

The Final Allied Offensive on the Western Front in 1918

*Lecture to the Alberta Military Institute by Colonel H. E. Boak,
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THE object of my talk tonight is to place before you some of the strategical and tactical aspects of the last great offensive of the Allied Armies on the western front which culminated in the ultimate defeat of the German Army and the consequent signing of the Armistice of 11th November, 1918.

Owing to the immense numbers of the combatants and the great extent of the front, you will readily understand that it will be impossible to go into details. The period, whose strategy and to some extent tactics, which I intend to deal with, commences with our attack on 8th August, 1918. This, to my mind, marks the opening of the allied offensive in the west, although previous to this the French had counter-attacked after the failure of the German attack of July 15th and during a fortnight's fighting drove him back across the Vesle.

But before proceeding further I would like to give you a short narrative of previous events in order that we, as they say, may "get into the picture." It will necessarily have to be brief.

1917 saw the collapse of Russia and the transfer of the preponderance of strength in the west to the Germans. Early in 1918 it became certain that we in France and Flanders would be confronted by almost the full military power of Germany. The question was, could we hold out until the arrival of the Americans? Although prudence demanded that the British should do everything possible to increase their army, Lloyd-George's Eastern policy allowed the British divisions to be reduced by three battalions each, and the strength in fighting troops to drop by one hundred and eighty thousand between March, 1917, and March, 1918.

Our Intelligence estimated that the Germans would have a superiority of three hundred thousand rifles over the Allies. However, on the opening of their offensive, March 21st, the number on both sides in this theatre of war was approximately equal. The remaining German divisions were on the way and did arrive in time to be used in their offensive. It was while he had this superiority of numbers that Ludendorff hoped to win the war, that is before the arrival of the Americans would gradually swing the numerical superiority to the side of the Allies. As the Allies were on the defensive it was a simple matter for Ludendorff to assemble superior forces where he intended to attack.

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To give you an idea of the drain on our forces caused by the Government's Eastern policy, in February, 1916, there were four hundred thousand British in Egypt, and by the end of that year sixty-four thousand British and one hundred and fifty-six thousand Indians in Mesopotamia. As Sir William Robertson in summing up this policy says, "it is no exaggeration to say that every mistake we made in our wars with France more than one hundred years ago had been repeated." We had committed ourselves to expeditions on a large scale and in remote theatres which were strategically unsound and which had not been properly thought out. The false direction thus given to our strategy imperilled the chances of ultimate success and at least was bound to hang round our necks like a millstone for the remainder of the war. One must also consider the matter from the point of shipping as well as man-power, and it must be realized that under no circumstances could any of these theatres be considered as decisive ones.

Now the Germans in their last great offensive made five separate and distinct attacks.

The first, starting on the 21st March on the front of the Third and Fifth British Armies which was stopped just short of Amiens and so failed in its object.

The second, commencing on the 9th April and extending from north of the Vimy bastion to Ypres. Here, as in the first attack, great progress was made, but the attack was finally held and battle ended on 30th April.

The results of these two attacks were that 55 British Divisions had held 109 German Division at the terrific cost of 300,000 casualties including 70,000 prisoners, 1,000 guns, 4,000 machine guns and 200 tanks. Eight divisions had to be reduced to cadre to find draft for others.

May 27th saw the third German offensive against the French and five British Divisions sent down for a rest. The attack took place on the Chemin des Dames and was finally stopped by the arrival of the Americans at Chateau Thierry.

In the meantime British re-inforcements of seasoned troops from other theatres of war were arriving and from June onwards 300,000 Americans were arriving in France monthly.

The German fourth objective to take Compeigne and widen the base of the Marne triangle between Soissons and Compeigne took place on the 9th June. The French were ready; counter-attacked at the right time, and the Germans suffered heavy losses for small and really useless gains.

The fifth German objective was planned on a large scale, the hope being the capture of Paris. It started on July 15th but owing to lack of secrecy the French were prepared. To the east of Rheims, Gouraud (4th French Army) withdrew to his battle positions and 25 German

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Divisions were shattered. West of Reims the Germans made some progress but were held mainly through the fine courage of the 3rd and 28th American Divisions which held the sector east of Chateau Thierry. On the 18th Foch counter-attacked between Soissons and Chateau Thierry and by the first days of August the Germans were back across the Vesle.

It is to be noted that in this action the Germans were opposed by five American and four British divisions in addition to the French.

The failure of this offensive marked the beginning of the end as far as the Germans were concerned. Where had they failed? It was not due initially to lack of numbers for it has been estimated that on July 15th they had still 250,000 more infantry than the Allies.

I have two reasons to offer for your consideration.

