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The Western Front 1918: victory and armistice

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After more than three years of stalemate and grinding frustration, accompanied by extremely heavy casualties, warfare on the Western Front suddenly broke into a fierce war of manoeuvre that left both sides reeling between the exaltation of astounding success and the deep despondency of looming defeat. The Australian Imperial Force, though lucky to miss the ferocity of the German spring offensive, nevertheless helped to stem the tide and go on to play a significant part in at least the beginning of an astonishing fight back by the British Armies in France in the last 100 days of the War. In this second of two articles¹, Philip Carey traces that remarkable turn of events after 8 August 1918.

Introduction

The French victory in the second battle of the Marne, in July 1918, and the British victory at Amiens on 8 August, convinced the General-in-Chief of the Allied Forces, Marshal Foch, and the Commander-in-Chief, British Armies in France and Belgium, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, that they had finally developed a formula that could end the War in victory for their side. However, their newfound harmony still had a rocky road to travel. Foch's well known propensity for constant attack and Haig's continuing desire for breakthrough began to give way to a more prudent strategy as a result of disagreement initially over how to capitalise on the success of the two offensives. After a somewhat painful dispute over Foch's attempts to issue orders directly to General Rawlinson commanding the British Fourth Army, without Haig's consent, the winning formula emerged (Prior and Wilson 1992, 336). Foch never again tried to issue orders to the British Commander-in-Chief or his subordinates, and henceforth it would largely be Haig's concept of operations that would defeat the German Army.

The Battle of Amiens

For the British High Command, the Battle of Amiens was a significant victory, although not the decisive stroke so long sought. A worthwhile advance had been made, but casualties were high – 22,000 in all, 9074 Canadians, 7137 British and 5991 Australians (Stevenson 2004, 427). An expected exploitation was not achieved because of stiffening German resistance from 9 August onwards (Neillands 2004, 494). When General Rawlinson ordered a continuation of the attack on 9 August, he did so with a considerably reduced tank force and an air force that was finding it difficult to provide both ground attack and fighter protection for its

own bomber force. Furthermore, the consequent difficulties experienced by the infantry in dealing with strengthening German defences were exacerbated by loss of coordination by the staff at all three levels of command – Army, Corps and Division. Orders for 9 August were received late and added to the disjunction between corps – III British and Australian along the Somme; and Australian and Canadian on the southern flank. Artillery and tank support was unsatisfactory and only one brigade managed to secure both artillery and tank support at the beginning of its attack (Prior and Wilson 1992, 329-30). The incoherence of the battle plans is best illustrated by the fact that the sixteen attacking brigades used thirteen different start times.

Clearly, considerable improvement was required, but despite the difficulties, Fourth Army managed to advance another three miles, capture many more prisoners and yet sustain relatively light casualties. The explanation lay in the degree of disorganisation and disorientation on the German side of the line.

The following days, 10 and 11 August, were repeats of 9 August, except that the returns for effort decreased steadily; less progress was made, with increasing difficulty and more casualties. It seems to us now rather like 21 March all over again, except in reverse. In fact, the developments between 8 and 11 August displayed an all too familiar pattern of operations on the Western Front over its four years of stalemate. Initial success was followed by an inevitable wearing down of the attack as resistance stiffened; fatigue set in; and artillery effectiveness diminished as the advance proceeded because guns had to be moved. Even the newer techniques of sound ranging and flash spotting had to be reorganised. Furthermore, tanks reached the limit of their endurance and resupply problems increased. There was always a point at which an astute commander should call off an operation to avoid exhaustion and further casualties. In earlier years Haig had rarely exercised this level of judgement. This time he did so of his own accord, although with some

¹The first was Carey (2008).

pressure from his subordinates and an unfortunately negative reaction from Foch (Wilson 1986, 594-5)². It is clear that Foch, with his determination to attack everywhere at once, never really understood the new formula devised by the British generals, especially the requirement for surprise and the limitation of objectives to the effective range of artillery.

The First Phase – Towards the Hindenburg Line

When the Battle of Amiens ended on 11 August, the situation in the Somme area was that the French First Army and the British Fourth Army had halted facing entrenched German opposition. Foch agreed that the forces on both wings of those Armies should attack to outflank the German forces holding them up and that attacks should be mounted in series at different locations in an alternating fashion all along the line, maintaining constant pressure on the Germans, keeping them off balance and uncertain. What happened next has been described as a series of piecemeal Allied advances (Stevenson 2004, 427). This, however, tends to understate the importance of Haig's general concept of operations. For it was this concept that ensured the eventual disintegration of German defences and, more significantly, the collapse of their High Command's capacity to continue.

