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Operations at Arras

*An Address to the Alberta Military Institute by Brigadier General
J. S. Stewart, C.M.G., D.S.O., at Calgary, Jan. 8th, 1932*

THERE are those who, more or less obsessed by the high cost of living and heavy taxation, have predicted that the downfall and bankruptcy of the Empire is imminent. The term "bankruptcy" is usually applied to financial operations, and it could not describe the condition of a great Empire that has recently emerged victorious from a world conflict. Nations are ruined and bankrupt whose honor

BRITISH EFFORT, 1917		
Infantry	67 Divisions. Cavalry	Separate Attacks
62	5	
2	-----	8
1	-----	7
9	-----	6
10	-----	5
12	-----	4
14	-----	3
7 and	3 -----	2
7 and	2 -----	1
Total—246.	Average—3.83.	
ROADS, 1918		
46,700 Motor Vehicles. 30,000 Lorries.		
400,000 Horses.		
4,500 Miles of Roadway to Maintain.—1 mile requires 200 tons monthly.		
1918 Store output—3,500,000 tons.		
RAILWAYS		
1916	1918	
62 Locomotives.	1,200 Locomotives.	
3,840 Trucks.	52,600 Trucks.	
1918		
Trains Weekly -----	1,800	
Load Weekly -----	400,000 tons.	
1918		
Built 2,340 miles Broad Gauge.		
1,348 miles Narrow Gauge.		

is tarnished, and whose physical forces and resources are spent. Now, this nation is in great danger, no doubt, but is not near bankruptcy, for the courage and chivalry of her armies in France saved her.

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During the summer of 1917, it fell to the lot of the British Army to shoulder a heavy burden in the fighting, and consequently it suffered heavy losses. From January 1st to December 5th, 1917, the British Army in France, which consisted of 62 infantry and 5 cavalry divisions, carried out 246 separate divisional attacks—an average of 3.83 attacks for each infantry division.

Sir Douglas Haig commanded the British forces on the Western front for a little over three years, from 19th December, 1915, to the spring of 1919. Sir John French commanded the British Expeditionary Force for a little under a year-and-a-half. During French's command some of the most critical periods of the war occurred. Yet for great endeavors the years 1916-17-18 form the greatest page in the history of the British Empire. It was fought always in the most critical and most momentous theatre of the war. All other theatres of war are insignificant when compared with the Western front.

Unless the succession of battles commenced on the Somme in July, 1916, and ending with the battle of the Sambre in November, 1918, are viewed as part of one long campaign it is not possible intelligently to follow the course of the war or comprehend the military lessons.

To direct attention to any single phase of that incessant and stupendous conflict, and seek in it the explanation of our success to the exclusion of any other phase, possibly less immediate in its effects, is to run the risk of forming unsound opinions as to the character and requirements of modern war.

Taking the four and a half years of warfare on the Western front as one continuous battle, you will find those stages and phases that mark all great struggles in history where the combatants are evenly matched. First, there is the preliminary stage, in which the troops deploy, endeavoring while doing so to gain some early position of advantage, which might be pushed home to early decision. In former wars, this period was marked by skirmishes between the outposts of armies. Here, a penetration would be made; there, they would be driven back. In the last war, this phase came to an end when the enemy was thrown back on the Marne by the French under Joffre, and shortly afterwards there were constructed two long irregular lines of trenches extending from Switzerland to the sea.

In the second phase, we find that, battle having been joined, the main forces of the opposing armies are pitted against each other in close and costly combat. Each commander tries to break the morale and power of resistance of his opponent, at the same time accumulating in his own hand a strong reserve with which he can manoeuvre and, when signs of weakness in his opponent are seen, strike the decisive blow. The greatest possible pressure against the enemy's whole front must be maintained, especially as the crisis of battle approaches. Then every man, horse, and gun is required to co-operate to complete

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the overthrow and exploit success. In this phase of the struggle, the losses of both sides will be heavy, for in it the price of victory is paid. If the opposing forces are approximately equal in number, morale, guns, and equipment, there is no way of eliminating this phase of the engagement or avoiding payment of the price.

In former battles this phase did not last for more than a few days, and was often completed in a few hours, but when armies of millions are engaged, it will necessarily be longer. It will include violent crises of fighting, which viewed separately and apart from the whole will appear as great undecisive battles.