First: It is a military doctrine that the decisive act of the battle in the war of manoeuvre must be prepared systematically by a number of preliminary combats and that the opening for the finishing blow has to be created. Experience had demonstrated that the attacker in the first rush was often successful in penetrating the enemy's defences but was ultimately always stopped by his reserves. Therefore the opening for the decisive blow was not created until the enemy's reserves were used up. Ludendorff put the cart before the horse.

Second: Ludendorff's strategy or tactics was a compromise between the policy of a succession of attacks intended to prepare for a great final effort and the policy of attempting to break through in one battle.

He failed in the first by continuing his assaults beyond the period when he was inflicting more loss than he suffered, and he failed in the second because he would not, or could not continue them to the point where decisive success was obtainable, and in acting as he did he sapped his strength. He allowed himself to be drawn too far by early success so that he was too late and too weak when ready for his final effort.

To retrogress. On July 4th General Haig was thinking of assuming the offensive. A small action took place at Hamel the object being to clear the Villers-Brettoneux Plateau and capture Hamel. This was a necessary preliminary to an attack on the Amiens salient. The work was entrusted to the Australian Corps, 60 of the newest tanks and four companies of the 32nd Division. The attack was a complete success. The Australians complained that the Americans were good lads but too rough.

From the result of this fight Haig was convinced that we should assume the offensive, and on July 13th issued the order for the attack of the 8th August.

To come back to Foch's plans. When asked by a politician in Paris what he intended to do he demonstrated by striking out with his right hand, then with his left, again with his right followed by a big kick. In studying his strategy, I am of the opinion that he divided it into three phases:—

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- (i) A series of short, sharp blows to confuse the Germans and use up their reserves.
- (ii) The decisive blow.
- (iii) The pursuit.

His preparation (i) was carried out as follows:—

(a) On 8th August Haig attacked between Amiens and Molancourt with his right astride the Amiens-Roye Road, and by 12th August was established on the line Roye-Chaulnes with the result that the Germans to the south with their flank threatened and the use of the Chaulnes railway denied them gradually gave way and by the middle of August the French were almost everywhere back to the line they held in the summer of 1916 (Roye-Lassigny plateau).

As the Germans had now brought up their reserves the fight here was stopped, and on 18th August the French Tenth Army drove in the enemy outposts with a local operation and on the 19th attacked in force, and by the 20th had captured the heights between the Oise and Aisne with 8,000 prisoners and 400 guns.

(b) The next day the battle opens again, but this time it is the British who open the Battle of Baupaume. The Third Army attacks north of the Aisne and the Fourth Army is to conform by advancing astride the Somme on Peronne. This operation was divided into two phases. On the 21st, the Third Army made good the line of the Amiens-Arras railway. This was followed on the 23rd by the main attack. The German defence crumbled and the Thiepval Ridge, Pozieres, Courcellette, Martinpuich and Miramont fell in rapid succession. By the 26th this advance was causing the Germans anxiety about their troops between the Somme and Oise and they were withdrawn, so by the 29th August the Fourth Army reached the left bank of the Somme opposite Peronne, and the French held Nesle and Noyon. On the night of 30-31, the 2nd Australian Division took Mont St. Quentin and as a direct result Peronne fell on September 1st.

(c) While the Battle of Bapaume was in full blast, preparations were being made for another attack. On August 26th, the 2nd and 3rd Canadians and 51st Division captured Monchy le Preux and drove the enemy into the Drocourt-Queant switch. This very formidable line of defences had been completed after the capture of the Vimy Ridge and was a northern extension of the Hindenburg Line to Lille.

On September 2nd the 1st and 4th Canadians, 4th, 52nd, 57th and 63rd Divisions and 40 tanks broke through this network of defences, and in seven hours completely defeated nine German divisions. The results of the great feat were far reaching. The Germans south of Queant had to hurry back into the shelter of the Hindenburg defences, and by September 9th they were back in the outpost division of their main defensive system. In other places, in order to straighten out their line, the Germans also went back and we re-occupied Kemmel Hill and Bailleul, Merville and Neuve, and the French Ham on the Somme, and Chauny on the Oise.

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It is to be noted that in one month all the gains with the exception of some ground near Ypres captured from us by the first two German offensives, had been regained. Also when the Germans retreated in 1917, they did so according to plan over a period of three months except for the Battle of Arras in which we got 21,000 prisoners and 220 guns; this time they were driven back in a month and lost 53,000 prisoners and 470 guns. They could no longer retreat according to plan.

(d) While Haig was keeping Ludendorff busy in the north, Pershing was collecting his scattered divisions into the First American Army and on September 12th captured the St. Mihiel salient. This was a strong position, covered by woods and defended by nine German and Austrian Divisions, but at the time of the attack they were preparing to withdraw from the salient. The Yankees got 16,000 prisoners and 443 guns. This victory completed Foch's preparation for his decisive blow which he was preparing to launch.

