

Trench Warfare Begins on the Aisne

by Col. (later Maj-General) Edward D. Swinton, DSO

September 14th, the Germans were making a determined resistance along the River Aisne . Opposition, which it was at first thought might possibly be of a rear-guard nature, not entailing material delay to our progress, developed and proved to be more serious than was anticipated.

The action, now being fought by the Germans along their line, may, it is true, have been undertaken in order to gain time for some strategic operation or move, and may not be their main stand. But, if this is so, the fighting is naturally on a scale which as to extent of ground covered and duration of resistance, makes it undistinguishable in its progress from what is known as a "pitched battle," though the enemy certainly showed signs of considerable disorganization during the earlier days of their retirement phase.

Whether it was originally intended by them to defend the position they took up as strenuously as they have done, or whether the delay, gained for them during the 12th and 13th by their artillery, has enabled them to develop their resistance and force their line to an extent not originally contemplated cannot be said.

So far as we are concerned the action still being contested is the Battle of the Aisne. The foe we are fighting is just across the river along the whole of our front to the east and west. The struggle is not confined to the valley of that river, though it will probably bear its name.

The progress of our operations and the French armies nearest us for the 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th will now be described:

On Monday, the 14th, those of our troops which had on the previous day crossed the Aisne, after driving in the German rear guards on that evening, found portions of the enemy's forces in prepared defensive positions on the right bank and could do little more than secure a footing north of the river. This, however, they maintained in spite of two counter-attacks delivered at dusk and 10 p. m., in which the fighting was severe.

During the 14th, strong re-enforcements of our troops were passed to the north bank, the troops crossing by ferry, by pontoon bridges, and by the remains of permanent bridges. Close cooperation with the French forces was maintained and the general progress made was good, although the opposition was vigorous and the state of the roads, after the heavy rains, made movements slow. One division alone failed to secure the ground it expected to.

The First Army Corps, after repulsing repeated attacks, captured 600 prisoners and twelve guns. The cavalry also took a number of prisoners. Many of the Germans taken belong to the reserve and

Landwehr formations, which fact appears to indicate that the enemy is compelled to draw on other classes of soldiers to fill the gaps in his ranks.

There was a heavy rain throughout the night of September 14th-15th, and during the 15th. The situation of the British forces underwent no essential change. But it became more and more evident that the defensive preparations made by the enemy were more extensive than was at first apparent.

In order to counterbalance these, measures were taken by us to economize our troops and to secure protection from the hostile artillery fire, which was very fierce; and our men continued to improve their own intrenchments. The Germans bombarded our lines nearly all day, using heavy guns, brought, no doubt, from before Maubeuge, as well as those with the corps.

All their counter attacks, however, failed, although in some places they were repeated six times. One made on the Fourth Guard Brigade was repulsed with heavy slaughter.

An attempt to advance slightly, made by part of our line, was unsuccessful as regards gain of ground, but led to the withdrawal of part of the enemy's infantry and artillery.

Further counter-attacks made during the night were beaten off. Rain came on toward evening and continued intermittently until 9 a.m. on the 16th. Besides adding to the discomfort of the soldiers holding the line, the wet weather to some extent hampered the motor transport service, which was also hindered by broken bridges.

On Wednesday, the 16th, there was little change in the situation opposite the British. The efforts made by the enemy were less active than on the previous day, although their bombardment continued throughout the morning and evening. Our artillery fire drove the defenders of one of the salients of their position but they returned in the evening. Forty prisoners were taken by the Third Division.

On Thursday, the 17th, the situation still remained unchanged in its essential. The German heavy artillery fire was more active than on the previous day, The only infantry attacks made by the enemy were on the extreme right of our position, and, as had happened before, were repulsed with heavy loss, chiefly, on this occasion, by our field artillery.

In order to convey some idea of the nature of the fighting it may be said that long the greater part of our front the Germans have been driven back from the forward slopes on the north of the river. Their infantry are holding strong lines of trenches among and along the edge of the numerous woods which crown the slopes. These trenches are elaborately constructed and cleverly concealed. In many places there are wire entanglements and length of rabbit fencing.

Both woods and open are carefully aligned, so that they can be swept by rifle fire and machine guns, which are invisible from our side of the valley. The ground in front of the infantry trenches is also, as

a rule, under crossfire from the field artillery placed on neighboring features and under high-angle fire from pieces placed well back behind the woods on top of the plateau.

A feature of this action, as of the previous fighting, is the use by the enemy of their numerous heavy howitzers, with which they are able to direct long-range fire all over the valley and right across it. Upon these they evidently place great reliance....