In this phase we can place the battle of Arras, which was amongst those battles which gradually wore down the strength and resources of the enemy.

In the third and final phase, we find that whether from superior leadership or better fighting qualities or greater resources or greater tenacity of purpose, one side will gain ascendancy over the other. The commander of the side which has suffered most must choose as to whether he will retire and break off the battle if possible, or risk his all in one last daring throw for victory. You will remember that Napoleon risked his all when he threw in his Guards at Waterloo. All day he had striven to break those hollow squares of the British, and then gave that order, known the world over, "Up, Guards, and at them!"

In the last war the corresponding action of the German commenced in March, 1918, and continued for four months until they were held up by the French, assisted by some British and American troops.

The Napoleonic throw was over in a few minutes. The German effort ran for some months, but the feature of warfare is the same in both instances. Anyone who studies strategy will not be misled, for the great number of troops which the German leaders were able to accumulate and spread over a long front spun out the effort, and left the result for months in doubt.

The rapid collapse of Germany's military power in the latter half of 1918 was the logical outcome of the fighting of the previous two years, and it would not have taken place but for that ceaseless period of attrition. Whilst the continued pressure of the blockade sapped the power of resistance of the German people, it is to the great battles of '16 and '17 that we must look for the secret for our success.

Some critics state that so far as leadership and generalship are concerned the British lacked brilliance and made no headway until Foch was given command in March, 1918. They state we were led without brains and that the fighting was brutal and all they can do is to praise the ultimate victory. But that victory would not have been ours if the fierce fighting had not first taken place. I can still

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look into the face of the woman whose husband fell in '16, or the orphan whose father was killed in '17, because that fighting had to take place in order that victory might come.

Let us first of all get a picture of the Western front in the fall of 1916. As a result of the fighting on the Somme, which was staged in order to relieve the pressure at Verdun, the German forces were placed in an unfavorable position. They were left in an awkward salient between the Ancre and the Scarpe. At a conference held at Chantilly on 18th November, 1916, at which military representatives of the Allied forces were present, plans were laid for the forthcoming spring offensive in '17. Haig suggested he should attack both shoulders of this German salient, the Fifth Army operating from the south, and the Third Army from the northwest at Arras, and these two attacks, if successful, would pinch off the salient, and would make the withdrawal of the enemy troops very costly if it was not taken in due time. To this plan Joffre agreed. The general plan for the offensive was that there should be a series of offensives on all the Allied fronts, so timed as to prevent the enemy from withdrawing troops from any one sector in order to reinforce the threatened front. Thus, if an attack were staged on the British front, followed shortly by a thrust on the French front, the enemy would not be able to recover and reinforce the threatened sectors.

At this time, however, a school of thought arose in France which believed the war could be won without this "periode d'usure," and they desired to get back to a war of movement. In looking around, they decided that General Nivelle was the man to take charge of their forces in such a movement.

Nivelle was selected to replace Joffre, who was given a position as consultant to the French government. With him went Foch, as the French people felt he had lost too many men over small objectives at the Somme. Nivelle took command on 13th December, 1916. On December 20th, a conference was held between Nivelle and Haig at Cassel. Nivelle placed his plans for the spring offensive before Haig, and materially changed the former plans which had been accepted. First, he suggested Haig should take over more line, and as a result, Haig was forced to take over from Le Transloy to the Amiens-Roy Road, making him responsible for 110 miles of fighting front. Second, the British offensive was to proceed, a much greater assault to be put on by the French on the Aisne. Haig's task would be to engage the enemy and draw as many German divisions to his own front as possible, and thus prepare the way for the French attack. Third, the date of the assault was placed earlier.

Nivelle did not appear to have the confidence of the British Army authorities that Joffre had and as a side issue let me say the French people were not satisfied with the British Army in the spring of 1918.

Haig was advised by the British government to assist Nivelle in every way possible, and at a conference held at Calais on 27th Feb-

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ruary, between some members of the British cabinet and the French commander, it was agreed that Nivelle should be appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Western Front.

At the Chantilly conference between Joffre and Haig, it had been agreed that not only should Haig attack on the Arras salient, but that he should also include the Vimy Ridge. Haig had decided he must secure Vimy Ridge in order to make safe the left flank of his attack east of Arras. At first Joffre demurred, feeling that, as the French had failed to capture Vimy Ridge, the British would also be unsuccessful.