In accordance with the Field Marshal's orders, on 21 August the British Third Army under General Byng, from south of Arras launched the Battle of Albert over an area between the old Somme battlefield of 1916 and the Arras battlefield of 1917. Also on 21 August, the Canadian Corps returned to First Army leaving Fourth Army to consist only of III Corps and the Australian Corps with the 32nd British Division. The next day, the left wing of Rawlinson's Fourth Army, III Corps with 3rd Australian Division, joined the battle and the 18th British Division recaptured the ruined town of Albert. From 23 to 25 August, both Armies continued to push the Germans back. Their success forced the German High Command (OHL) to order a withdrawal to a hastily organised 'Winter Line' (Stevenson 2004, 428).

By mid-August, the whole Allied Front had developed into a series of major operations alternating between different localities. Foch, following Haig's advice, energised the French Army. On 10 August, the French Third Army attacked south of the Somme towards the Oise and occupied Montdidier. In Champagne, General Mangin and his Tenth Army resumed their advance towards the Aisne and

captured the heights on 20 August. Also on 10 August, the American First Army was formed and Foch allocated it a region east of Verdun opposing the St Mihiel Salient where it was to perform successfully, though with heavy casualties, later in September (Willmott 2007, 264).

In the north, while Third and Fourth British Armies were pursuing their retreating enemy, Field Marshal Haig had decided to shift the emphasis of the offensive further north still and, on 26 August, the British First Army, with the Canadian Corps returned to it, attacked north of Arras towards the Drocourt-Quéant Switch. Fourth Army, whose formations had been constantly in action since 8 August, was at first ordered to press the enemy closely. But as Haig became concerned about the divisions' growing tiredness and increasing casualties, he advised Rawlinson to 'ease back'. Rawlinson, keen to embark on a forceful pursuit was reluctant, but passed on the order.

The Australian commander, General Monash, as keen as Rawlinson to pursue and trap his enemy against the Somme, embarked on what has been described as a 'private war' (Serle 1982, 353). The lure of fame was irresistible. Ultimately, with Rawlinson's tacit approval, he initiated what was probably the finest achievement of the Australian Corps during the War, the capture of Mont St Quentin and Péronne on 31 August/1 September. The operation was very risky and the plan was Monash's. He drove his divisions relentlessly – 'Casualties no longer matter', he said (Bean, 1942, 822). However, success there was! Nevertheless, Monash could not control events closely and clearly the result was due to the determination and skill of the soldiers, their brigadiers, battalion commanders and company officers (Serle 1982, 355).

At the same time in First Army's area, the Canadian Corps supported by two British divisions broke the Drocourt-Quéant Switch line and the XVII British Corps of Third Army smashed the same line at its junction with the main Hindenburg Line (Bean 1942, 874). The German Winter Line was therefore turned and, though there is some strong argument that the Australian attack on Mont St Quentin was probably unnecessary (Pitt 1962, 217-9), the Winter Line's major component to the south had been forced back.

German Reactions

The Fourth Army's achievement at Amiens was of course extremely significant. It broke up six German divisions and pushed the Second German Army back 12 miles. But the really crucial significance was probably its effect on OHL (Neillands 2004, 495). This is not to say the German troops did not fight with skill and strong determination. German machine gunners in particular and their infantry in general fought with a dedication and bravery against continuously heavy odds, but with increasing desperation.

²Foch attempted to issue orders to Rawlinson over Haig's head. Rawlinson objected as did Haig, who threatened to appeal to his Government, as was his right. Haig stood firm. Shocked, Foch backed down. Harmony was restored and Haig's concepts prevailed thereafter. Also see Bean's detailed but self-censored account (Bean 1942, 713-7) and a more precise account in Nicholson (1962, 422-3).

In fact, although reinforcements (three divisions) had been rushed piecemeal into the fray, many were exhausted troops who had been withdrawn for rest and reconditioning. Most had no real idea where the front line was because of the disjointed nature of the British attacks. A demoralising situation confronted the German reserves as they arrived at the front line. They saw the disruption caused by the British attack. Their commanders at the local level were similarly affected as they asked for permission to withdraw to a more defensible and better organised line. General von Kuhl, Chief of Staff to Crown Prince Rupprecht, commanding the Army Group, realised the problems faced by the British command. He had experienced them himself in March; an increasingly incoherent series of fierce attacks and importantly, he realised, no fresh British divisions had been introduced into the operation. He correctly rejected the appeals to withdraw (Prior and Wilson 1992, 331-2).

