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CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

Notes on Canadian Units and Formations Engaged

Battles of the Somme, March-April 1918

ARCHER FORTESCUE DUGUID

Introduction by Mark Osborne Humphries

Although the Canadian Corps did not participate directly in the German Spring Offensives that began on 21 March 1918, detached Canadian cavalry, artillery, and motor machine gun units serving with British divisions played important roles at various points in the battles. In one of the better known instances, Canadian cavalry were instrumental in delaying a German drive on 30 March south of Amiens at Moreuil Wood where, in one of the most dramatic cavalry actions of the war, Lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew led a mounted charge with sabres drawn. For that action, he was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

Little was known about Canadian actions away from the Corps in the interwar period and official historian Archer Fortescue Duguid drew up a brief narrative for the fifteenth anniversary of those events in the spring of 1933. Former Corps Commander Sir Arthur Currie, then principal of McGill University, was sent a second draft of that document, dated 23 March 1933, and after his death it was found amongst his papers. These were donated to the Canadian War Museum in 1980. Currie was a constant guardian of the reputation of Canadian service men and routinely offered comments on the work being produced by the Army Historical Section. This case represents a rare instance where Canadian actions took centre stage but where Currie had no personal role in or knowledge of events.

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By 1933, Duguid's multi-volume history of the Canadian role in the Great War had made little progress. The first and only volume to be published, covering the first two-thirds of 1915, was only partially completed and would not be published until 1938. Rather than working on narrative volumes, much of Duguid's time was instead spent on drafting mini-histories such as the document sent to Currie, either in response to queries from members of the general public, the British historical section, or questions raised in the Canadian House of Commons. While Duguid's account of Canadian actions in 1918 is cursory and sometimes inaccurate or incomplete, it is nevertheless a good illustration of both the type of work being done by the historical section in the 1930s as well as the evolving memory of the war in the interwar period. And it is with this in mind (as well as the 100th anniversary of those events this spring) that we publish this document in Canadian Military History.

Duguid's early official account emphasizes the heroism of Flowerdew, the determination of Canadian soldiers to hold their ground in the face of terrible odds, and the importance of the Canadian contribution to the war effort. But is it important to note that Duguid's eulogistic writing style and choice of subject matter were not part of a top-down effort to construct a heroic version of the Great War for Canadians. Instead, it reflected the preoccupations of ordinary Canadians with the war and its meaning. One of the main reasons Duguid made so little progress in his series was that the inquiries from regimental associations, city counsellors, grieving parents, newspaper reporters, and amateur historians were endless and the official historian seemingly tried to respond to all of them. Moreover, he felt significant pressure from those who wrote to him and his former comrades, like Sir Arthur Currie, to "get things right." What this meant, though, was balancing historical accuracy with the need to honour the memory of the fallen and the reputations of the living: an impossible task that pulled the Director of the Army Historical Section in two directions. Later, after the Second World War, Colonel C.P. Stacey, who replaced Duguid in Ottawa, would find greater success balancing these two competing aims. So long as living legends like Sir Arthur Currie remained influential, Duguid proved unable to move beyond summary and into the type of analysis that would have forced a choice between history and commemoration.

Le Corps canadien n'a pas participé directement aux batailles durant l'offensive du printemps des Allemands qui a commencé le 21 mars 1918, mais des unités de cavalerie, d'artillerie et de mitrailleuses du pays ayant servi au sein de divisions britanniques ont joué un rôle important à différents moments. Dans l'un de ces épisodes les mieux connus, la cavalerie canadienne a joué un rôle déterminant en retardant l'avance des Allemands, le 30 mars, au sud d'Amiens, au bois de Moreuil. Dans

une des charges de cavalerie les plus mémorables de la Première Guerre mondiale, le lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew a dirigé ses hommes, armés d'épées déployées. Pour cet exploit, la Croix de Victoria lui a été attribuée à titre posthume.

On connaissait peu des actions réalisées par les troupes canadiennes détachées du Corps pendant l'entre-deux-guerres. L'historien officiel Archer Fortescue Duguid a rédigé un court récit des événements au printemps 1933, à l'occasion de leur quinzième anniversaire. L'ancien commandant du Corps d'armée canadien, sir Arthur Currie, alors principal de l'Université McGill, a reçu la deuxième ébauche de ce document, datée du 23 mars 1933, laquelle a été retrouvée dans ses papiers après sa mort. Ces derniers ont été donnés au Musée canadien de la guerre en 1980. Arthur Currie a toujours veillé à préserver la réputation des militaires canadiens et a souvent offert des conseils au sujet du travail effectué par la Section historique de l'Armée. La bataille au bois de Moreuil est l'un des rares épisodes où les Canadiens ont joué un rôle déterminant auquel Currie n'a pas participé ou dont il n'était pas au courant.

En 1933, l'œuvre de Duguid sur le rôle de Canadiens dans la Grande Guerre, qui devait compter de multiples volumes, avait peu progressé. Le premier et seul volume à paraître, portant sur les huit premiers mois de 1915, était en partie terminé; il ne sera publié qu'en 1938. Plutôt que de s'attarder aux exposés narratifs, Duguid passait le plus clair de son temps à rédiger des mini-récits, comme celui qu'il a envoyé à Currie, en guise de réponse à des questions de la part du grand public, des membres de la Section de l'histoire britannique, ou encore de la Chambre des communes du Canada. Si le récit de Duguid sur les actions des Canadiens en 1918 est sommaire et parfois inexact ou incomplet, il demeure un bon aperçu du type de travail réalisé par la Section historique dans les années 1930 ainsi que des souvenirs en évolution des conflits durant l'entre-deux-guerres. C'est dans ce contexte (et celui du centenaire de ces événements au printemps) que nous publions le document dans Canadian Military History.

