

Although this decision involved giving up important positions most gallantly won, I had no doubt as to the correct course under the conditions. Accordingly, on the night of the 4th/5th December the evacuation of the positions held by us north of the Flesquieres Ridge was commenced. On the morning of the 7th December this withdrawal was completed successfully without interference from the enemy.

Before withdrawing the more important of the enemy's field defences were destroyed, and those of his guns which we had been unable to remove were rendered useless. The enemy did not discover our withdrawal for some time, and when, on the afternoon of the 5th December, he began to feel his way forward, he did so with great caution. In spite of his care, on more than one occasion bodies of his infantry were caught in the open by our artillery.

Much skill and courage were shown by our covering troops in this withdrawal, and an incident which occurred on the afternoon of the 6th December in the neighbourhood of Graincourt deserves special notice. A covering party, consisting of two companies of the 1/15th Battalion, London Regiment, 47th Division, much reduced in strength by the fighting at Bournon Wood, found their flank exposed by a hostile attack farther east, and were enveloped and practically cut off. These companies successfully cut their way through to our advanced line of resistance, where they arrived in good order, after having inflicted serious casualties on the enemy.

The new line taken up by us corresponded roughly to the old Hindenburg Reserve Line, and ran from a point about one and a half miles north by east of La Vacquerie, north of Ribecourt and Flesquieres to the Canal du Nord, about one and a half miles north of Havrincourt—i.e., between two and two and a half miles in front of the line held by us prior to the attack of the 20th November. We therefore retained in our possession an important section of the Hindenburg trench system, with its excellent dug-outs and other advantages.

THE RESULTS OF THE BATTLE.

(14) The material results of the three weeks' fighting described above can be stated in general terms very shortly.

We had captured and retained in our possession over 12,000 yards of the former German front line from La Vacquerie to a point opposite Boursies, together with between 10,000 and 11,000 yards of the Hindenburg Line and Hindenburg Reserve Line and the villages of Ribecourt, Flesquieres and Havrincourt. A total of 145 German guns were taken or destroyed by us in the course of the operations, and 11,100 German prisoners were captured.

On the other hand, the enemy had occupied an unimportant section of our front line between Vendhuile and Gonnelieu.

There is little doubt that our operations were of considerable indirect assistance to the Allied forces in Italy. Large demands were made upon the available German reserves at a time when a great concentration of German Divisions was still being maintained in Flanders. There is evidence that German Divisions intended for the Italian theatre were diverted to the Cambrai front, and it is probable that the further concentration of German forces against Italy was suspended for at least two weeks at

a most critical period, when our Allies were making their first stand on the Piave Line.

GENERAL REVIEW.

(15) I have already summarised in the opening paragraphs of this Despatch both the reasons which decided me to undertake the Cambrai operations and the limitations to which those operations were subject.

In view of the strength of the German forces on the front of my attack, and the success with which secrecy was maintained during our preparations, I had calculated that the enemy's prepared defences would be captured in the first rush. I had good hope that his resisting power behind those defences would then be so enfeebled for a period that we should be able on the same day to establish ourselves quickly and completely on the dominating Bournon Ridge from Fontaine-notre-Dame to Mœuvres, and to secure our right flank along a line including the Bonavis Ridge, Crevecoeur and Rumilly to Fontaine-notre-Dame. Even if this did not prove possible within the first twenty-four hours, a second day would be at our disposal before the enemy's reserves could begin to arrive in any formidable numbers.

Meanwhile, with no wire and no prepared defences to hamper them, it was reasonable to hope that masses of cavalry would find it possible to pass through, whose task would be thoroughly to disorganise the enemy's systems of command and inter-communication in the whole area between the Canal de l'Escout, the River Sensee and the Canal du Nord, as well as to the east and north-east of Cambrai.

My intentions as regards subsequent exploitation were to push westward and north-westward, taking the Hindenburg Line in reverse from Mœuvres to the River Scarpe, and capturing all the enemy's defences and probably most of his garrisons lying west of a line from Cambrai northwards to the Sensee, and south of that river and the Scarpe.

Time would have been required to enable us to develop and complete the operation; but the prospects of gaining the necessary time, by the use of cavalry in the manner outlined above, were in my opinion good enough to justify the attempt to execute the plan. I am of opinion that on the 20th and 21st November we went very near to a success sufficiently complete to bring the realisation of our full programme within our power.

The reasons for my decision to continue the fight after the 21st November have already been explained. Though in the event no advantage was gained thereby, I still consider that, as the problem presented itself at the time, the more cautious course would have been difficult to justify. It must be remembered that it was not a question of remaining where we stood, but of abandoning tactical positions of value, gained with great gallantry, the retention of which seemed not only to be within our power, but likely even yet to lead to further success.

Whatever may be the final decision on this point, as well as on the original decision to undertake the enterprise at all with the forces available, the continuation of our efforts against Fontaine-notre-Dame gave rise to severe fighting, in which our troops more than held their own.

On the 30th November risks were accepted by us at some points in order to increase our