In considering the phases of the battle which I have outlined I want to draw your attention to the rapidity of Foch's short, sharp blows, and to his refusal to continue the conflict a moment longer once it became apparent that the German reserves had established equilibrium. This also caused the dispersion of German reserves as they could not foretell where they would be required.

The British and French attack at Amiens August 8th and finished August 12th.

French Tenth Army opens offensive August 18th. Finished August 20th.

Battle of Baupaume opens August 21st and finishes September 1st.

Monchy Le Preux taken August 26th.

Drocourt Quant line broken September 2nd.

Compare this with Ludendorff's ponderous blows giving time between each for his opponent to get his breath.

First attack March 21st to 29th.

Second attack April 9th to 30th.

Third attack May 27th to June 6th.

Fourth attack June 10th to 15th.

Fifth attack July 15th, counter attacked on July 18th.

As I said before, the American victory at St. Mihiel completed the first stage of Foch's battle. His immediate object had been to free Paris and Amiens from the German threat and clear the strategic railways he needed for a free movement of his troops. His ultimate object had been to exhaust the German reserves preparatory to his decisive attack. His success in the first we see from the map.

At the end of May the Germans had 207 divisions on the western front, of whom 66 were in reserve, fit and rested, ready for battle.

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On September 12th they had 185 divisions on the western front, 21 of which were in reserve, fit and rested. Twenty-two divisions had been broken up to furnish reinforcements to the other divisions. Five divisions were on the move to the west but did not arrive in time for the next phase. On the other hand the allied strength had rapidly gone up. The British Army which in July could put only 53 divisions in the line now had 59 divisions, the battalions of which were now back to normal strength.

The Americans had 16 divisions in the line and nine practically fit to join the fight. Counting the American divisions as equal to two other divisions, the allied strength had gone up by 32 divisions, while the Germans had decreased by 22 less five on the way. In guns our losses had been made up and the numbers actually increased from 18,000 in May to 21,000 in September, while we had captured over 2,000 German guns and large stocks of ammunition. The Germans had also brought over the Bolshevik theory from Russia.

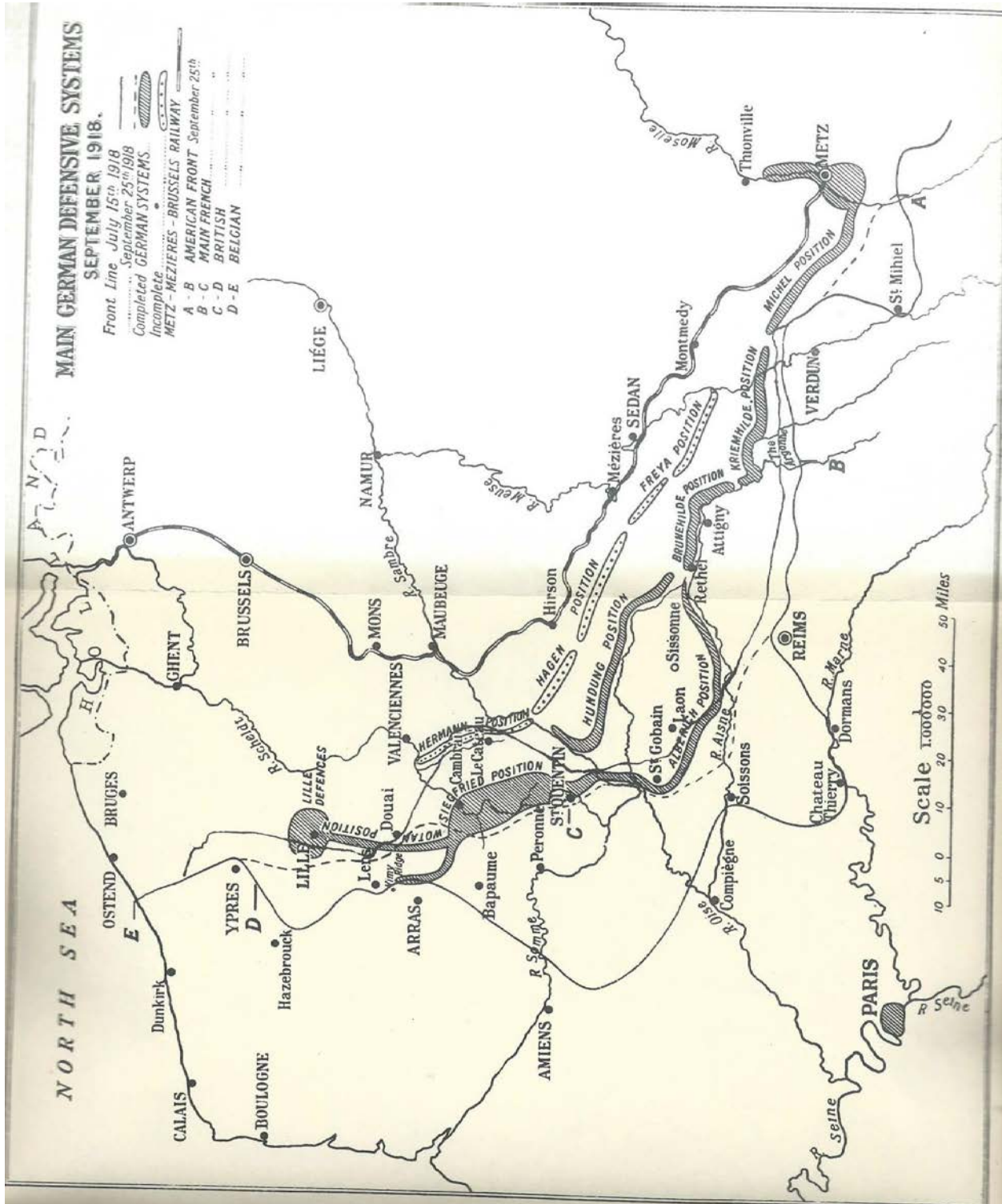
We now come to Foch's decisive stroke. The breaking of the Hindenburg Line.

