

# AFTER 3 YEARS BRITISH TURN TABLES ON GERMANS AT YPRES

## BRITISH OFFENSIVE AT YPRES WILL END THE SEASON'S CAMPAIGN

After Three Years British are Retaking Ground Lost to Germans Early in War.

### CONDITIONS ARE ALTERED

Three Million British Troops on Offensives in Region Where First Hundred Thousand Fought Violently.

By Frank H. Simonds

IN THE present article I desire to discuss in detail the latest British operation from Ypres eastward, a logical and natural extension of the two earlier operations, which are themselves phases of the great British campaign of 1917. To do this it will be necessary to examine at considerable length the main geographical and strategic circumstances of the Ypres region, so frequently mentioned and so little described in current battle reports.

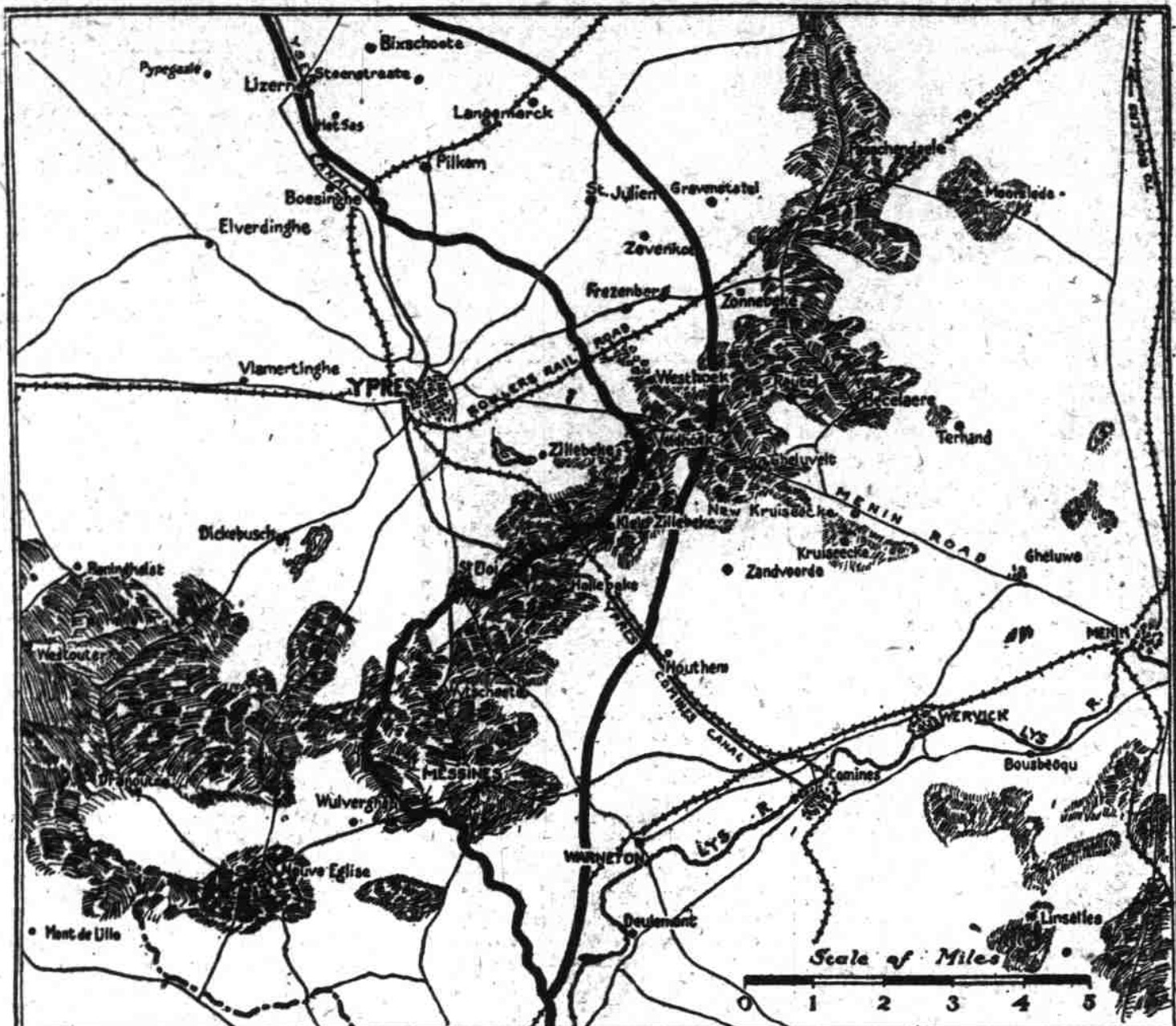
To start at the beginning, there is between Langemarck and the Lys river at Warneton a 15-mile front of good ground—that is, solid ground over which armies can advance. North of Langemarck the land is low and swampy and has been flooded since the battle of the Yser. In October, 1914, when the Belgians opened the sluices and thus halted the German advance on the Yser front, South of Warneton and on the right bank of the Lys the forts of Lille and the city and its suburbs make any advance difficult, and to the difficulties of ground is added the obstacle incident to the certain destruction of this great French city should the fighting approach it. What the Germans have done in St. Quentin and Lens they would certainly do in Lille.