Le premier compte-rendu de Duguid met en relief l'héroïsme de Flowerdew, la détermination des soldats canadiens à tenir bon en dépit du terrible défi à relever, ainsi que l'importance de la contribution des Canadiens à l'effort de guerre. Toutefois, il importe de souligner que le style élogieux de Duguid et son choix de sujet ne s'inscrivaient pas dans les efforts des dirigeants visant à livrer aux Canadiens une version héroïque de la Grande Guerre. Au lieu, ces écrits témoignent des préoccupations de citoyens ordinaires au sujet de la guerre et de son incidence. L'une des principales raisons expliquant le peu de progrès réalisé par Duguid dans son projet d'écriture était les demandes qu'il recevait d'associations de régiments, de conseillers municipaux, de parents endeuillés, de journalistes et

d'historiens amateurs : l'historien officiel en recevait une multitude, et il semble avoir tenté de répondre à chacune d'elles. De plus, ne voulant pas décevoir les gens qui lui écrivaient, dont ses anciens camarades, comme sir Arthur Currie, il voulait relater les événements avec justesse. Il devait donc trouver l'équilibre entre la précision historique et le besoin d'honorer la mémoire de ceux qui ont péri ou de préserver la réputation des vivants : un objectif inatteignable qui suscita un véritable déchirement chez le directeur de la Section historique de l'Armée. Plus tard, après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, Colonel C. P. Stacey, qui succéda à Duguid à Ottawa, a mieux réussi à concilier ces buts concurrents. Ainsi, aussi longtemps que des personnages marquants comme sir Arthur Currie ont maintenu leur influence, Duguid a été incapable de délaissier les sommaires pour s'adonner aux analyses qui auraient conduit au choix entre le récit historique et le récit commémoratif.

The German Offensive of 1918 began with a drive from St. Quentin and Cambrai towards Amiens on a front of 60 miles between the Oise and the Sensee; when the battle began on 21st March the junction of the French Sixth Army with the British Fifth Army was at Barisis, five miles south of the Oise. The British right was held by the III Corps (Butler) with the 58th Division south of the river, the 18th Division opposite La Fere and holding Vendueil, and the 14th Division in Moy and opposite Itancourt. Next to the north was the XVIII Corps (Maxse) opposite St. Quentin, with the 36th Division south of the canal, the 30th a mile east of the town, and the 60th holding Fayet and northwards to the opposite Gricourt. Then the XIX Corps (Watts) had the 24th Division astride the Omignon from Pontru northwards and the 66th in Villeret and Hardicourt. The left Corps of the Fifth Army was the VII (Congree) which had two divisions in line, the 16th holding Lempire and Epehy, and the 21st in Goueaucourt, which marked the junction with the V Corps of the Third Army (Byng). In line on the V Corps front were the 47th Division holding Villers, and the 63rd holding Rivecourt and the point of the salient towards Cambrai; the 17th Division was on the left in Flesquieres and astride the Canal du Nord. Thence the IV and VI Corps carried the line north of Boussies, Lagincourt and Bullecourt to the Sensee at Cheristy, which was the right of the First Army (Horne).

The fighting lasted for two weeks, the whole of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was in the battle area for that period, although the R.C.H.A. [(Royal Canadian Horse Artillery)] remained detached and as part of the divisional artillery of the 24th (British) Division, the XIX



Lt. Gordon M. Flowerdew, VC. [Library and Archives Canada PA-006810]

Corps was employed continuously as field artillery covering the 24th, 8th and 20th Divisions on the right of that Corps throughout the fighting until 4th April. The rest of the Brigade, which formed part of the 3rd Cavalry Division (Harman) and was in the Ennemain-Devisé area (6 miles south of Peronne) received at 5.20 a.m. on the morning of the attack, the prearranged message "Concentrate South"; subsequent orders diverted its movements eastwards to Beaumont to support the III Corps in the area between Chauny and Ham. There it furnished a dismounted battalion 800 strong which, brigaded with two similar battalions of the 3rd Cavalry Division, reinforced the British and subsequently the French infantry on the front immediately north of the Oise, and it also supplied from 23rd to 27th March a mounted party of 200 men which, with 300 from the 6th and 7th Cavalry Brigades, formed part of Harman's Detachment and operated in the same Corps area covering the withdrawal of the British infantry in front of the Guiscard and of the French infantry in front of the Lassioy. On the 27th as the Brigade was reformed at Arsy near Compiègne whence it moved towards Montdidier in anticipation of a break through; on the 29th March and 1st April it was engaged north of Moreuil.

The order for the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade [(C.M.M.G.)] ("A" and "B" Batteries each with 8 guns in 4 armoured cards) and the attached Borden, Eaton and Yukon Motor Machine Gun Batteries ("C", "D" and "E" Batteries each with 8 Vickers guns carried in light box cars) to proceed as a group from the Canadian Corps on the Vimy front to Amiens and to report to Fifth Army, was received on the afternoon of 22nd March. The Brigade moved during the night via St. Pol and Frevant to Amiens and thence to Headquarters, Fifth Army at Villers-Bretonneux which was reached at 4 p.m. on the 23rd. Units were immediately detailed; the Eaton and Yukon Batteries to report to XVIII Corps at Roye, "B" and Borden Batteries to report to VII Corps at Corbie, "A" Battery to remain in reserve. The batteries fought a continuous rearguard action east of the Somme assisting the hard-pressed infantry, filling critical gaps in the line and patrolling roads in the area Ham-Cléry-Villers-Bretonneux from 24th March to 4th April. The Brigade rejoined the Canadian Corps at Verdrel on 10th April.

21ST MARCH

Under cover of an intense bombardment by artillery and trench mortars, and favoured by a heavy white mist, the Germans attacked in great strength and with confident determination early on the 21st March; by nightfall they had reached the Crozat Canal on the front of the III Corps and had pushed the right of the XVIII Corps across the St. Quentin canal and to the west of Savy and Holnon. Further north on the fronts of the XIX, VII, V, IV and VI Corps, the British line, in spite of the most desperate resistance was everywhere forced back distances varying from half a mile to nearly three miles.

When the attack began the two batteries of the R.C.H.A. Brigade were in action between Vendelles and Massiemy covering the right front. Early in the morning teams went up to bring out the forward guns, that of "A" was successfully withdrawn, but the crew of "B"s gun having been reduced to two it was found impossible to run it out of the emplacement, so the breech block was brought out. On this front the enemy delivered repeated and heavy attacks down the Omignon; Massiemy fell at noon on the first day but during the afternoon and night no further penetration was made and his troops suffered heavily in the valley. Late in the afternoon the two batteries moved back to prepared positions east of Poeuilly.