On the other hand, at OHL, where Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (Chief of the General Staff) was head and General Erich Ludendorff (First Quartermaster General) was his principal assistant, a strange crisis had developed. Ludendorff, effectively director of operations in all theatres, had been the architect of the March Offensives and had directed the Army through the disastrous consequences that followed. His brittle and manic character could not cope with the reverses his armies encountered (Keegan 1998, 442) and his reaction to Amiens and subsequent events was wild and disruptive to the German cause.

Dissent started to occur after the Marne in July when General von Lossberg, a respected tactical expert, had recommended that all available reserves should be put to work improving the Hindenburg Line and that the Army should withdraw to that position quickly. An infuriated Ludendorff rejected the proposals as outrageous. When, in the face of the losses at Amiens, similar proposals were mentioned at a conference at OHL on 13 August attended by the Chancellor, von Hertling and the Foreign Minister, von Hintze, Ludendorff again hotly rejected them (Nicholson 1962, 422).

At that conference and the following day in front of the Kaiser, however, he acknowledged that the War could not now be won by offensive action alone and that diplomatic moves should be initiated to end the War while Germany still stood in possession of large tracts of enemy territory. He asserted that the Army should stand on the defensive to wear down the enemy so as to achieve, if not a favourable, then at least a drawn outcome (Stevenson 2004, 427). Ludendorff, in an approaching state of denial, ordered a withdrawal to the Winter Line. As we saw, it was not to last long.

Generally, the Winter Line ran from Noyon following the line of the Somme where it flowed south to north, through a bridgehead west of Péronne to Maricourt and Bucquoy. It was to be held for the remainder of the

year. Although this Winter Line was hastily arranged, it was nonetheless a sequence of strong positions including the Somme River with the fortress of Péronne, the Canal du Nord and the formidable Drocourt-Quéant Switch running north to extend the Hindenburg defences (Prior and Wilson 1992, 337). When this fell, Ludendorff had no option but to order a retirement to the Hindenburg Line.