#### Between Warneton and Langemarck

An offensive, therefore, which had as its main strategic purpose to move down the Lys valley and thus turn the Germans out of their position along the Belgian coast from the Yser to the Dutch frontier would necessarily have to pass through this sally-port between Warneton and Langemarck. Its advance would be from west to east and, progressing thus, it would cross one after another of the railroads and highways, themselves running north and south, which are the main lines of German communication. More than this, such an advance would push a wedge into the whole German front in Flanders, quite analogous to the wedge driven into the German lines along the Somme in the great battle of last year.

Thus, long before the allies moved down the valley of the Lys arrived at Ghent, the Germans would have to withdraw out of the whole of coastal Flanders, as they had to do out of the great Noyon salient this spring, while the French and British were still outside of Peronne and Bapaume. Moreover, just as Bapaume and Peronne were the immediate objectives of the Somme "push," Roulers and Menin

## THE YPRES BATTLEFIELD



The left hand black line shows the British front before the first offensive, in June, 1917. The right hand black line shows the Anglo-French front at end of the third offensive, 10 days ago. Shaded portion shows the ridge which, from Messines to Passchendaele, is the immediate British objective.

are the immediate goals of the present drive. Once the British are at Menin and at Roulers, the Germans to the north and south, along the coast from Ostend to Zeebrugge and in the ever deepening La Bassee-Lille salient, will be in a dangerous position, although their fronts remain unshaken on either side of the entering wedge.

#### The Topographical Situation

So much for the larger strategic circumstances. East of Ypres rather less than two miles rises a low ridge, it runs in a general direction from northeast to southwest, and its southern extremity is just due south of Ypres. It is not more than a hundred feet above the surrounding country and the rise is so gradual that it does not suggest real height at any point. This ridge carries a number of villages familiar to all leaders of the war news of the past three years. These are Messines, Wytschaete, Hollebeke, Zandvoorde, Gheluyvelt, Zonnebeke and Broodseinde. North of Broodseinde it narrows very rapidly to a point at the also familiar village of Passchendaele. Actually this ridge is the watershed between the Yser and the Lys. Down its gently sloping western flanks flow a number of little streams which enter

the Yser, rapidly dropping to the great marsh to the west of Ypres. Eastward from the ridge flow other little brooks, which enter the Lys. They are much shorter than the streams of the west, but on neither side are the watercourses more than mere brooks, obstacles to military operations only in the wet season, which, however, is pretty constant in this unhappy region.