When Nivelle took command, he informed Haig that the latter must give up his plan to attack Vimy Ridge. There then commenced a certain amount of unpleasantness. Haig insisted he must secure the high ground on the Ridge as this would deprive the enemy of observation to the southeast and to the west.

During preparation for the Arras battle two events occurred which greatly interfered with the plans. First, there was the retirement of the Germans on the Fifth Army front to the Hindenburg Line. The British intelligence had long foreseen this and had warned Nivelle that the enemy was about to retire to a new line, which was in the course of erection from St. Quentin skirting Cambrai. This Hindenburg Line was the latest development in modern field defences, and early in December Haig warned Nivelle of this approaching withdrawal. But Nivelle would not listen. On 12th March, Haig ordered the Fifth Army to follow up the retirement of the enemy, and the plans for the attack were confused.

Second was the revolution in Russia. The Russian military representatives at Chantilly had agreed to the plans of following up the British and French attacks by one on their own front. When the revolution occurred these plans were abandoned and our Ally on the Eastern front was not of any assistance during 1917, and their opposition was so weak that it permitted the withdrawal of forty fresh German divisions from the Eastern to the Western front.

Another event upset Haig's plans for 1917 in the collapse of Italy. In Italy's first attack she was successful, and then they lost their morale and courage, and Foch was sent to Italy as the military adviser, and five British divisions under General Plumer were taken from the Western front at a time when those divisions were most urgently needed in France.

In preparation for the spring offensive of 1917, the most urgent initial step was to provide adequate transportation facilities. The existing lines of railway, narrow and broad gauge, were not capable of handling the traffic, and most of it was diverted to the roads. As winter set in, the heavy traffic broke the roads, and the maintenance and upkeep became an impossibility, and the necessity for some hundreds of miles of railway was great. The railway companies in Great

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Britain and Canada came to the assistance of the army, in giving locomotives, cars, and even rails were torn up from the roadbed west of Edmonton and sent to France for railway building purposes.

The attack at Arras took place on a fifteen-mile front, from a thousand yards below Souchez to Croiselles on the south. On the southern portion of the front the enemy awaited our assault at a part of the Hindenburg Line. About $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 5 miles of the Hindenburg Line were assaulted on April 9th. The centre defences consisted of well-defined trench line systems strengthened by a number of fortified villages and with the marshes of the Scarpe to break up the attack. The northern sector was defended by Vimy Ridge, perhaps the most formidable defensive position in northern France and one which our Ally had in vain endeavored to capture. The defences consisted of three principal lines, and some three to six miles further east, there was the Drocourt-Queant switch, which broke off from the Hindenburg Line west of Cambrai, and extended north to Lens.

The method of attack, though doubtless influenced by Nivelle's methods at Verdun, did not differ materially, save in one respect, from the form of attack developed on the Somme. The advance was to proceed by stages and the troops were given a series of objectives corresponding with the principal German defence lines which were to be taken and consolidated successively, ample time being given for each objective to be secured and the troops organized for the next advance. The principal features to be secured were south of the Scarpe, Monchy-le-Preux Hill, which stands like a sentinel overlooking and guarding all the eastern approaches to Arras, and north of the Scarpe, the Vimy Ridge, the last of the high ground overlooking the Flanders plains.

In this battle a method of attack was developed which had not been tried before. It had been the practice to proceed by stages, which was the very basis of the wearing-out battle. Objectives were divided among the troops of the attacking division and when certain objectives had been secured other units of that division would pass through and carry the attack to a greater depth. In the Arras battle, this method was applied to divisions, and we find that the 37th and 4th divisions were detailed to follow up the 12th, 15th and 9th, which delivered the opening assault astride the Scarpe. When the 12th, 15th and 9th divisions had captured certain objectives, the 37th and 4th were to pass through and carry the assault to more distant points. To carry out such a manoeuvre for the first time required competent staff work on the part of those concerned and a high degree of discipline and training on the part of the troops. So successful was this leap-frogging method that it became the accepted practice in future attacks where it was desired to carry it to the greatest possible depth.