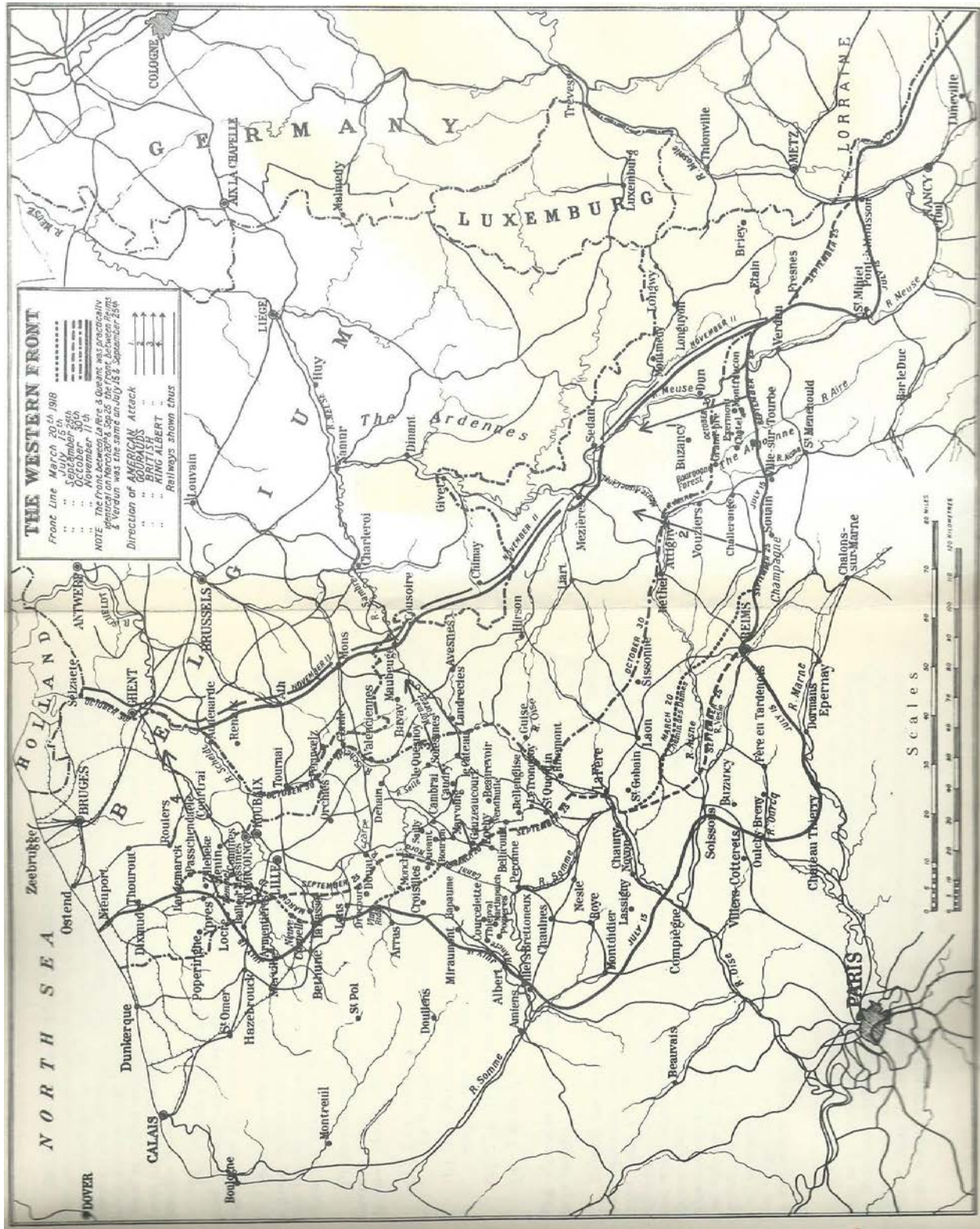
In order to recall to your minds the really stupendous task involved in this operation, I would like to digress for a moment and give you a short description of these defences.

