

7-6-2015

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Recommended Citation

Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson (2015) "The Second Battle of Ypres," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 28.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol24/iss1/28>

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The Second Battle of Ypres

COLONEL G.W.L. NICHOLSON

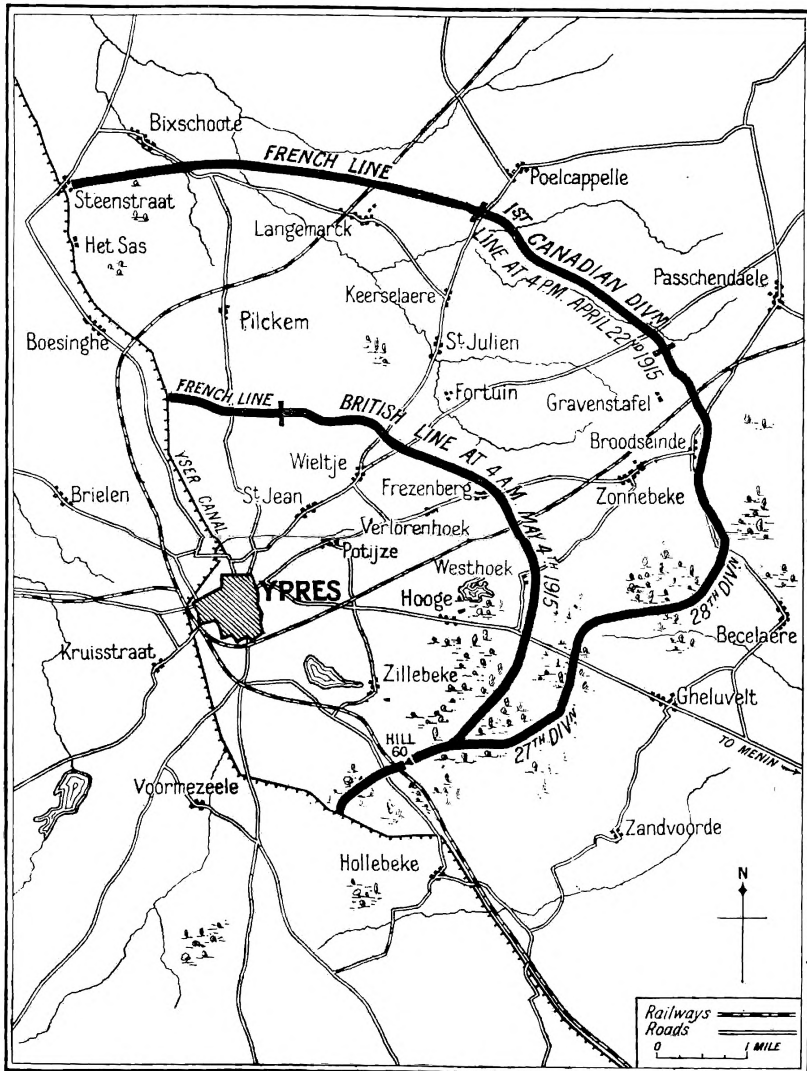
Editor's Note: This paper was originally given as a public lecture by the CEF's official historian, Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson in Ottawa on 23 March 1965. While it is in some ways a standard narrative of the battle, it also sheds light on Nicholson's own views on the battle at the fiftieth anniversary. This fall, McGill-Queen's University Press will publish a new edition of the official history, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919, with an introduction by Mark Humphries.¹

IT IS AFTER midnight now in Western Europe, and in the ancient Belgian town of Ypres all good citizens are, or should be, asleep in their beds. Earlier this evening, at eight o'clock local time, those who were walking along the Rue de Menin, which from the Grand Place in front of the rebuilt Cloth Hall leads to the Menin Gate on the east side of the town, would have been seen to pause a few moments for the nightly ceremony of the Last Post.