#### Campaign of 1914

In 1914, when the British first came to the Ypres district, they were advancing toward the north and east and along two main highways—that which goes from Ypres to Menin, the famous Menin road, and the Ypres-Roulers road, which passes just south-east of Langemarck. But their main push was along the Menin road, and when they were brought to a dead halt by the new German drive for Calais they stood along the ridge from Broodseinde right down to Messines, holding all the little villages along the crest, which I have mentioned. From Broodseinde their line extended at right angles to Langemarck, behind several of the little brooks which flow west to the Yser. In the first battle of Ypres—in October and November, 1914—the British

were pushed westward off the ridge from Broodseinde all the way through Wytschaete and Messines except for one little strip from Gheluyvelt to Zonnebeke; but from Zonnebeke to Langemarck their line was pushed back very little, indeed. This fighting transformed the Ypres sector into a very disagreeable salient, and the Germans on the ridge about Messines and Wytschaete looked down upon Ypres and swept the rear of the British and their lines of communication in all the salient.

#### Second Battle of Ypres

In the second battle of Ypres—in April and May, 1915—the battle in which poison gas appeared, the German attack was about Langemarck, and having broken the French colonial troops, who held the line about Langemarck and to the west, the Germans came south until they reached the Yser canal at Lierne. They even passed the canal at the crest of their push. This advance necessitated a new adjustment of the lines, and the British were compelled to draw back along their whole front between Langemarck and the Menin road, giving up Zonnebeke and all but the barest foothold on the ridge. To all practical purposes they were now out of the Ypres salient. The Germans held all the good gun positions and observation points from one end of the ridge to the other. And this situation endured down to June of the present year.

At this time the British, having determined to make their main offensive for the year in the Ypres district, were faced with the immediate problem of the ridge. Before they could push at all it was necessary to drive the Germans off that portion of the ridge south of the Menin road and crowned by the villages of Messines and Wytschaete, because from these positions the Germans commanded their rear and all their lines of communication from the Yser canal to Lierne all the way round to the foot of the ridge at Wytschaete.

This was done in the battle which is known to the British army as the battle of "White Sheet" ridge, and this battle marks one of the most successful British operations of the technical side in the whole war, comparable with the several French attacks in the Verdun sector, which alone rival it in brilliant correlation of artillery and infantry tactics. In this battle the British captured all of the south-

ern end of the ridge as far north as Hollebeke, where the Ypres-Commines canal, connecting the Yser and the Lys, cuts through it.

#### Plans for Great Attack

But this was a necessary preliminary step. It was a necessary preparation for the main attack, but this main attack necessarily had to be made north of the Commines canal and along the Menin and Roulers roads. From June to August the preparations for this great operation went forward. In this time all the great mass of munitions accumulated, roads and railroads built, guns concentrated, and this work was completed by July 31, which saw the opening of the second phase in the British offensive.

This time the operation was from the north side of the old Ypres salient. Precisely as the Germans from the Wytschaete-Messines ridge commanded the Ypres salient from the south, they swept from the north on the succeeding days in which the British, with the aid of a French army, on their extreme left, pushed across the Yser canal and the Steenstraete, Douve, Pilleken, Bixchoote, and St. Julien. These positions, after some counter attacks, were finally left in British hands, and the allies now held a line from where the British had won the battle of Ypres-began. They had, in a word, abolished the Ypres salient, and from the flooded districts south of Broodseinde and the Yser canal, the allied line ran practically straight, while at the northern and southern extremities—that is, about Pilleken and Wytschaete, the high ground was wholly in their hands.

#### Difficulties Encountered

But from the Ypres-Commines canal at Hollebeke to the foot of the ridge near Gravenstafel, north of Zonnebeke, along the whole center of the Ypres sector—all the high ground, all the ridge, still remained in German hands, and this was the portion which was essential to the other operations had merely been preliminary work on the two flanks to clear the way for an attack in the center. While the Germans held the Pilleken and Wytschaete ridges it was not possible to push forward in the center, because the advance would be endangered by German gunfire from the flanks and a British concentration could be observed and reported before they had passed Ypres and while they were still further than German reserves were from the actual firing line.