After consultation with his Corps Commanders on the evening of the 21st, General Gough decided that as his army was not strong enough to stop an attack of such weight and numbers he ought not to commit himself to a decisive battle where it stood, but he must keep an unbroken line by gradually yielding to the pressure until sufficient reinforcements could arrive to stabilize the defence.

22ND MARCH

The German attack was continued on the 22nd. The position along the Crozat Canal was maintained by the III Corps but, on account of the exhaustion and heavy losses of the infantry, was abandoned during the night across the whole XVIII Corps front to the line of the Somme. On the fronts of the XIX, VII and V Corps the British line, on the morning of the 23rd, ran east of Monchy-Lagache, Vraignes, Buire, Aizecourt, Nurlu and through Fins on the Army boundary to Havrincourt.

The R.C.H.A. batteries moved back from their positions east of Poeuilly when the infantry of the 24th Division, after repelling all assaults during the forenoon, were ordered to withdraw through the 50th Division which was on the rear zone position three miles further back. They came into action again between Mons and Devise, and at 6 p.m, assisted in counter attacks against Coulaincourt which the enemy eventually captured. During the night, while the 50th Division was withdrawing from the rear zone, they moved to new positions and by daylight were in action between Ennemain and Falvy, covering the right.

23RD MARCH

On the southern front, where divisions of the French V Corps (Pellé) were now taking over from III Corps, the enemy crossed the Crozat Canal and gained about three miles during the day.

The dismounted battalion of the Canadian Cavalry which had been detailed as reserve to the 54th Brigade, 18th Division, on the 22nd, was held in Bois de Genlis. At 8.30 a.m. on the 23rd, the R.C.D. [(Royal Canadian Dragoons)] took up a position at the Railway Triangle north of Frières and covered the infantry withdrawal from Menessis; the battalion was in action near Frières and Fallouel in the afternoon, keeping the line continuous as the front, outflanked on the left, fell back to, and latter through Bois de Genlis. At 6 p.m. the Canadian cavalry battalion passed through the French line at Villerquier Aumont and spent the night 23rd/24th at Bois de Caumont. On the XVIII Corps front Cugny, Golancourt and Ham were lost; the whole of the XIX Corps was withdrawn across the Somme, and some 15 villages and also Peronne were abandoned to the enemy.

The R.C.H.A. occupied two positions this day, the first to the south of Ennemain, the second east of Morchain. Further north the enemy also advanced crossed the Tortille and forced the VII Corps back on Clery and Bouchavesnes.

24TH MARCH

On the allied right where relief of British by reserve troops of the French Third Army (Plumbert) was in progress the Germans took

Chauny and Guiscard, near the latter place the mounted party of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was in action, steadying the infantry line in the gradual withdrawal from Cucny, Beaumont and Villeselve towards Berlancourt. The dismounted battalion was at Caillouel in reserve under the V French Corps.

From 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. "A" and "B" Batteries, R.C.H.A. barraged the line Bethencourt-Parony to prevent the enemy from crossing the Somme. Then after the enemy captured Morchain at about 5 p.m. the batteries moved in the middle of the night to positions in the open between Pertain and Omiecourt. There was little water, ammunition was difficult to obtain, buffer springs were giving trouble and the horses had not been off-saddled for a long time.

On the front of the XVIII and right of the XIX corps the enemy attacked and captured Esmerly-Hallon-Hombleux, Mesnil and Bethencourt; in this area the Eaton and Yukon M.M.G. Batteries were engaged. Four of the Yukon guns with the 20th Division, in position east of Hombleux Cemetery, had excellent targets, particularly on enemy advancing in column down the Ham-Nesle Road and only after 4 p.m., by which time the enemy was at 300 yards on both flanks. [Then] the three remaining guns [were] brought back to cover the Bacquencourt bridge over the canal at Breuil. The Eaton Battery was detailed to support a counter attack by the 183rd Infantry Brigade (61st Division) against Bethencourt but by the time the plateau east of the village was reached the Germans were already advancing in a steady flow and had also effected [*sic*] a crossing at Pargny. Defensive positions were taken up and held until fifty per cent of the gunners were casualties and ammunition was running low; then the infantry having withdrawn N.W. and S.W. and there being consequently a gap of some 3,000 yards at the junction of the XVIII and XIX Corps, the guns were brought into action to hold the line, first near the woods east of Dreslincourt, and later, in an old trench N.W. of that village, until dark when they fell back 2,000 yards to cover the new line of the 24th Division, XIX Corps, east of Hyencourt le Petit and across the gap.

While the Eaton and Yukon batteries were holding up the enemy's advance north and south of Nesle, "A" Battery, 1st C.M.M.G. Brigade, sent forward from Villers-Bretonneux to the centre of the XIX Corps, and with it eight guns mounted in four armoured cars, reported at Marcheport to the 24th Infantry Brigade, 8th Division, which was then being hard pressed. From 5 to 8 p.m. the cars co-operated on

the roads leading to Cizancourt, Licourt and Epenancourt with the Sherwood Foresters; the battery fired 8,000 rounds and succeeded in holding up the enemy, who on one occasion used hand grenades against the foremost car.