On the walls of the great Memorial Gateway are inscribed the names of fifty-five thousand Allied soldiers who fell in the First World War and who have no known graves. To honour them, since 1929 the Last Post has been sounded here every evening, except during the Second World War, when Belgium was under German occupation.

It is a memorable scene. A few minutes before the hour two policemen appear and with upraised arm halt the traffic passing through the gate in either direction. Then, when all is quiet, two

¹ The original paper is located in the Colonel GWL Nicholson Papers, MG31-G19, Volume 6, Library and Archives Canada.



trumpeters step forward under the Great Arch, and while the bystanders remain at attention, two silver bugles sound the poignant notes of the Last Post

On certain important occasions the buglers are in uniform; and sometimes the call is sounded on two silver trumpets—two trumpets that have a special significance for Canadians. These were presented in 1961 to the Ypres Last Post Committee by a retired officer of the Royal Canadian Artillery, Lt.-Col. Ted Lancaster, of St. Catharines, who served as a lieutenant at the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915. As we shall see later, the St. Catharines battery made an important contribution in the battle, and it is appropriate that from one of its veteran members should have come a gift which, in the words of the Burgomaster of Ypres at the presentation ceremony, would provide a link “by which the Canadian veterans will henceforth be directly associated with our people.”

Ypres gave its name to four battles or series of “battles of the First World War. The first of these took place in October and November of 1914. You will recall that after the Allied victory on the Marne had stopped the German onrush toward Paris, the opposing armies entered on the operations known as the Race to the Sea—as each side, trying to outflank the other’s northern wing, dug in along an ever extending front line which soon reached the coast. The Germans then decided on a strenuous effort to breach the Allied front at Ypres, in order to burst through to the Channel Coast at Calais. Their attack opened on October 29 under the optimistic eye of the Kaiser, who had taken up his quarters nearby, in readiness to make a triumphal entry into Ypres. For two weeks the enemy launched mass attacks which French and British troops threw back with heavy losses to both sides. German gains south of the town bent the front line into the curve that for most of the war was to remain as the Ypres Salient. But the prize on which Kaiser Wilhelm had set his heart was denied him. The 1914 battles ended on November 15; and as the Germans continued to rain shells on the town they could not capture, the most notable casualty was the grand old Cloth Hall, which by November 23 was a roofless, burnt-out shell.

In this first struggle, and the Second Battle of Ypres, which we shall be discussing tonight, Allied troops were on the defensive; but in 1917 General Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, launched his long-cherished Flanders offensive, which he hoped would produce a break-through to the

coast, and the capture of troublesome German submarine bases at Ostend and Zeebrugge. The successive of Allied attacks collectively known as the Third Battle of Ypres began on July 31. They ended in the rain and the mud on November 10, 1917, having failed to make any significant gains. It was the Canadian Corps that carried the brunt of the fighting in the final operations of that ghastly series—operations which introduced into battle nomenclature a new name synonymous with horror—Passchendaele.

The Canadian Corps was not represented in the Fourth and final Battle of Ypres, though the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was there, under the command of a British Division. For Allied arms it was the one satisfying battle of all those bearing the name Ypres. Commencing on September 28, 1918, when the Canadian Divisions farther south were battering their way across the Canal du Nord, in front of Cambrai, Fourth Ypres initiated the drive through Flanders that kept pace with the Canadian advance to Mons and led to final victory.

In between these various operations, Allied forces—which often included Canadian formations, stood guard in the Salient. And that guard held firm. Although the Germans were to level Ypres with their long-range shelling, they could not enter the ruined city. When the war ended, Ypres was the only Belgian community of any size that had not fallen into enemy hands.

The Canadians first saw the ancient moated town during the second week of April 1915. At that stage of hostilities only one Division of the four that would eventually make up the Canadian Corps had crossed the English Channel. Landing at St. Nazaire, in the Bay of Biscay in mid-February, the First Division was given a brief period of indoctrination in trench warfare—one brigade at a time—before assuming full responsibility for a section of the front line.