At the end of August 16th the situation from the German point of view was by no means rosy. Russia was still formidable. The Austrians required a great deal of support. Rumania was coming in against them. The Verdun offensive had failed, and the Franco-British attacks on the Somme were pressing them hard and using up their reserves. In order to finish off Russia and Rumania it was necessary for the Germans to act on the defensive and also to shorten their line in the west. This would free the necessary troops for an offensive in the east and south.

The question was where to shorten this line? They could not go back in Belgium as they required Ostend and Zeebrugge as submarine bases. To withdraw from the Vimy Ridge would give France the use of her coal deposits; also it would be a difficult position to attack when they resumed the offensive. Further south the St. Gobain massif formed a pivot for his centre which it was important to hold. Between Reims and Verdun a retirement would shorten the front, but bring the enemy too close to the Metz-Sedan-Mezieres railway. In the east he could not give ground without exposing Metz to shell fire or Alsace and Lorraine to invasion. However, by withdrawing from the great arc between St. Gobain and Vimy he would shorten his line and conserve troops. So as the cord to the arc, the original Hindenburg Line was begun, and in the course of time became what you now see on the map.

It started from the Vimy Ridge defences east of Arras, ran south-east to the Canal du Nord eight miles west of Cambrai, thence almost north and south past the western outskirts of St. Quentin through La Fere to the St. Gobain massif. (This was the part to which he withdrew in January and February, 1917).





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Before the Battle of Arras the Drocourt Queant switch was dug. This was the beginning of the vast extensions of the Hindenburg system carried out in 1917 during the whole of which time the Germans were on the defensive. Russian prisoners of war and pressed labour from France and Belgium were used in its construction. The term "line" is rather misleading. These defences were as much as ten miles deep, and consisted of a whole series of lines and defended localities heavily wired.

The trenches and machine gun posts were often of concrete, and even underground barracks were built for the garrison. They were sighted on the reverse slopes to prevent ground artillery observation.

How were these defences captured? They were designed to meet a great bombardment, but sound-ranging and counter battery work and the development of the tank all combined to neutralize them and allow our infantry to get to close grips with the defenders.

Foch, strongly backed by Haig, had made up his mind that the German reserves were sufficiently reduced to permit his making his decisive blow. His plan was as follows:—

- (a) The American Army to advance between the Meuse and the Argonne upon Sedan.
- (b) The French Fourth Army (Gouraud) between the Argonne and Reims on Mezieres.
- (c) The British on Maubeuge.
- (d) The Belgians on Ghent.

The plan was bold yet simple, and if successful, would have tremendous results.

Behind the front at a distance of about 45 miles from the British lines opposite Cambrai, and of about 20 miles from Meuse-Argonne front, ran the Metz-Sedan-Mezieres-Maubeuge-Mons and Brussels railway. This was the spinal cord of the Germans' defensive system, and was Ludendorff's main means of moving his reserves and military stores rapidly from flank to flank, and was the last good line of lateral communication west of the Ardennes. His attack if successful would cut this cord, prevent the lateral movement of troops and stores and indeed, make the withdrawal of the German Army almost impossible. Furthermore, we must note how the Allies struck at the corners of the bulge. Success at the corners would make it imperative for troops in the centre to be withdrawn.

Foch knew that Ludendorff in his anxiety to protect Cambrai and his precious Hindenburg Line had been weakening his forces in Flanders so he proposed to take advantage of this by making a third attack in Belgium with the Belgian Army reinforced by part of the French Sixth Army and the British Second Army. This attack if successful would clear the Belgian coast and threaten the enemy's communications with Germany north of the Ardennes.

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Now we shall see how the allied plan worked. The American Army assembled behind the French, and when these were withdrawn on the night of 25-26th September and the American First Army attacked on the morning of 27th September the Germans had failed to bring up reinforcements and their four divisions in the line were overwhelmed by the nine attacking Americans. By the evening of the 27th they had secured the first line defences over their whole front, and penetrated to a depth of seven miles in the centre, and by the evening of the 29th they had secured the Germans' second system of defences between the Meuse and the Argonne and in places penetrated the third system. During this operation they had captured ten thousand prisoners.

