about our work in France, of which he clearly appreciated the difficulties. We discussed the situation fully *en route*, and I remember his putting many questions to me about all the principal members of the Headquarters Staff. Whilst assuring him of my entire satisfaction with each and all of them, I reminded him that, if any fault was to be found, I and no one else was responsible.

In this and many subsequent conversations of a similar kind, I always maintained that a Commander-in-Chief can only be held in contempt who allows any member of his staff, or, indeed, any officer under his orders, to bear blame which must always most properly belong to *him* and to *him alone*. A chief in supreme command has always the absolute power of replacing any officer who fails in his duty. To *him* comes the principal credit and reward when things go well, and to *him* and him

alone must the blame be apportioned when they do not. Until any officer under him is found by *him* to be unfit for his position, it is contrary to all efficient discipline to allow such officer to be censured or removed by any outside authority.

This principle is one of the most sacred traditions of the British Army. It is the foundation upon which there has been slowly and carefully built up that mutual confidence which exists between officers and men, which is the real secret of their wonderful fighting power. I recalled to Kitchener's memory our service together in South Africa, and reminded him how truly and faithfully he had always kept up this tradition in his own exercise of command.

After four months of the most ruthless war the world has ever seen, it was a curious sensation to find myself once again on English soil and in the midst of peaceful surroundings. It was one of those mild, balmy days which we very seldom get in the month of December, and the usual English Sunday atmosphere of rest and repose was over every object, animate and inanimate.

I could not help feeling deeply the extraordinary contrast which the scene presented to that which I had left behind me a few hours before. Except that one noticed a few men in khaki, there was nothing to indicate the terrific war which was raging all the time just across the Channel.

The people of this country have never truly realised the wonderful immunity from the horrors of war which they alone of all the belligerent countries have enjoyed. I wonder if it has really struck any large number of them that, after more than four years of desperate strife, we are the only people in Europe who can proudly claim that no enemy has ever occupied one square inch of all our vast Empire throughout the world, except for a short time in East Africa. The soil of Germany, Austria, Hungary, Turkey, Bulgaria, France, Russia, Italy, Serbia, and Roumania has been repeatedly violated. It is truly a great record when we come to think that the sun never sets on the British flag.

On arriving at Walmer Castle I was very kindly and cordially welcomed by the Prime Minister. Entering the historic old stronghold, where the great Iron Duke breathed his last, I remember being at first seized with a pang of regret; for I thought his spirit would have rested in greater peace, if, under that famous roof, I could have told the first Minister of the King that we had once again planted the British flag in the face of the enemy on the field of Waterloo. It was a dream I had indulged in from the first, but, alas! like many others, it was destined never to be realised.