At that time the Division was commanded by an Imperial Officer, Lt. Gen. Sir E.A.H. Alderson. He was a general of the old school, and bore the nickname “Poonah Pete.” During training on Salisbury Plains he carried a hunting horn. “When I blow this horn,” he would say, “I want my officers to come to me.” The men had a good word for him, for had he not, over the protests of Sir Sam Hughes and the WCTU insisted on introducing wet canteens?

On March 3 Alderson took over 6,400 yards of front line about fifteen miles south of Ypres, near Armentieres. Within a week the front on his right flared into action as four British Divisions launched an assault on the German positions at Neuve Chapelle. Canadian

participation was limited to an artillery demonstration, designed to prevent the Germans opposite from reinforcing the battle area. After a promising start the attack petered out, with a failure to exploit preliminary gains. Neuve Chapelle cost the British First Army nearly 13,000. casualties. For the Canadians it was hardly an encouraging introduction to warfare.

On completion of their 24-day tour in the line the Canadians went into Army Reserve, five miles to the rear. Then, early in April they marched across the rolling Flanders countryside to the Cassell area, about seventeen miles West of Ypres, to begin a week of preparation for new tasks. The Division now formed part of Lt.-Gen. Sir Herbert Plumer's V Corps, a component of the British Second Army, which was commanded by General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien (who incidentally had had Canadian troops under his command in the South African War).

What were the circumstances that brought the Canadians to Ypres? Throughout the winter the whole of the Salient had been held by the French Eighth Army, which had taken over the area after the Germans were stopped there in 1914. But the British Commander-in-Chief, General Sir John French, had been under pressure from his opposite number, General Joffre, to extend his line northward so as to release two French army corps in front of Ypres for a proposed offensive in the region of Arras. It was not until March that the arrival in France of the Canadian Division and the first of the divisions of Kitchener's New Armies gave Sir John French the necessary manpower to increase his commitments in the line. He took over nearly five miles of French front, covering roughly two-thirds of the Ypres Salient. The Canadians were assigned the northernmost sector, a frontage of about two and a half miles northeast of Ypres on the extreme left of the British armies in France.

Although Ypres itself had suffered damage in the 1914 fighting, in April 1915 the fertile area of the Salient was virtually unharmed and still under cultivation. The network of roads spreading out across the Flanders plain linked Ypres with small villages, hamlets and farmsteads which were still tenanted, even though some were within two miles of the firing line. The main road within the Canadian sector was that which ran northeastward through St. Jean and St. Julien to Poelcappelle (a town in German hands). A longer route to Poelcappelle was by way of Pilckem and Langemark—both in the area defended by the French.

In general the ground in front of Ypres was quite open and passable to troops of all arms; though a number of physical features were to have an important bearing on the tactics employed by both sides during the Battle. The southeastern perimeter of the Salient lay along the low sandy ridge called the Ypres Ridge—and sometimes the Passchendaele Ridge. It was nowhere more than 200 feet above sea level—or 150 feet above the town of Ypres. But it was high enough to give the Germans holding it unrestricted observation of the British and Canadian positions in the saucer of the Salient—high enough also to conceal from view bodies of German troops massing on the rear slopes for an attack. From this ridge the surface of the land fell away gradually to the Yser Canal—which ran north to the sea behind Ypres—and projecting from it were several subsidiary spurs—such as the Frezenberg Ridge (where Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were later to win distinction), and the Gravenstafel Ridge. These formed the watershed of the numerous little *beeks*, or brooks, some hardly more than ditches, which provided a drainage system for the low-lying fields, and fed the Steenbeek, a sluggish stream flowing northward through the village of St. Julien.