On the left of the XIX Corps the enemy did not cross the Somme; north of the river on the VII Corps front "B" and Borden M.M.G. Batteries checked the thrust down the Somme valley at Clery and Ham; further north on the Third Army front the Germans were in Longueval, Bazentin and Courcellette. At 2 a.m. on the 24th "B" Battery and Borden Battery moved from VII Corps Headquarters at Corbie to come under the orders of the 21st Division at Maricourt and from there, after congested roads had delayed the four armoured cars of the "B" and the light box cars of the Borden Battery, were directed towards Clery sur Somme where they arrived at about 8 a.m. Two Guns of the Borden Battery came into action in the eastern outskirts just as the Germans, under cover of a heavy cloud of smoke, overran the village and pressed on towards a small wood on the high ground 700 yards to the North East where the other 14 guns were in position. After doing good execution one of the two forward guns was destroyed in Clery, the other was brought out after a running fight with revolvers; the remaining guns were disposed astride the Clery-Maricourt road, in a trench which although wide and shallow and only 500 yards long, provided some cover. The infantry line had fallen back to the Bois de Hem, a mile in rear, but a party of 100 remained in the forward trench with the machine gunners, who were unwilling to give up the advantages offered by good observation and an excellent field of fire. Repeated assaults in this trench were stopped, and attempts to reduce it by working round the open flanks were defeated, but by artillery fire and snipers the garrison was depleted and the enemy in the course of the next four hours worked up closer and threw hand grenades at the guns. Fortunately, at about 11:30 a.m. a party of the 15th Cheshire's (35th Division) came up and occupied a wired trench 50 yards in rear, and as the position of the four surviving guns was becoming precarious they were moved back into it at 2 p.m. Three hours later orders came for the infantry to withdraw at 8 p.m. to a line Hem-Maurepas. Long before that hour, however a combined assault from front and flank drove the garrison out, but not without suffering severe losses from the two remaining guns, one of which was put of action during the attack and the other, after being fired until the enemy were within 50 yards, was

brought back down the Hem road. The crews of the two batteries now numbered one N.C.O. and 4 men. The O.C., the Borden Battery, the last surviving officer of the little garrison, lost his right arm, and the five other officers, including the O.C. of "B" Battery, were killed. The determined defence of this position had held up the 1st German Division for over eight hours.

25TH MARCH

Early in the morning of the 25th, the mounted party of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade went forward to the assistance of the French infantry at Chevilly, between Muirancourt and Catigny. The V French Corps in the sector immediately north of the Oise during this day fell back six miles to a line Pontoise Noyon (exclusive) Lagny (inclusive). The dismounted party withdrawn from Caillouel was engaged in the area Mondescourt-Appelly, where it formed a line through which the French withdrew to their new position south of the Pise. The last allied troops to cross the Appilly bridge was a squadron of L.S.H. [(Lord Strathcona's Horse)]

The Eaton and Yukon Batteries [C.M.M.G.] were all day in action on the left of the XVIII Corps. Four of the Yukon guns and one Eaton were with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on the northern outskirts of Nesle and from 5.30 a.m. to 8.30 a.m. frustrated the enemy's attempts to sweep through the gap on the northern boundary of the Corps; then having covered the infantry withdrawal they fell back through Nesle and joined the other guns in defense of the new line overlooking the river Ignon between Herly and Languevoisin and of the high ground east of Cressy. This line in turn was outflanked by heavy attacks which forced the Canal at Breuil, penetrated to Moyencourt and turning northwards, in co-ordination which continued pressure westwards, force the British line back towards Roye. The Eaton and Yukon batteries took a heavy toll of the advancing Germans and after covering the gradual retirement of the infantry were withdrawn from the line soon after midnight when the French II Cavalry corps took over responsibility as far north as Hattencourt on the right boundary of the XIX Corps.

In the morning "A" and "B" Batteries, R.C.H.A., having moved back from Morchain, were in action between Pertain and Omiecourt; shortly before noon they moved south of Chaulnes and after engaging

the enemy over open sight, to east of Chaulnes at 6 p.m.; when the infantry line fell back later in the evening positions were taken up west of Lihons.

On this front "A" Battery, 1st C.M.M.G. Brigade was hotly engaged from noon onwards, making good use of the armoured cars along the roads particularly near Marchepot, Gizancourt and Licourt, where one car, after all its occupants, including the battery commander, had been killed at short range, fell into the hands of the enemy.

The British line at nightfall met the Somme at Frise and followed it for four miles along the exposed left flank of the XIX Corps to the eastern outskirts of Bray, whence the Third Army, which now included the VII Corps, carried the line east of Meault, west of Albert up the Ancre to Beaumont-Hamel and thence through Hebuterne and Bucquoy.

26TH MARCH

On the French Front the Germans captured Roye and Lassigny; on the XIX Corps front they pushed on through Fouquescourt, Lihons and Cappy.

[The Canadian Cavalry Brigade] mounted detachment (Harman's) in action between Lagny and Evricourt, Chateau des Essarts.

The Eaton and Yukon Batteries [C.M.M.G.] covered the supposed junction of the French and British forces near Fouquescourt and Bouvroy.

The R.C.H.A. was in action east of Vrely covering the 24th British Division which was not in touch with the French on the right, where a wide gap across the Amiens-Roye road was reported. The left of the XIX Corps was in Proyart but the flank along the Somme was exposed for five miles as far as Sailly le Lec, whence the line of VII Corps ran north westwards to the Ancre at Mericourt and thence up that river. Because of the situation on the battlefield and the exhausted condition of the troops, it had been decided that a rear line should be prepared and occupied across the front of the Fifth Army; the line chosen was that known as the Amiens Defence Line running east of Demuin, through Aubercourt, and by Marcelcave, Lamotte and Hamel to Bouzencourt on the Somme. This line was manned on the 26th by some 2,000 troops of all sorts from various units of the Fifth Army and in it were mounted 14 machine guns of the Canadian

Motor Machine Gun Brigade. This body of troops, holding eight miles of the line was designated Cary's Force.

27TH MARCH

The German thrust eastwards from Roye reached Montdidier and nearly drove a wedge between the British and French. The Eaton and Yukon Batteries [C.M.M.G.] were active all day in the area Guerbigny, Bouchoir and Rouvroy and the enemy, beyond capturing these villages, met with little success on the British right.

The R.C.H.A. batteries were in action west of Vrely firing to prevent the enemy from entering Rosieres and to check his advance from Meharicourt. On the XIX Corps left Proyart was lost, but at Cerisy, where "A" Battery, C.M.M.G. Brigade was in action, and in three hours fired 15,000 rounds, the enemy failed to cross the Somme until 4 p.m. After that hour the armoured cars engaged the enemy in large numbers between Cerisy and Hamel; they inflicted severe casualties and checked the advance until darkness.

28TH MARCH

Both parties of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, withdrawn and now transferred from the 3rd to the 2nd Cavalry Division, moved towards Compiègne and on the morning of the 18th the reunited Brigade (less R.C.H.A.) moved from Arsy, by way of Montigny and Moranvillers to Welles five miles south west of Montdidier. A detachment of 10 L.S.H. under Lieut. Harvey, recaptured Fontaine and handed it over to the French. Further north on the frontage of the new Groupement Mesple, the villages of Contorie, Plessier and Hancest all passed into German hands; on the British front Marcelcave Lamotte, Cerisy and Saily-Laurette also fell.