The importance of Vimy Ridge must be apparent to any one who was over the ground, or who has made an examination of it since. Yet there is in England a school of thought which declares that all our fighting on the Western front was brainless and brutal, so far as

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leadership and generalship are concerned. There is no danger of exaggerating the foresight of the British military leaders, who insisted that we secure that great bastion in 1917. A short time before the attack, a party of Nivelles's officers paid a visit to the First Army H.Q., and asked to see the plans for the assault on the Ridge. After they had examined these plans, they failed to conceal their disappointment, even contempt. The Canadians had no chance of capturing Vimy Ridge by such plans as these. The plans were not, as a result of this, in the least degree changed, and in due course the whole of the long-contested Ridge was to fall into our hands and, having gained it, we were to keep it.

The capture of Vimy Ridge was immediately necessary to protect the assault of the five British divisions astride the Scarpe and to assist the Canadians at Vimy the 5th British division was placed at our disposal. The Canadians attacked on a 7,000-yard frontage and in the following order from right to left: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th divisions.

The capture of Vimy Ridge was immediately necessary in April, 1917, in order to secure our left flank in the Arras attack, but we recognize the importance of Vimy Ridge by turning to the events of March and April, 1918. In the fierce assault which the Seventeenth German Army made against our positions on 28th March, 1918, the Ridge was one of his objectives for that day. Ludendorff admits that in his observations on the German failure of that date. But our possession of it was one of the main causes for his defeat at that time. As Hindenburg and Ludendorff both admit, 28th March, 1918, was an unfortunate day for Germany. To the skill of the very fine counter-battery work of the First Army, and the splendid conduct of the troops, the credit for 28th March can first be accorded. But is it certain that the enemy, who attacked with great force and vigor, would have been thrown back as he was if we had not held Vimy Ridge? Or suppose he had held Vimy Ridge when he attacked us north of La Bassee on 9th April, and worked his way over to the Lorette Ridge close by. He would have secured direct observation on the coal fields of Northern France and could have shelled them with great effect. The Lorette Ridge was one of his objectives on 28th March, 1918.

No class of infantry could have carried out successfully the attack at Vimy Ridge unless supported by a good amount of artillery of the highest calibre. I was then with the 2nd Division, and we had 175 18-pounders on a front of about one mile. To break down the morale of the enemy, heavy bombardments were carried out for three weeks prior to the attack. Concentrated fire was directed at Thelus and Vimy.

When the Germans attacked on March 28, they strove to take the Ridge in flank and rear and roll up our defences by that method. The direct attack would not be possible. Just before this assault by the enemy, we took two out of every six guns from the flat ground east of Vimy Ridge and placed them in position on the top of the high

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ground. We were prepared for this flank attack. One major had his guns taken from their pits and turned them at least 40 degrees to the southeast and did his bit at 5500-yard range to hold back the German assault. Just before this assault on 28th March, the 56th Division took over 1500 yards of frontage from our 1st Division, and the 3rd Division moved south another 1500 yards, leaving the 3rd Canadian Division in the line, and we had the 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions in reserve to counter-attack should the enemy make any headway against us east of Arras.

At Arras there were some 400,000 British. Two corps were engaged south of the Scarpe and two north. We had five divisions astride the Scarpe and three cavalry divisions were in readiness to develop the attack beyond the German third-line trenches should our assault be successful.

The object of the Arras battle was to draw the enemy divisions and his guns to our front in order that the French assault on the Aisne could make good. We gained valuable ground, such as Monchy and Vimy, and twenty-three exhausted German divisions were withdrawn. We captured some 13,000 prisoners, and 200 guns and we performed the first portion of the task allotted to us with a completeness and success that delighted and surprised the French.

In 116 days of heavy fighting the British army brought to a close the great wearing-out battle, 1914-18. It is an accepted military doctrine that if you place good soldiers in a defensive position they can hold off a much larger number of men in the attack. This is due to the fact that they are able to dig in and to the long range of their rifles. This doctrine was proved in the fighting on the Somme in 1918.

But when the tide of battle turned and the British armies advanced to the attack, the attacking British forces were numerically inferior to the Germans they met and defeated. In that period we took 187,000 prisoners and 2,850 guns, bringing the total number of our prisoners for the year up to 201,000. All this was accomplished by fifty-nine fighting British divisions, who in the course of the fighting met and defeated ninety-nine German divisions.

It would be impossible to devise a more eloquent testimony to the skill of our leadership and the fine fighting qualities of the British regimental soldier and officer. We have been accustomed to be proud of the record of our soldiers. But the men who formed the British armies of 1914-18 have established new traditions which challenge the high records of the past, and they will be a glorious inspiration to the generations which are to follow us.