The French Fourth Army attacked at the same time as the Americans. They had more opposition and the ground having been fought over before was more difficult. They advanced about three miles the first day and it took them three days to force their way through the old battlefield. The French task then became easier as the Americans' grew harder, and by October 1st they were on the outskirts of Chellerange, a penetration of nine miles, and had captured thirteen thousand prisoners and three hundred guns.

The British attack was timed for the morning of September 27th and on the evening before a great bombardment was opened on a thirty-mile front from a point two miles northwest of St. Quentin as far as the Sensee River northwest of Cambrai. Then in the grey light of the early dawn the IV, VI, XVII and Canadian Corps, in all thirteen divisions of the Third and First Armies, advanced on the Cambrai front, stormed the immensely strong Canal Du Nord, swept beyond Bournon Wood and Fontaine Notre Dame and captured Sailly, a penetration of six miles through the strongest defences the Germans had found it possible to construct. We were near enough to the railways centring on Cambrai to deny their use to the Germans. Ten thousand prisoners and two hundred guns were captured.

Further north the Belgians and six divisions of the Second Army and two French divisions attacked on September 28th, overwhelmed the five divisions there who were defending seventeen miles of front from Vormezele four and one-half miles south of Ypres to Dixmude, and by evening of October 1st had penetrated almost to the outskirts of Roulers-Plumer, throwing in three more divisions, crossed the Messines Ridge, cleared the Lys Valley and advanced to within two miles of Menin. Thus Lille, like Cambrai, was menaced from the north. Here the British alone took five thousand prisoners and one hundred guns.

While King Albert was putting the finishing touches to his victory the bombardment which had begun on the evening of September 26th on the front of the Fourth, Third and First Armies had been continued on the front of the former throughout the 27th and 28th, while the two other armies were fighting their way towards Cambrai. During this bombardment, which was necessitated owing to the fact that the St. Quentin Canal ran just west of the German advanced defences,

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and tanks could only be used in two places where the canal ran underground (one $4\frac{1}{2}$ and the other $3\frac{1}{5}$ miles long), nearly one million shells weighing twenty-five thousand tons were fired.

At 5.30 a.m. on September 29th the Fourth Army attacked the heart of the Hindenburg Line on a front of twelve miles. The French First Army extended the battle to the south and the Second Corps of the Third Army to the north. It was here that the 46th Division equipped with life belts and rafts swam the canal in the face of the enemy and ended the day by capturing four thousand prisoners and seventy guns. On September 30th and following days the enemy were driven back on the front of Fourth, Third and First Armies, and by the 5th of October the whole of Hindenburg's defences were in our hands. In the battle the British took thirty-six thousand five hundred prisoners and three hundred and eighty guns.

The effect of these blows was that the enemy was forced to yield in the intervals and by the end of September had begun to withdraw between Lens and Armentieres and was showing signs of evacuating the St. Gobain bulge. He was at once pressed by the French and British on these fronts and the battle thereupon enveloped the whole 250 miles from Dixmude to the Meuse. The decision to make the decisive attack was justified. The "big kick" had been delivered, and the whole German front was crumbling under it. For a time, on the British front at least, the German morale broke down. Prisoners were taken from the German infantry in great numbers and without much resistance. There were signs of confusion and disorder in the enemy ranks although the artillery and machine guns continued to fight with their old devotion and skill.

The resolution of the higher command was badly shaken. There were no men in Germany to replace the tremendous losses. The stores of all descriptions piled up behind the lines could not be moved. The Allies had captured thousands of guns and the German factories could not begin to replace them. With dwindling resources Ludendorff saw himself faced with three great dangers. The Americans, more numerous and efficient than he believed they could possibly be, were threatening his communication between Metz and Mezieres. In the centre the British Army had beaten the best of his troops in their strongest defences and he had no more Hindenburg Lines. In Flanders the Belgians whom he had classed as only capable of defence had won their way into the open and were fighting with unexpected dash. On September 28th he insisted on a request for an armistice.

Owing to the state of the ground which had been fought over the destruction of roads, bridges and railways, the Allies now found it almost impossible to get on even against a beaten enemy. The Belgians were within two miles of Roulers on October 1st, but did not enter the town until the 14th. Cambrai was enveloped north and south on September 30th but not entered until October 9th. The French were in St. Quentin on October 1st but had advanced only eight miles by the 10th.