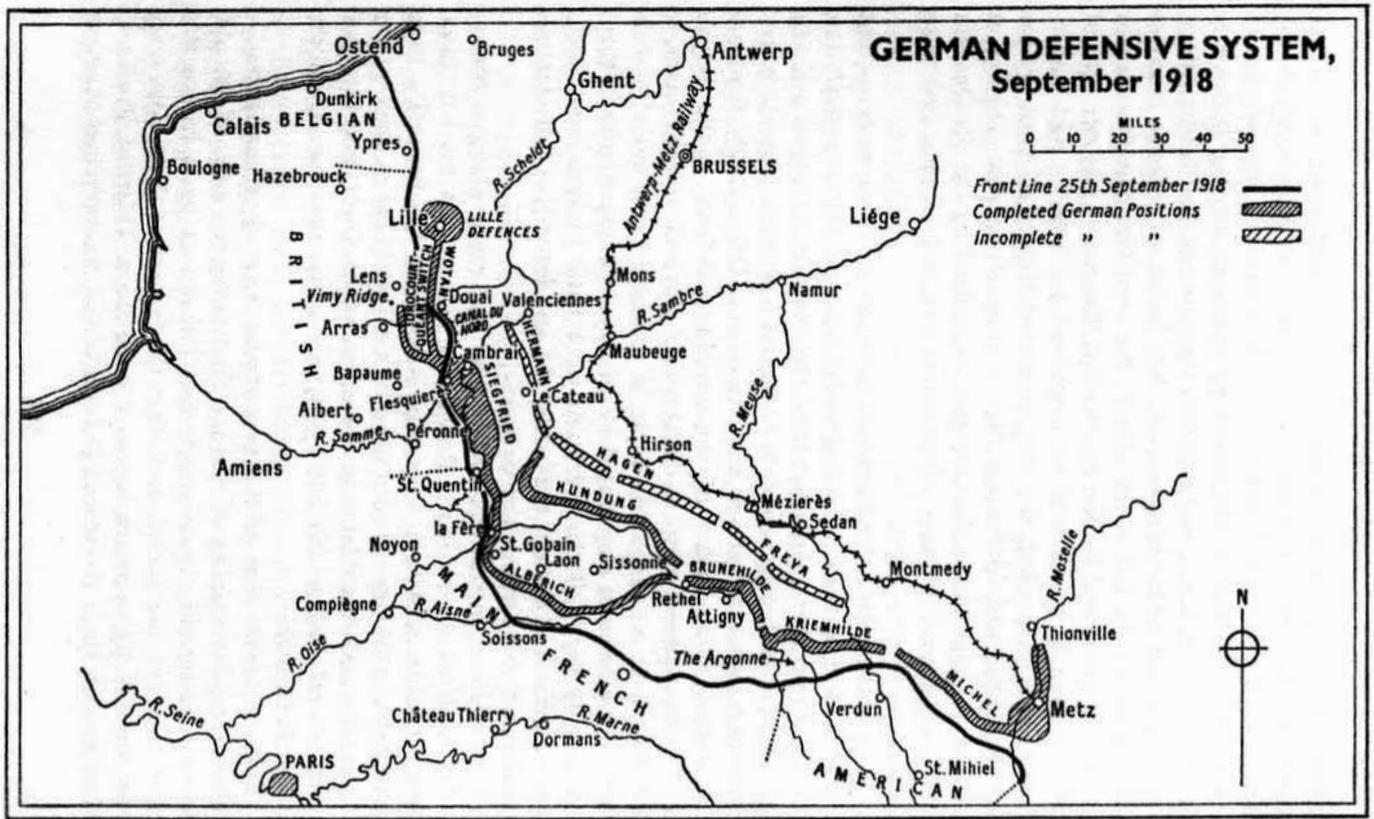
The Hindenburg Line

The name is a misnomer. The Allies adopted the name to describe the strong defensive position to which the German Army had withdrawn at the end of the Battle of the Somme. Originally begun after September 1916, it was a series of trench lines and strong points including deep bunkers and fortified villages running for some 85 miles from just east of Arras, through St Quentin to just east of Soissons in the south. The Germans named it the *Siegfried Stellung* (position). In November 1916, a second position, the *Wotan Stellung*, was added to strengthen the defences north of Arras. This, the Allies named the Drocourt-Quéant Switch Line. It branched off from the Siegfried position near the village of Quéant and ended at the village of Drocourt where it was later incorporated in the defences of the city of Lille.

The accompanying map on page 30 shows the extent of the German defensive positions in September 1918, with their different names, sizes and extent relative to each other. By 1918, the name was often used to describe the entire defensive system shown in this map. By then, the Germans had constructed a huge defensive zone, up to ten miles deep in places; the strongest section being opposite the British First, Third and Fourth Armies. Here the defensive system was designed to withstand powerful artillery bombardment and to break up any attempted infantry penetration with wide belts of barbed wire and machine gun posts in concrete bunkers. Furthermore, it incorporated pre-existing features like the Canal du Nord and the St Quentin Canal into its framework.

The withdrawal from the Winter Line began on the night of 3 September and concluded on 11 September. Despite its formidable design, the Hindenburg position had its flaws, especially about the St Quentin Canal where it could be dominated from a ridge running southeast from Epéhy. To the west of this ridge were the remains of three old British trench lines dating from 1917. These the Germans improved and strengthened to provide a screen for the main position – they are sometimes referred to as the Hindenburg Outpost Line. Following the reverse at Amiens, construction of two additional lines to the east of the main position was begun (Prior and Wilson 1992, 348)³.

³For a comprehensive analysis of the Hindenburg position, see Prior and Wilson (1992, 346-351).



The German defensive system on 25 September 1918 [from Pitt (1962)]

The Grand Offensive

From 3 September, the British First, Third and Fourth Armies paused to regroup. Both Foch and Haig set about planning the next operations, which for the British would culminate in an assault on the main Hindenburg positions. In the meantime, the Americans made their first attack as a national army to eliminate the St Mihiel Salient on 12 September (Brown 1998, 220). Also from 12 September, the British Armies cautiously followed up the German withdrawal, conducting what has been described as a series of preliminary operations to obtain a favourable start line for a major assault on the main Hindenburg complex (Sheffield 2001, 203).

This series of manoeuvres included the Battles of Havrincourt and Epéhy, which brought them within striking distance of their main objective. In the case of the latter, the Australian 1st and 4th Divisions secured the ridge in the vicinity of Hargicourt and Le Vergieur overlooking the Canal (Bean 1942, 930-1). Both Divisions were now exhausted and moved back to rest areas. An excited Foch ordered 'everyone into battle!'

Beginning on 26 September, the Western Front exploded into action. That day the French and Americans attacked in the Meuse-Argonne area at the south-eastern end of the Front. The following day the British First and Third Armies attacked towards Cambrai and, on 28 September, the Belgian Army with General Plumer's Second British Army attacked out of the Ypres Salient. The most difficult assault was

launched by Rawlinson's Fourth Army against the toughest objective – the Siegfried position where it fronted the St Quentin Canal.