The R.C.H.A. occupied three positions, west of Vrely, east of Beaucourt and beside the Roye road south of Demuin; they covered the withdrawal of the infantry and repeatedly engaged the enemy advancing in close formation. In their last position they were in support of the 133rd French Division which came into line south of the Luce.

Two of the [C.M.M.G.] armoured cars were engaged all day between Vrely and Caix and two on the Amiens-Roye road their mobility enabled them to avoid shell fire and to surprise the enemy at medium range before he could lie down or deploy.

A detachment (15 officers and 386 other ranks) of the 2nd Battalion, C.R.T. [(Canadian Railway Troops)] formed part of the Carey's Force and having acquired 16 Lewis Guns took up a positions astride the Villers Bretonneux railway at Card Copse (V.3.a.8h.62.D) during night 27th/28th. Owing to withdrawal of infantry from Wiencourt and Marcelcave this became part of the British front line at about 3 p.m. 28th. During night 28th/29th patrols found Marcelcave lightly held by the enemy.

29TH MARCH

On the afternoon of the 29th the Canadian Cavalry Brigade marched to Ailly-sur-Noye and thence to billets in Goyencourt. The R.C.H.A. batteries, owing to a mistaken withdrawal by the French infantry, had spent the night full of uncertainty, but by 8 a.m. the line was reoccupied and at 10 a.m. the enemy advanced and the line fell back. Soon after noon the batteries were ordered to take up positions two miles in rear and to cover the 20th Division. On the front between the Luce and the Somme the Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade had 32 guns in action with Carey's Force in the Amiens Defence Line, some of them manned by British gunners; ten of these guns were on the high ground above Aubercourt to cover the Luce valley and approaches to Demuin; ten were just west of Marcelcave and three groups of 4 guns were east of Villers Bretonneux south of Hamel and east of Hamel. The Germans gains on this day included Pierrepont and Haricourt, Merirres and Villers aux Erables, all on the French front, and on the British front Ignacourt was taken. During the night the enemy established a footing in Moreuil Wood.

The 2nd Battalion, C.R.T. held position and on night 29th/30th sent patrols 1,000 yards forward and towards Marcelcave in which the enemy was now established. Between the 21st and the 30th March the Germans made an advance of 25 miles towards Amiens and had now reached the edge of the plateau overlooking the valley of the Avre, known as Moreuil Ridge, and situated some ten miles east of Amiens. This dominating position extends for some fifteen

miles along the east bank of the river Avre, and from the northern extremity observation may be obtained to the eastward over the main line of the Paris-Amiens railway, less than four miles distant, thus making close artillery fire possibly. Together with the various other railways countering on Amiens this line constituted a vital link in the allied lateral communications; if it were overrun or destroyed it was reasonable to assume that the French would fall back towards Paris and the British upon the Channel ports, with the German forces thrusting forward between, and the separation of the French and British armies must inevitably follow. To accomplish such a developed was one of the main objects of the German strategic plan, and its successful achievement might well have had fatal consequences.

The Fifth Army, bearing the brunt of the German onslaught made by 64 divisions, a number considerably greater than the entire British Army in France,* had been fighting incessantly since the 21st March, and on the 30th March, when new grave danger threatened by the penetration of the enemy on the Moreuil Ridge, only disorganized and greatly depleted elements remained. The command of the British right had been taken over by General Sir Henry Rawlinson, who was engaged in forming a new Fourth Army out of the survivors of the Fifth Army and such troops as could be made available from other sectors of the British line. In the meantime the French had assumed responsibility for the front south of the Somme, with general control of British troops operating in that area, but the French divisions had not yet established a continuous line on this part of the front and there was a gap of some two miles north of Moreuil in which were only a light screen of newly arrived French infantry who had been driven out of the wood and on their left exhausted units of the 8th and 20th Divisions.

30TH MARCH

At 5 a.m. orders were received for [R.C.H.A.] batteries to move to positions north of the Luce between Domart and Hangard to cover infantry in line from Memuin to N.E. corner of Moreuil Wood. Barrage was laid down on E. edge of Rifle Wood as our infantry were

* Despatch of Sir Douglas Haig dated 20th July, 1918.

falling back. At 6.30 p.m. barrage was fired to cover the successful counter attack which regained Rifle Wood.

Shortly after 7 a.m. on 30th March, the XIX Corps sent the following instructions by telephone to the 2nd Cavalry Division:

“Enemy reported in large wood N.E. of Moreuil on right flank of 20th Division. Cross river Avre at once and move S.E. across the river Luce and clear up the whole situation in the wood and secure the line as far as Moreuil.”

The 3rd Cavalry Brigade and the Canadian Cavalry Brigade were nearest the objective named, and Major General T.T. Pitman commanding the 2nd Cavalry Division at once motored to the 3rd Brigade Headquarters at Cottenchy; at 7.30 a.m. he ordered that brigade to cross the river Noye at Fouencamps as rapidly as possible, to seize the high ground north of Moreuil Wood, then, working with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, to restore the situation up to the line of the Moreuil-Demuin road; the distances to be covered was about eight miles and whichever brigade arrived first was to go straight for the high ground. General Pitman then motored to Guyencourt headquarters of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, saw Brigadier-General J.E.B. Seely, whose brigade was saddled up and ready to move, and ordered him to cross the Avre via Remiencourt and Castel, seize the high ground and work in conjunction with the 3rd Cavalry Brigade. Time and obscurity prevented the elaboration of details; the first brigade—whether the 3rd or the Canadian—to arrive on the ground was to act on its own initiative according to circumstances, closely supported by the second.