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On both sides of the Argonne the French and Americans experienced great difficulty in advancing and their progress was very slow. This delay in following up the Germans gave them a breathing space and Ludendorff got his nerve back and formed a new plan. His plan was to retire at once in Flanders and establish his troops behind the water obstacle of the Ghent Canal and River Scheldt as far south as Valenciennes. With this water obstacle in front to protect him from tanks there was a chance of gaining the time necessary to organize an orderly and gradual retreat from Belgium, provided Haig and the French First Army could be checked long enough between Valenciennes and the Oise. This was his weakest link. This was the German position. It was not dug, but as it followed the course of the River Selle had great natural strength which it was hoped would compensate for lack of artificial protection.

South of the Oise he was better prepared. East of St. Gobain and Laon was the Hundung position, and further south the Brunehilde, Kriemhilde and Michel positions all well entrenched. He therefore started to get into the Hundung position at once, and prepared for a similar withdrawal to the Brunehilde position and further south attempted to make full use of the country to delay the Americans. He got away fairly well in Flanders but the main retreat in front of the British between Cambrai and St. Quentin was not carried out according to plan.

By hard, skilful and incessant work on the part of the engineers and others, bridges were thrown across the Canals du Nord and St. Quentin and roads made possible for traffic, and by 6th October before the German rearguards were organized, the Fourth and Third Armies were able to begin the second battle of Le Cateau. The battle culminated in a fine attack made on a front of seventeen miles at dawn on 8th October. It was a bold measure to attempt to assemble in the dark, on ground seamed with trenches and scarred by shell fire and covered with wire, such a mass of troops on such a wide front, but it was the time to be bold and it succeeded. The immediate result was the capture of Cambrai, the turning of the retreat into a rout, and the driving of the enemy in disorder across the Selle. Here we captured twelve thousand prisoners and two hundred and fifty guns.

By 16th October Ludendorff appears to have been fairly well satisfied with his retreat. His left and centre were back in their new position, and his losses, if heavy, had not been overwhelming. His right was not yet in position, but he had every hope that it would be able to complete its move without undue loss. This is shown by his attitude towards the German cabinet. Whereas on September 30th and October 1st he was pressing for an armistice at any price, he now, while still urging an armistice, would not agree to the stopping of the "U" Boat campaign, or accept terms that would leave Germany militarily defenceless.

However, on 17th October the Battle of the Selle began with an attack by the First French Army and the IX and II American Corps and XIII Corps of the Fourth Army against the German left from Le Cateau southwards. The enemy fought well, but after three

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days of strenuous fighting they were forced across the Sambre. The battle was then extended to the north, and seven divisions of the Third and First Army attacked at 2 a.m. October 20th and helped by tanks stormed the heights on the east bank of the Selle. The result of this battle was that a breach was made in Ludendorff's rallying position thirty-five miles wide and six miles deep, and twenty thousand prisoners and four hundred and seventy-five guns were captured.

On October 14th the Americans had broken into the forward position of the Kriemhilde system and after eight days of very hard fighting between the Meuse and Grandpre they pierced this position near its centre. The result was the exhaustion of the German defensive power on the Meuse in the same way as Haig had done on the Cambrai-St. Quentin front and the straightening out of the American line so that by the end of the month it was well placed for another general forward movement.

As already pointed out, the success of Ludendorff's plan for a deliberate withdrawal to the Meuse depended upon holding off the British on the Selle and the Americans on the Kriemhilde line. He was unable to do this, and the German Government became convinced that there was no line upon which the German troops could be relied upon to stand.

This ended Foch's big kick or decisive blow. The Germans had suffered a tremendous defeat. Since 8th August they had lost to the Allies some two hundred thousand prisoners and thirty-three hundred guns, of which the British took one hundred and fifty thousand prisoners and over two thousand guns. With their last natural line of resistance penetrated, could the Germans hope to get their Army back?

The situation was as follows:—

The German armies had suffered a series of crushing defeats. Her navy was seething with mutiny. Her working class population were on the verge of starvation and all her allies had collapsed. The military power of the United States was only half developed. The output of the Allies munitions factories was still increasing. They had won a definite superiority in the air and the "U" Boat menace had been held if not mastered. There could be only one end to the war. The question was when would the end come?

When the Germans first invaded France and Belgium the troops deployed on the western front had crossed between the Dutch frontier and Metz—a distance of 115 miles. In August, 1914, fifty-four divisions passed this line. The battle front had since extended into an arc with a length (circumference) of 350 miles manned by 190 divisions. These divisions were smaller than in 1914, but their appurtenances—guns, mortars, machine guns, aeroplanes and war material of all kinds—had in the four years multiplied exceedingly.

On October 3rd, after his great retreat, Ludendorff had a front of 250 miles with 160 divisions. Therefore, to make good their retreat, the Germans had to get back across 115 miles about three times as

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many men and material as Moltke had sent westwards in August, 1914.

