

ing, in which great losses were inflicted on his troops both by our infantry fire and by our light tanks, the enemy gained possession of Villers Bretonneux; but was held up on the edge of the wood just West of that place by a counter-attack by the 8th Division. South of Villers Bretonneux, some of our heavy tanks came into action and drove back the German tanks, with the result that the enemy's infantry were stopped some distance to the East of Cachy Village, which formed their objective. North of Villers Bretonneux, all attacks were repulsed.

At 10.0 p.m., on the night of the 23rd/24th April, a counter-attack was launched by a Brigade of the 18th Division and the 13th and 15th Brigades of the 4th and 5th Australian Divisions, Major-General Sir J. J. T. Hobbs, K.C.B., commanding the latter division, and met with remarkable success. A night operation of this character, undertaken at such short notice, was an enterprise of great daring. The instant decision to seize the opportunity offered, and the rapid and thorough working out of the general plan and details of the attack on the part of the III. Corps Commander and divisional and subordinate commanders concerned are most worthy of commendation, while the unusual nature of the operation called for the highest qualities on the part of the troops employed. It was carried out in the most spirited and gallant manner by all ranks. The 13th Australian Brigade, in particular, showed great skill and resolution in their attack, making their way through belts of wire running diagonally to the line of their advance, across very difficult country which they had had no opportunity to reconnoitre beforehand.

At daybreak, Villers Bretonneux was practically surrounded by our troops. During the morning two battalions of the 8th Division worked their way through the streets and houses, overcoming the resistance of such parties of the enemy as were still holding out. That afternoon Villers Bretonneux was again completely in our possession. In this well-conceived and brilliantly executed operation nearly 1,000 prisoners were captured by our troops. A German tank was left derelict in our lines and was salvaged subsequently.

The Capture of Kemmel Hill.

(67) These operations on the southern front were followed on the 25th April by a renewal of the enemy's attacks in great strength North of the Lys.

Following upon a very violent bombardment, at about 5.0 a.m. the enemy attacked the French and British positions from Bailleul to the Ypres-Comines Canal with nine divisions, of which five were fresh divisions and one other had been but lightly engaged. The main object of the attack was the capture of Kemmel Hill by a direct assault upon the French, combined with an attack upon the British right South of Wytschaete, aimed at turning the British right flank and separating it from the French. At that date the British right flank lay on the Messines-Kemmel road, at a point about half-way between Kemmel and Wytschaete.

After very heavy fighting, the German infantry worked their way round the lower slopes of the high ground, and at 10.0 a.m. had succeeded in capturing Kemmel Village

and Hill; though elements of French troops held out until a late hour on the hill and in the village.

The weight of the attack in the British sector fell on the 9th Division and attached troops of the 49th Division, who at 7 a.m. were still holding their positions about Wytschaete intact, though heavily engaged. Fierce fighting continued in this neighbourhood for some hours later, and great numbers of Germans were killed by rifle and machine-gun fire at short range. Later in the morning the right of the 9th Division was forced to fall back fighting stubbornly to Vierstraat, but at 1 p.m. our troops still held the Grand Bois north of Wytschaete.

In the afternoon the attack spread northwards along the front held by the 21st Division. By the evening our troops had been gradually pushed back from their forward positions, and held a line running from Hill 60 to Voormezele, when it passed north of Vierstraat to our junction with the French about La Clytte. The Allied line had not been broken, and reinforcements were hurrying up.

Next day fighting continued fiercely. In the early morning a very gallant counter-attack by the 25th Division, with attached troops of the 21st and 49th Divisions, undertaken in conjunction with the French, penetrated into Kemmel Village, taking over 300 prisoners. Our troops then found themselves exposed to heavy machine-gun fire from the flanks, and were unable to maintain their positions.

Later in the morning the enemy renewed his attacks in strength, but, in spite of repeated efforts, was only able to make small progress at certain points. Troops of the 21st, 30th, 39th and 49th Divisions (Major-General C. A. Blacklock, C.M.G., D.S.O., commanding the 39th Division), and the South African Brigade of the 9th Division, had heavy fighting, and made several gallant counter-attacks. It will not have been forgotten that each of the 21st, 30th and 39th Divisions had experienced severe and prolonged fighting in the battle of the Somme.

Successful counter-attacks were carried out also by the French, in the course of which the village of Loere was recaptured in a very gallant action.

The capture of Kemmel Hill seriously threatened our position in the Ypres salient, the communications and southern defences of which were now under direct observation by the enemy, while his continued progress to the north-west in the Voormezele sector would make the extrication of troops east of Ypres most hazardous. A further readjustment of our lines in the salient was accordingly carried out on the night of the 26th/27th April, our troops withdrawing to the general line Pilkem—Wieltje—west end of Zillebeke Lake—Voormezele.

The Enemy's Advance Stayed.

(68) On the 28th April local fighting took place in the neighbourhood of Loere and Voormezele without material change in the situation; but on the following day, encouraged by the capture of Kemmel Hill, the enemy made a determined effort to improve his success.