So far as the British are concerned, the greater part of this week has been passed in bombardment, in gaining ground by degrees, and in beating back severe counter-attacks with heavy slaughter. Our casualties have been severe, but it is probable that those of the enemy are heavier.

On our right and left the French have been fighting fiercely, and have also been gradually gaining ground. One village has already during this battle been captured and recaptured twice by each side, and at the time of writing remains in the hands of the Germans.

The fighting has been at close quarters and of the most desperate nature, and the streets of the village are filled with dead on both sides.

The Germans are a formidable enemy, well trained, long prepared, and brave. Their soldiers are carrying on the contest with skill and valor. Nevertheless they are fighting to win anyhow, regardless of all the rules of fair play, and there is evidence that they do not hesitate at anything in order to gain victory.

A large number of the tales of their misbehaviors are exaggeration and some of the stringent precautions they have taken to guard themselves against the inhabitants of the areas traversed are possibly justifiable measures of war. But, at the same time, it has been definitely established that they have committed atrocities on many occasions.

Among the minor happenings of interest is the following: During a counter-attack by the German Fifty-third Regiment on positions of the Northampton and Queen's Regiments on Thursday, the 17th, a force of some 400 of the enemy were allowed to approach right up to the trench occupied by a platoon of the former regiment owing to the fact that they had held up their hands and made gestures that were interpreted as signs that they wished to surrender. When they were actually on the parapet of the trench held by the Northhamptons they opened fire on our men at point-blank range.

Unluckily for the enemy, however, flanking them and only some 400 yards away, there happened to be a machine gun manned by a detachment of the Queen's. This at once opened fire, cutting a lane through their mass, and they fell back to their own trench with great loss. Shortly afterward they were driven further back, with additional loss, by a battalion of Guards which came up in support.

The following special order has been issued to the troops:

"September 17, 1914.

"Once more I have to express my deep appreciation of the splendid behavior of the officers, non-commissioned officers, and men of the army under my command throughout the great Battle of the Aisne, which has been in progress since the evening of the 12th inst., and the Battle of the Marne, which lasted from the morning of the 6th to the evening of the 10th, and finally ended in the precipitate flight of the enemy.

"When we were brought face to face with a position of extraordinary strength, carefully intrenched and prepared for defense by an army and staff which are thorough adepts in such work, throughout the 13th and 14th, that position was most gallantly attacked by the British forces and the passage of the Aisne effected. This is the third day the troops have been gallantly holding the position they have gained against most desperate counterattacks and the hail of heavy artillery.

"I am unable to find adequate words in which to express the admiration I feel for their magnificent conduct.

"The French armies on our right and left are making good progress, and I feel sure that we have only to hold on with tenacity to the ground we have won for a very short time longer when the Allies will be again in full pursuit of a beaten enemy.

"The self sacrificing devotion and splendid spirit of the British army in France will carry all before it.

*"J. D. P. FRENCH, Field Marshal,
"Commander in Chief of the British Army in the Field."*

The enemy is still maintaining himself along the whole front, and, in order to do so, is throwing into the fight detachments composed of units from different formations, the active army, reserve, and Landwehr, as is shown by the uniforms of the prisoners recently captured.

Our progress, although slow on account of the strength of the defensive positions against which we are pressing, has in certain directions been continuous; but the present battle may well last for some days more before a decision is reached, since it now approximates somewhat to siege warfare.

The Germans are making use of searchlights. This fact, coupled with their great strength in heavy artillery, leads to the supposition that they are employing material which may have been collected for the siege of Paris.

A buried store of the enemy's munitions of war was also found, not far from the Aisne, ten wagon loads of live shell and two wagon loads of cable being dug up. Traces were discovered of large quantities of stores having been burned --all tending to show that as far back as the Aisne the German retirement was hurried.

On Sunday, the 20th, nothing of importance occurred until the afternoon, when there was a break in the clouds and an interval of feeble sunshine, which was hardly powerful enough to warm the soaking troops. The Germans took advantage of this brief spell of fine weather to make several counter-attacks against different points. These were all repulsed with loss to the enemy, but the casualties incurred by us were by no means light.

The offensive against one or two points was renewed at dusk, with no greater success. The brunt of the resistance has naturally fallen upon the infantry. In spite of the fact that they have been drenched to the skin for some days and their trenches have been deep in mud and water, and in spite of the incessant night alarms and the almost continuous bombardment to which they have been subjected, they have on every occasion been ready for the enemy's infantry when the latter attempted to assault, and they have beaten them back with great loss.

General Headquarters, September 18, 1914