Another series of ridges, running east and west, just high enough above the plain to overlook Ypres from the north, lay between the Steenbeek and the Yser Canal. The Canal itself was a barrier which was to hamper the transfer of Allied reserves. Its normal road bridges, augmented by a number of military spans thrown across north of Ypres, constituted defiles which were to constrict the movement of troops and become the targets of German artillery fire.

What struck the Canadians most forcibly as they completed the relief of the French 11th Division on April 17 was the flimsy nature of the French front line, contrasted with the trenches they had been occupying in the British sector. The French believed in manning their forward positions only lightly. It was their tactics that if attacked, their infantry would retire, allowing the artillery's effective 75-millimetre field guns to come into action to stop the enemy. And so the Canadians found unconnected lengths of field works without the customary traverses—a sort of zigzagging of the trench to give protection against enfilade fire from an enemy shooting down the length of the trench. Furthermore, because of the high water table in the region it was not possible to dig to a depth of more than two feet without striking water. This made it necessary to build up the trench

parapets into breastworks of sod, mud, or sandbag—about four feet above the level of the ground.

The newcomers at once began to convert their front line into a defensive position more in keeping with British standards. Every available man in the forward companies went to work rebuilding breastworks, deepening existing trenches where possible, adding traverses and communication trenches, linking all into a continuous defence line, guarded by an unbroken belt of barbed wire. It was not a pleasant task, for the ground was littered with the debris of earlier fighting. In many places the shallow graves of the dead hampered digging. At the same time companies in reserve were busy improving a secondary defence line some two miles behind the front trenches. Its site had been marked out by General Headquarters as part of a reserve line to be built behind the entire length of the British front. Hence its name—the GHQ Line.

Immediately adjacent to the north of the Canadians was the 45th Algerian Division, composed largely of French Colonial troops. Next to it was the veteran French 37th Territorial Division, which had fought in the 1914 Battle of Ypres and had remained in the sector ever since. These two divisions made up a Groupe which took its name from the nearby town of Elverdinghe. Farther north, between the Groupement d'Eleverginghe and the sea was the Belgian Army, commanded by King Albert. The Canadians were flanked on their right by the two other divisions of Lord Plumer's V Corps—in order the 28th and 27th Divisions, and the 5th Division of the Second Corps, holding the eastern, southeastern and southern faces of the Salient.

The usual internal reliefs had taken place within the Canadian Division. The 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, a brigade whose four battalions were made up of men mainly from Western Canada, was holding the Divisors right sector with the 5th Battalion in front of Gravenstafel next to the British 23th Division, and the 8th Battalion on its left. Brigade Headquarters was at Pond Farm on the Gravenstafel road. On General Alderson's left the 3rd Brigade had the 15th and 13th Battalions in the line, the latter on the left, adjoining the Ypres-Poelcappelle road—which formed the boundary with the French group.

By coincidence, it happened that the commanders of these two brigades were the only two Canadian officers who served overseas who before the end of the war were to attain the high rank of Lieutenant General. Brig. Gen. A.W. Currie, who was in command

of the 2nd Brigade, would finish the war as Lieut. Gen. Sir Arthur Currie, Commander of the Canadian Corps. The commander of the 3rd Brigade, Brig. Gen. R.E.W. Turner, who had won the Victoria Cross at Leliefontein in the South African War, became Lieut. Gen. Sir Richard Turner, Chief of the Canadian General Staff in the United Kingdom.

As was customary, each commander was holding a battalion in brigade reserve. The remaining battalion of each brigade was in Divisional reserve, on the northern outskirts of Ypres.

General Alderson's other brigade of infantry, the 1st Canadian Brigade, was temporarily not under his control. The Brigade, commanded by Brig.-Gen. M.S. Mercer (it comprised the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Battalions) was being held in Army Reserve at Vlamertinghe, behind Ypres, on one hour's notice to reinforce the British 5th Division for an attack on Hill 60—in the south eastern part of the Salient.