Let us take a look at this front. Behind their centre are the forests and mountains of the Belgian and Luxembourg Ardennes, a region traversed by few roads and fewer railways, and washed by the Meuse which has a limited number of bridges. The main exits lay north and south of the Ardennes, in the north from Liege to Namur, in the south Mezieres to Longuyou. Also the course of the Meuse from Mezieres to Namur runs generally northward, but at Namur where the Sambre joins it, it makes a sharp turn eastward. The consequence of this is that troops on the Scheldt on either side of Ghent would in their retreat when they reached the longitude of Namur still have fifty miles to march to the river and would only find east of Namur four points of passage.

If the British succeeded in crossing the Meuse between Namur and Dinant before the German forces in Belgium had got over the river, there was every possibility that they would be driven against the Dutch frontier and forced to surrender. If the German centre had not made good its retreat before Gouraud (Tenth Army) and the Americans captured Mezieres and Sedan it was in danger of being cut off. It was therefore no longer a question of a leisurely retreat to the Meuse, as planned by Ludendorff, but an extremely hurried withdrawal, and even to do that it was essential that the British advance on Namur and the American progress towards Sedan be delayed.

Foch realizing conditions to the full proposed to take every advantage of the situation by continuing the general plan of his great battle. Gouraud and the Americans were to strike for Mezieres and Sedan to block the southern exits while the British armies made for Maubeuge and Mons and threatened Namur. On the rest of the front the allies were to continue their role of harassing and delaying the German retreat. The French and two American divisions were to force Scheldt about Audenarde.

On November 1st the last drive began with a Franco-American attack. The Americans broke clean through and by November 6th a division of the First American Corps reached the Meuse opposite the southern outskirts of Sedan, twenty-one miles from the starting point of November 1st. Gouraud on the other hand had more opposition and did not reach his objective, Mezieres, until evening of the 10th November. The attack spread southwards and on the morning of 11th November the Franco-American front was within six miles of Montmedy.

On November 1st Haig attacked south of Valenciennes and by the evening of the 2nd had turned the line of the Scheldt from the south. This gave him more elbow room, and on November 4th the Fourth, Third and First Armies attacked on a thirty-mile front from the Sambre Canal eight miles south of the Mormal Forest to the north of Valenciennes, and by evening the left of the Third Army and the

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right of the First Army were five miles beyond Valenciennes. The French First Army on the right of our Fourth Army had forced a crossing of the Sambre Canal to the north of Guise and kept pace with its advance. The three British Armies captured nineteen thousand prisoners and forty-five guns. The First French Army took five thousand prisoners. South of Ghent the two French Corps which had each an American division with them drove back the Germans along in Scheldt and the 91st American Division captured Audenarde.

From this time until the end, the pursuit was delayed mainly by the very complete destruction of roads, railways and bridges by the Germans as they fell back. By the 5th our troops were well beyond the Mormal Forest. By the 8th the Fourth Army occupied Avesnes. On the 8th the Germans began to fly from the Scheldt, and finally the pursuit was stopped by the Armistice of November 11th.

In reviewing this period of the Great War I would like to draw your attention to the following salient points:—

- (a) The weakening of the British effectives owing to Lloyd-George's Eastern policy.
- (b) The failure of Ludendorff to obtain a decisive success owing to faulty tactics in that he failed to use up his opponents' reserves before putting in the decisive attack, and his failure to maintain his objective.
- (c) The realization by the Allies that war committees were useless, and the appointment of a generalissimo on the western front, and how much more effective they became once their policy was co-ordinated and directed by one man.
- (d) The cool and calculating courage of Foch, Pershing and Haig in deciding on the decisive stroke, especially the latter. He was aware of the tremendous task confronting the British Armies in attacking the Hindenburg Line. He knew that the British War Cabinet was opposed to it as they thought they foresaw failure. In fact, so pessimistic were they, that although previous to the main attack the British had taken over one hundred thousand prisoners no word of congratulations had been sent the Army or the Commander-in-Chief. Although they were not prepared to veto the plan they felt so doubtful of its success that they were not prepared to support it and wished it postponed until the spring. Think what another year of war would have added to our war debts even if the aggregate casualties were the same, which would be unlikely, as the respite would have enabled the Germans to have increased their defences, especially anti-tank weapons and aircraft.
- (e) Once the plan of campaign was decided upon, the amazing speed at which attack after attack was pushed home, every one a definite part of the whole, and all aimed at the same

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objective, i.e., the cutting of Ludendorff's lateral line of communication, once astride that at the selected points, the destruction of the German Army was certain.

The data for this lecture has been taken from the various official despatches, Sir F. Maurice's "The Last Four Months" and "Ludendorff's War Memories".

Also I should like to point out that any views or opinions put forward tonight are my own personal ones and are in no way to be considered official.

by courtesy of MacLean's Magazine