By the middle of August, then, the allies had restored the situation on their flanks which had existed at the first battle of Ypres and had opened, in October, 1914. In a sense this is what the French achieved in their first Verdun offensive, in October, 1916, when the British retook these two vital positions they limited their effort to this objective and the enemy still held all the nearby heights. The successive drives, that in December of last year and that in recent weeks, completed the task. But it is well to remember that the French never attacked the Ypres salient and did not prepare any great offensive. They were satisfied when they had reoccupied all the important positions in advance of this system, which had been in their hands before the German attack of February, 1916.

#### Losses Are Enormous

About Ypres, on the contrary, the allies were not satisfied with an ambitious objective, and they regarded the June and August operations as necessary, but relatively minor, preparatory thrusts. When they retook the situation on the operative front from St. Julien to Hollebeke looked up the slopes of the ridge to the positions which they had held in the opening days of the fighting in this region and had only given up completely in May, 1916, after the gas attack had broken in the northern end, or, reentrant, as the soldiers say, of the Ypres salient.

On the large scale map of the German front in this sector made by the British staff from airplane observation, a copy of which General Maubrice, chief of military operations, gave me in London in the winter, the line is indicated before the British line of last autumn three systems of trench lines, separated by something like a mile, the first running along the foot of the ridge from St. Julien down to Hollebeke, passing through the hamlets of Frezenberg, Westhoek and Klein Zillebeke. The second line was a line breached before the British line of last autumn was taken, but it was not for many weeks that the British were able to surmount it, and some of the fiercest and most deadly fighting of the war has taken place in this first system. This is revealed in the weekly British casualty lists, which show a total loss of 70,000 in three weeks ending August 17, weeks in which there was no great drive, but merely the "dingdong" of local operations.

#### Locations Renamed

By the first of September, we may say, the British had surmounted this first German system from St. Julien to Hollebeke; they had taken the foot of the ridge, which lay before them from Gheluyvelt, on the Menin road, to Zonnebeke, on the Ypres-Roulers railway. The British had before them now a second system of defenses stretched across some of the most difficult country on the whole western front, a country of small woods and little ponds, hiding solid farmhouses which lent themselves to fortification. To these woods, ponds and farmhouses the British "Tommy" and his Canadian and Australian comrades had given familiar names, although some of the more considerable patches of forest kept their old names. Polygon wood, the largest belt of woodland, famous for the first time in the Ypres salient, its name, as did Nun's wood; but Glencorse wood, Inverness forest, with Dumbarton lakes nearby, signalled the presence of Britons and Scots, while Toronto farm, Quebec farm, Abraham heights and even Kansas Cross testified to America, as did Anzac, Helles and Gallipoli farms to Australia. "Bill Boxes" abound.

This second system was an inextricable tangle of underbrush, marsh, ruins—it had endured three years of belting, and only those who have seen the battlefields of the Somme or Verdun can even conjecture what such a country really is like. Roughly speaking, this line covered Zonnebeke to Gheluyvelt, which were behind it and between it and the third line, which lay along the crest of the main ridge. This operative front was approximately seven miles broad, from St. Julien to Tower Hamlets, a redoubt southwest of Gheluyvelt; it was defended by the old-fashioned redoubts and fortifications of the Somme time, now become obsolete, but it was defended by a deep network of little cement forts for machine guns—"pill

boxes," in the argot of the "Tommy"—and prepared shell holes, details in Hindenburg's "elastic" defensive.