Brigadier-General Seely galloped off ahead of his brigade to Castel, where he found the General Commanding the 133rd French Division, which was disposed on the front between Moreuil and the Luce at Demuin, but not in possession of Moreuil Wood and Ridge in the centre, and arranged with him to send instructions to the French troops, then under orders to withdraw from Moreuil, to hold on at all costs. General Seely, still in front of his brigade, crossed the Avre at the gallop with his headquarters party, and halted at the front line of infantry 600 yards east of the brigade only long enough to send back concise verbal orders for the employment of squadrons to carry out his plan for the capture of the ridge. Now under fire from the small parties of Germans, who from the edge of the wood could see them

emerge from the morning mist still heavy in the valley, they dashed up the grassy slope to establish headquarters at the southwestern corner of the Bois de Ballon, the semi-detached north-west portion of the wood not yet occupied in strength by the enemy. The gallopers met their oncoming regiments as they formed line of troops columns on clearing the bridge; as each squadron received orders it broke away at an increased pace. Now it was about 9 o'clock, and the 4th Hussars and the 5th and 16th Lancers of the 3rd Brigade were on their heels as they crossed the Avre.

The orders for the attack were: the Royal Canadian Dragoons, the leading regiment, to send the foremost squadron (Capt. R. Nordheimer) at a gallop to clear the north-western corner of the Bois de Moreuil; the second squadron (Capt. T. Newcomen) to proceed mounted to the south-western face of the wood, to occupy the southern point and gain touch with the French presumed to be still in possession of Moreuil; the third Squadron (Major R.S. Timmis) to gallop to the north-east corner of the wood and endeavour to join up with the second squadron. Lord Strathcona's Horse, following close behind the Dragoons were to develop the attack; one squadron (Lieut. G.M. Flowerdew) to move round the north-eastern corner at a gallop to engage any reinforcements which might be entering the wood, and then to occupy the eastern face; the remaining squadrons (Capt. J.B. Trotter and Lieut. A.D. Morgan under the general command of Lieutenant-Colonel D.J. Macdonald) were to press the main attack, dismounted, southeastwards through the wood.

The leading squadron of the Dragoons, although exposed to heavy rifle and machine gun fire, engaged the first line of the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. Having cut their way through and sent back the horses, the squadron penetrated into the heart of the wood and there broke through the second German line.

The second squadron worked south-eastwards across the open slope to about half way along the western face where it came under heavy machine gun and rifle fire from the enemy in the wood and in Moreuil. It then took up a line running south-westwards with the left flank in the wood, and maintained itself there throughout the day.

The third squadron followed the first, galloping eastwards in line of troop columns and about 500 yards distant from the northern edge of the wood; before the north-east corner was reached it came under such heavy machine gun fire from the wood that the signal "line to the right" was given and the squadron charged. After engaging the



Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron by Sir Alfred James Munnings. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0443]

enemy hand-to-hand for a time, first in the open and then among the beech trees, only the squadron commander and some 30 of his men remained mounted; these he collected and, leaving the dismounted men to continue the action, he emerged from the wood with the intention of completing his mission, but this was carried out by the Strathconas who now appeared on the field.

While moving at the trot up the deep draw 1,000 yards north of the wood, Lieutenant Flowerdew, at the head of the leading squadron of the Strathconas, detached one troop under Lieutenant F.M.W. Harvey, v.c. as vanguard in anticipation of mounted action. But on reaching the plateau the patrols could see that the enemy's position extended north-eastwards outside the wood; two lines of infantry each about 60 strong and two hundred yards apart, with machine guns posted both in the centre and on the flanks. Flowerdew therefore ordered Harvey to take the Hotchkiss guns, and to attack with his troop dismounted through the north-eastern corner while he himself led the remaining three troops to the charge against the position outside the wood. On the sudden appearance of the squadron



Dead horses from Flowerdew's charge. Still from Ministry of Information film 'German Offensive 4.' [© IWM]

the enemy in front opened fire; machine guns, trench mortars on the left flank and a 6-inch howitzer about 600 yards in the rear joined in the attempt to stop the advance; hurling a shower of bombs the front line ran to meet the attack with the bayonet and showed no signs of surrender when the horsemen charged home. Many of the enemy were killed with the sword as the squadron passed through both lines, and wheeled about, and charged again. After the second collision the few surviving Germans broke and fled; ten minutes after the action began the fifteen remaining Strathconas were making their way into the wood at the centre of the eastern face, where they established themselves, and later joined up with the dismounted troops and some of the leading squadron of the Dragoons. Lieutenant Flowerdew died of wounds received in this action; he was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

The dismounted parties had likewise to overcome the most determined resistance; there was fierce hand-to-hand fighting in all the northern portion of the wood, resulting ultimately in the complete capture of that section and the killing of most of the German garrison. The two Strathcona squadrons in the dismounted attack suffered

severely; the first to be engaged (Trotter) followed Nordheimer's squadron of the Dragoons into the wood as the north-west corner and fought their way eastwards, the second (Morgan) proceeded mounted to near the point where Timmis' squadron of the Dragoons had charged, and there dismounted, entered the wood and advanced southwards. Both were aided by the derangement caused by the simultaneous attacks of Newcomen and Flowerdew on the enemy's flank and rear; after a line had been established westwards across the wood, Trotter was withdrawn into close support and Morgan then joined up on the right of Harvey and Nordheimer on the eastern face. Here the Hotchkiss guns were brought into action and drove away the crew of the 6-inch howitzer and a detachment of the Machine Gun Squadron, which mounted their Vickers on the eastern face, frustrated repeated attempts of the enemy to manhandle it out of range. Meanwhile the second squadron of Dragoons continued to be held up half way down the western face of the wood by the enemy who was being strongly reinforced in the southern part of the wood and who was still fighting in the centre.

The 3rd Cavalry Brigade had crossed the river at 9.30 a.m., and in accordance with the orders of the Divisional Commander acted as support to the Canadian Brigade. A squadron of the 4th Hussars was sent down to the western edge of the wood to secure the right flank of the Canadians; it endeavoured to push through the southern part of the wood and up the Moreuil-Demuin road, but accurate close-range machine gun fire compelled a withdrawal to the right of the line held by Newcomen's squadron. The remaining two squadrons of the Hussars worked their way along the western slopes of the ridge between Moreuil and the wood.