In Flanders in a single day, General Plumer's troops drove beyond the Passchendaele Ridge, recaptured Messines and recovered all the ground they had to give up during the Spring Offensive. There they paused before resuming the advance on 23 October. At the northern end of the Hindenburg system in First Army, the Canadian Corps took Broulton Wood and crashed across the Canal du Nord in a bold but risky manoeuvre, consequently turning the whole Hindenburg system. However, they too were forced to pause. At the same time General Byng's Third Army ripped through the first and second Hindenburg positions, although Cambrai held out until 9 October (Neillands 2004, 503-4; Wilson 1986, 602-3).

In the centre of Fourth Army, the Australian Corps, assaulting the main Siegfried position where the Canal runs through a tunnel, experienced strong resistance at first. The Corps now contained only three Australian divisions, but was supplemented by two American divisions – keen and larger, but inexperienced and rather poorly organised. Monash's plan was complicated and poorly thought through. The Germans on the other hand fought tenaciously and well. Once the Australian divisions were committed, the situation developed into deadlock. But relief appeared from an unlikely source as the British 46th Division, a Territorial formation of somewhat mediocre reputation, in a

brilliant, daring operation supported by a surprise bombardment, crossed the Canal further south and attacked the main Siegfried position. Their deep penetration surprised the Germans holding up the Australians, and their capture of the bridge over the Canal at Riqueval proved an added bonus for Fourth Army (Pitt 1962, 238-9; Sheffield 2001, 208-10; Wilson 1986, 602-3)⁴.

It took another week to clear the outworks of the Siegfried position and one of the actions, the capture of Montbrehain, involved the Australian 2nd Division in the last action by the Australian Imperial Force on the Western Front. It was, Charles Bean said, one of the Australian infantry's most brilliant actions of the War, although very costly. He believed it was difficult to accept that it was wisely undertaken. He suggested it could have been devised simply to make some use of the troops before they were withdrawn according to Prime Minister Hughes' direction (Bean 1942, 1043).

Disintegration of the Central Powers and Ceasefire

The success of Fourth Army triggered a general retreat by the German Armies across almost the whole of the Western Front. In the final five weeks of operations, the Allies kept up the pressure. On 17 October, Fourth Army won another major victory on the River Selle and on 19 October, Second Army crossed the River Lys. German units were greatly under strength though some fought hard to resist. But the British advance was steady and remorseless. As the generals had repeatedly told the politicians since 1915, the Central Powers would be finished if the German Army on the Western Front were defeated. By mid October, that Army was in full retreat and although hard fighting continued, there was little doubt the end was in sight. The Americans broke the deadlock in the Meuse-Argonne area on 1 November and two days later cut the Lille-Metz railway heading for Sedan and the German frontier. The British Armies fought and won their last major action on 4 November at the Battle of the Sambre. The German Army had been defeated in the field (Sheffield 2001, 215). Crown Prince Rupprecht had predicted as much in a letter to Prince Max of Baden as early as 15 August (Neillands 2004, 495).

Behind the lines, however, a lot was afoot. On 6 October the German, Austrian and Turkish Governments had sent a 'Note' to Paris asking for an immediate armistice (Neillands 2004, 504). The Hapsburg Empire was already disintegrating and the process reached a formal stage on 31 October when Hungary and Bosnia declared their independence. Turkey capitulated on 30 October.

Political and economic conditions in Germany, where the process was far more tortuous, were in turmoil. The German 'Note' was little more than a ruse. Ludendorff and OHL still clung to a determination to maintain the War, even proposing to accept an armistice in order to regroup and resume the War at a later date. Their hubris was their undoing. A new liberal Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, appointed on 30 September, would have none of their prevarication and duplicity. On 26 October, in the face of distinct insubordination by the High Command and after receiving contrary advice on the state of the German Army from Crown Prince Rupprecht, he demanded changes to the command structure. Ludendorff was dismissed (Stevenson 2004, 466-75).

Within days of the result of the Sambre battle, the German frontier was threatened and, in the face of the Kaiser's vacillation, Max issued a proclamation declaring the emperor's abdication without a signed document to support it. The Kaiser fled to Holland on 10 November. The Armistice was signed at the direction of both Max and Hindenburg. The firing stopped on 11 November, but the story is more complex than this and the legacy continues.

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⁴An excellent analysis of the whole operation is to be found in Prior and Wilson (1992, 367-375).