It was against this system that the British launched their last offensive of September 19 and 20, and in this offensive they took all the works of importance in this system on the whole front attacked. Their advance was nowhere over a mile deep, but it carried them through the German second line, as the August operations had carried them over the first, and it was a much more clean-cut and immediately successful operation than that of the previous month, comparing favorably with the recent French offensive operation at Verdun, which made an advance of about the same distance over a front but little broader.

There remains between the British and the possession of the whole ridge from Broodseinde down to Messines, a mile ahead of them, only the third system of German trenches on the sector from the Menin road to the Roulers-Ypres railway just north of Zonnebeke; and this system, too, represents all of the ground lost by the British in the first two battles of Ypres which has not yet been recovered from the Belgian coast. This German system is indicated by many trenches and redoubts, which follow the western slope of the ridge, just below the crest, from Broodseinde, just east of Zonnebeke, through Reutel, west of Beclaeure to New Kruikecke, east of Gheluyvelt on the Menin road. Zonnebeke and Gheluyvelt are fortified positions in advance of this system, which must be captured before the main position is attained and conquered. So also is the famous Polygon sector, between the Yser canal and already been passed by the British advance.

With luck the British will have something like four weeks more of fighting weather, the first battle of Ypres lasted rather longer, up to the middle of November, in fact, but its main effort was ended by the first day of November, and only the sensational charge of the Prussian Guard along the Menin road from Gheluyvelt supplied a really important detail in the fighting after November began.

#### What Remains to Be Done

The problem that remains then is whether in the month of fighting weather they have reasonably surely to count on the British will be able to get over the crest of the ridge from Broodseinde to the Menin road, or perhaps five miles. If they do, then the spring will see the British holding all the important high ground in the sally-port between Zonnebeke and the Lys, save perhaps the tip of the ridge about Passchendaele. In the same fashion, by the coming of spring, this year, the British held all of the

summit of the Bapaume ridge, and were in a position to push on into that town and break the southern end, or reentrant, of the Bapaume salient, and the Germans chosen to stay. A German retreat from the Flanders front upon Courtrai and Roulers might easily follow a British success this fall, as it did in the Bapaume sector this spring.

Meantime, attention should be fixed upon the front between the Roulers railroad and the Menin road. Here the last fight of the campaign of 1917 will probably be fought on the ground that three years ago at the very same time saw the bitterest phases of the first battle of Ypres. Then the Germans outnumbered the British five to one and the British fought without heavy artillery or high explosives. Today the Germans are outnumbered and outgunned. Then a thin line of British infantry fighting with rifles against machine guns and field pieces against heavy artillery, blocked the German road to Calais; now the German line with equal desperation is seeking to block a British army aiming to push eastward through the Ypres sally-port and cut off the Germans from the Belgian coast.

Here is a measure of the fashion in which the conditions of the world war have changed in three years. Instead of 100,000 British, there are today nearly 2,000,000 in France and at least 15 times as many on the firing line as Field Marshal Sir John French had at Ypres. And it is rather an impressive evidence of British obstinacy and tenacity that now, after three years, they are retaking the ground the Ger-

mans captured in the opening months of the war. A victorious British army advancing over the ground, on which the "Old Contemptibles" stood and died, holding a new Thermopylae, is one more evidence of the amazing justice of the comparison of the Briton to the bulldog.

## Inquiry Into Alleged Milk Trust to Begin

Illinois Attorney General Says Evidence Seized Will Be Put Before Grand Jury in Near Future.

Chicago, Oct. 6.—(U. P.)—The county grand jury will start its investigation of the alleged milk trust, it was indicated tonight.

Attorney General Brundage, at whose instigation State's Attorney Hoynes raided the offices of the milk dealers' association and several dealers, said he would be ready to place the evidence before the grand jury as soon as James H. Wilkerson, Hoynes's assistant, returns from Washington. Wilkerson is expected Wednesday.

Wilkerson, Brundage intimated, would be in charge of the anti-trust proceedings. He is the man, who, as United States district attorney, secured the \$25,000,000 fine against the Standard Oil company.

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