Also at about 9.30 a.m. "D" Battery, R.H.A. [(Royal Horse Artillery)] came into action in the open on the high ground with six guns, and fired on selected points on information sent back by the squadrons from the eastern face. An hour later, when the Germans made some progress down the southern side of the Luce valley, one section moved to Hailles to cover a retirement, if necessary, and another took up a position southwest of Castel to enfilade the German position N.E. and E. of Moreuil. The four Vickers guns of the two armoured cars of "A" Battery, C.M.M.G. Brigade, detailed to cooperate with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, were placed in position at Castel to command the Avre valley, the railway track and the road bridge, and remained there all day but had not targets.

At the beginning of the action the Fort Garry Horse had been detailed as Brigade Reserve. Before noon two of the squadrons (Capt. F.F. Thomson and Capt. R.W. Allen) were dismounted and sent south-eastwards through the wood to reinforce Newcomen's squadron of Dragoons on the western face and to extend its line through the wood. The third squadron (Capt. R.G. Hutchison) was sent back across the river to enfilade the enemy from the high ground west of Moreuil.

By 11 a.m. the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, reinforced by the 4th Hussars, had established themselves on three sides of the wood; but the centre and southern portions were still full of the enemy, and further reinforcements consisting of the 5th and 16th Lancers, were sent by the 3rd Cavalry Brigade to the assistance of the Canadians. The G.O.C., Canadian Cavalry Brigade, has stated that without this timely aid the Canadians could not have held on to their hard-won position.

With the Canadian units already engaged and these additional troops, together with about 100 infantrymen (2nd West Yorkshire Regiment), a concerted advance was organized which drove southwards through the wood at about 3 p.m. and resulted in a continuous line facing south across it and connecting with the position on the eastern face.

By this time the Headquarters of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade had been moved forward to the northern face of the wood, and the lead horses to the open ground north of it. A circus of red German aeroplanes flew low over the horses and before the order to move to a flank could be carried out the enemy artillery placed a heavy concentration on them and inflicted severe casualties.

Fighting continued throughout the rest of the day; under cover of heavy shell fire the enemy made several counter attacks, one of which caused a withdrawal of the right of the line in the wood for a short distance; but the enemy eventually gave up hope of regaining his lost position that day; as night fell his artillery fire increased in intensity and for two or three hours he poured gas shells into the wood. By 2.30 a.m. on the 31st the two cavalry brigades had been relieved by the infantry of the 8th British Division, and the Canadian Cavalry Brigade withdrew to Bois de Sencat.

The losses of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in the section of Moreuil Wood have not been precisely ascertained as the official figures cover also the later fighting at Rifle Wood. It is recorded, however, that about 300 officers and men were killed and wounded.

Throughout this action nothing was more remarkable than the extraordinary bitterness of the fighting. The German morale had

been raised to the highest pitch by the successes of the past ten days, and although, according to a German source, "There were many young soldiers in the ranks who on this day were taking part in their first action" even the spectacle of charging horseman caused neither terror nor dismay; Canadian participants state that the enemy ran forward with the bayonet to meet them, and that desperately wounded Germans refused to be picked up by stretcher-bearers, and even seized rifles with intent to shoot their would-be rescuers. On the other hand, the enemy has paid tribute to the corresponding valour of the Canadians; in an account of the action published in 1927 in the "Militär Wochemblatt", a German officer who was present tells of the mounted attacks being met with a "murderous fire"; and of troopers, on foot refusing to surrender when their horses were shot, fighting it out in isolated groups to the bitter end. Not a man surrendered throughout the whole action and no unwounded prisoners were taken on either side.

During the day the enemy advanced along south bank of Luce river and occupied Demuin. Ten guns of the C.M.M.G. Brigade (four of them manned by British gunners) on the high ground north of the Luce, overlooking Aubercourt and Demuin enfiladed the advance and had excellent targets. Four other C.M.M.G. Brigade guns on the left covered north and east. When the infantry were ordered back these guns were withdrawn from the salient to the new line 1,000 yards in rear and south of the wood east of the Bois de Hangard. Four armoured cars were also operating, two of them with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, but did not come into action.

At 11 a.m. heavy enemy bombardment and withdrawal of line on both flanks caused [2nd Battalion C.R.T.'s] withdrawal from front line trench to support line. Forward positions were reoccupied in early p.m. Later heavy toll was taken of enemy infantry advancing to attack south westwards from Marcelcave; position held until relief (by 25th Australian Battalion) at 4.30 a.m. 31st.

31ST MARCH.

At 2.30 a.m. 31st March, the Cavalry in Moreuil Wood were relieved by the 6th Division and the Canadian Cavalry Brigade withdrew to the Bois de Seneat.

At 3 a.m. orders were received for [R.C.H.A.] batteries to move to positions in valley south east of Hailles covering infantry along east edge of Moreuil Wood. Many French 75 batteries were now in action.

Our troops were driven back to Hangard. [Canadian Motor Machine Gun] armoured cars were in operation between Hangard and Domart. During the night of the 31st March/1st April the Borden Battery moved from reserve at Hobecourt to relieve Eaton Battery in line.

1ST APRIL

By the 1st April Moreuil Wood, except for Balloon Wood at the north-western corner was again in possession of the enemy, and Rifle Wood, 1,500 yards to the north east, had also been occupied. A counter attack on the afternoon of the 31st by a British Infantry Brigade to recover the latter feature had been unsuccessful, and the allied front line was now at Hourges. To restore the situation the [Canadian Cavalry Brigade], though very tired, were called upon once more.

At 9.20 p.m. 31st March, the following order was issued by the XIX Corps to the 2nd Cavalry Division, to which the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was still attached:

“2nd Cavalry Division will establish tomorrow morning the line C.15 Central C.16 Control – to point 104 in C.11.d, thence north of Hangard exclusive.”

This was a line embracing Rifle Wood, and including the steep-sided valley to the south west and the higher ground 500 yards to the east.

Rifle Wood is about 900 yards long by 80 yards wide, on the same escarpment as Moreuil Wood; it was occupied by two German Infantry battalions and another was in reserve, but this was not known at the time. The conference of Brigadiers with the Divisional Commander took place late at night and it being impossible, therefore, to carry out any reconnaissance, plans had to be worked out by map. Brigadier General Seely was given command of all troops detailed for the operation. These were:

Two regiments, 4th Cavalry Brigade. (3rd Hussars 1/1st Oxford Hussars)

One Regiment, 5th Cavalry Brigade. (20th Hussars)
Canadian Cavalry Brigade.
Three Batteries R.H.A.
Four Machine Gun Squadrons.

Reserve: Two Regiments 5th Cavalry Brigade, (2nd Dragoons
(R.S.G. [(Royal Scots Greys)]) and 12th Lancers.)

It was arranged that the Artillery of the 29th (French) Division should co-operate with the Artillery of XIX Corps in laying down a preliminary 35 minutes bombardment on the area to be attacked. The machine gun squadrons were also employed to lay down a barrage.

Owing to the difficulty of getting horses across the single available bridge over the river Luce it was decided to make the attack dismounted. It was delivered, as planned, in three waves. As 8.55 a.m. the first was launched, it consisted of the two regiments of the 4th Cavalry Brigade (3rd Hussars, less one squadron, and Oxfordshire Hussars), organized as a battalion. These troops quickly seized their objective, the Hangard road from the N.E. corner of the wood to a T. road about 900 yards north leading to Demuin.

The second wave consisted of the 20th Hussars (5th Cavalry Brigade). The Hussars seized the north-eastern edge of the wood border in the main Amiens-Roye road, established themselves in the wood, and prepared two strong points.

The enemy troops dislodged by the two attacks sought refuge in the heart of the wood.

The third wave consisted of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, under the command of Lieut. Colonel Paterson, with the Fort Garry Horse, Lord Strathcona's Horse and the Royal Canadian Dragoons in the order given, the whole consisting of 12 officers and 476 other ranks. The Brigade was to assemble in the marshy bottom bordering the Luce, and to pass through the second wave and establish itself round the perimeter of the wood. On entering the wood, the Fort Garry Horse were to swing to the left and Lord Strathcona's Horse were to swing to the right. The Royal Canadian Dragoons were held in reserve to reinforce where necessary. Much fierce fighting followed though the enemy were less stubborn than at Moreuil Wood. The Canadians fought their way through the wood and established a line along the eastern, southern and western faces.

A platoon of the 20th Hussars and a platoon of the 12th Lancers were sent up as reinforcements, followed shortly afterwards by the 6th Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers) which prior to the action had been holding a position west of the wood and now took over responsibility for the eastern face.

About 9.45 a.m. while the struggle for possession of the wood was still in progress, the Royal Scots Greys, from the reserve, advanced southwards in the open and under heavy shell and machine gun fire established a line joining up with the Canadian right at the western face of the wood.

One hour later, the 12th Lancers (less the platoon already in the line) were sent forward and occupied the line vacated by the 6th Dragoon Guards 1,000 yards west of the wood.

By 11.00 a.m. the entire wood was in possession of the cavalry and the position in process of consolidation by the 2nd Field Squadron R.E. [(Royal Engineers)], which had followed close on the heels of the Canadian Brigade, and 100 infantry of the 59th Brigade, 20th British Division. Over 100 prisoners were taken and 13 machine guns, the latter being at once turned against the enemy, provided a most valuable reinforcement.

As the enemy were preparing to counter attack, the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons from the 7th Cavalry Brigade (3rd Cavalry Division) were ordered forward and took over the line along the south-western face of the wood. The 7th Dragoon Guards from the same Brigade were also sent up later and relieved the Carabiniers.

Between 11.30 a.m. and 3.00 p.m. the Germans were on several occasions seen massing for a counter attack in large numbers and were engaged by artillery, machine gun and rifle fire. The counter attack was finally delivered by a complete brigade of infantry. It was everywhere repulsed and many hundreds of German dead were left lying to the east and south of Rifle Wood. A great many of the casualties were inflicted by the Artillery which was able to fire with direct observation on heavy columns of Germans marching along the roads, as many as 2,000 rounds being fired by a single R.H.A. battery. On the other hand the enemy artillery, machine guns and trench mortar fire directed on the wood all day was severe and caused many casualties.

At 6.00 p.m. the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was relieved, and relief of the remainder of the cavalry force followed during the night.

The [R.C.H.A.] bombardment of last night broke up enemy concentrations and no attack was delivered. Between 3.30 and 4.30 p.m Hailles was shelled heavily by the enemy.

There were no new developments this day [regarding the C.M.M.G.].

2ND APRIL

At 3 p.m. the [Canadian Cavalry] Brigade marched to bivouac in the Bois de Boves and came under orders of the 3rd Cavalry Division. The R.C.H.A. batteries were not called upon to fire. This was also a quiet day for the C.M.M.G.

3RD APRIL

The [Canadian Cavalry] Brigade rested where they were complimented by General Sir Henry Rawlinson in person.

The R.C.H.A. experienced a very quiet morning. At 4 p.m. the batteries moved to positions 1000 yards north of Gentelles to cover the 24th Division in reserve line.

On the night 3rd/4th all Motor Machine Gun batteries were relieved and concentrated in reserve at Hobecourt under orders of Fourth Army.

4TH APRIL

On this day the Germans made their final attempt to break through the French and British armies. The attack was made with 14 divisions on a front of 21 miles southwards from the Somme. There was heavy fighting on the British front between the Somme and the Luce. The enemy gained some ground but Villers Bretonneux and the high ground near it were held.

At 10 a.m. the [Canadian Cavalry] Brigade was ordered to saddle up ready to move forward. It was not required, however, and at 6 p.m. orders were received to off-saddle but to be ready at half hour's notice.

The [R.C.H.A.] batteries moved to positions N.W. of Cachy, being transferred from 24th D.A. [(Divisional Artillery)] to 50th D.A.

At 3 p.m. the C.M.M.G. Bde. was ordered to check the enemy's advance and hold Villers Bretonneux at all costs. "A", "B", "D", "E" Batteries were in action in the neighbourhood of Villers Bretonneux. Armoured cars were also in action. Many casualties were inflicted on the enemy.

5TH APRIL.

In the forenoon the Canadian Cavalry Brigade marched to billets at Camon. On this day "A" Battery R.C.H.A. had three guns in action. "B" Battery had one. The C.M.M.G. Brigade held positions in front of and to the left of Villers Bretonneux.

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