But the move to Hill 60 did not materialize. Before the day ended the 1st Brigade, in common with the other Canadian units, was to find itself committed to action closer at hand. Each infantry brigade was supported by its correspondingly-numbered Field Artillery Brigade of four batteries of four 18-pounders.

In looking briefly at the enemy's side of the picture, it is perhaps sufficient to point out that the six allied divisions within the Ypres Salient faced seven German divisions and two independent brigades strung around the perimeter—all part of four army corps making up Duke Albrecht of Württemberg's Fourth Army. Up to now in 1915 the role of these German formations had been pretty well a defensive one. While the existence of the Allied-held Salient had remained a challenge to the enemy ever since the 1914 Battles of Ypres, at the present time there were no immediate plans for a major operation to capture it. The German high Command had decided to stand on the defensive in the West, while making a determined effort in the east—as they put it: “to annihilate the offensive power of the Russians for all time.” But in order to draw attention away from the extensive troop movements that were taking place, as Austro-German armies massed in mid-April for a great offensive in Galicia, German forces on the Western Front were ordered to engage in lively activities “combined with attacks in so far as the modest numbers remaining there permitted.” It was a good opportunity to test new techniques and new weapons.

“The Battle of Ypres which began on the 22nd of April,” frankly states the German Official History of the War, “had their origin on the German side solely in the desire to try the new weapon, gas, at the front.” True, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1906, to which Germany was a signatory, had prohibited the use of poison, or poisoned weapons, including asphyxiating gas. But the introduction of trench warfare had rendered the conventional means of attack largely ineffectual. Some new method had to be found. The Chief of the German General Staff, general Erich von Falkenhayn, was to declare without reservation that Germany’s adoption of chemical warfare arose from the need to find a weapon capable of preparing for assault “positions which had been constructed with all the modern methods of the art of fortification.” High sounding words for the miserably inadequate bits of shallow trench that the French Zouaves were manning in front of Langemarck and Pilckem. Early in 1915 the Germans had tried out against the Russians a 15-centimetre shell containing a gas charge. It was not successful, because of the extreme cold on the Eastern Front and the lack of sufficient guns to obtain the necessary mass effect.

This time they would try chlorine gas, released as a cloud and propelled across No Man’s Land into enemy territory by a favouring wind. Chlorine was cheap. It was used in large quantities in the German dye industry, and it could be readily transported in cylinders already in commercial use. German factories produced 37 tons of chlorine a day—that worked out at less than five days’ production for the release on April 22. Being a heavy gas, chlorine was not easily dissipated, and it would cling to the ground as the cloud rolled forward, seeking out such low spots as the bottoms of trenches. Its action was prompt and effective. It attacked the respiratory organs, immediately incapacitating those exposed to it; often it proved fatal, or left its victim with permanently damaged lungs.

Orders to employ the new weapon against the Ypres Salient reached Duke Albrecht late in January. He selected the south eastern sector—astride and south of the Menin Road; and by mid- February newly-organized pioneer companies had dug in the cylinders in the German front trenches, fitting them with pipes in readiness to discharge the gas as soon as the wind was right. But the choice this first location reflects little credit on the German meteorologists. The wind consistently failed to blow from the required quarter. Towards the end of March the army commander ordered gas cylinders to be

installed along the northern flank of the Salient. By April 11th a line of 5,730 cylinders extended from a point 1200 yards west of Poelcappelle to just east of Steenstraat, on the Yser Canal. The time of this installation is worth noting.

It refutes the claim, sometimes made, that the enemy displayed good psychology in deliberately picking a sector occupied by coloured troops, who might be the more readily panicked by the gas. The French Colonials came into this part of the line only between April the 9th and 16th, whereas the orders to the attacking German formations were issued on the 8th.

Still, for ten more days the wind refused to co-operate with Duke Albrecht, and successive postponements of the attack did little to increase the enthusiasm of the German troops for the new device. Von Falkenhayn was getting more and more impatient, for he wanted to transfer two of the Corps opposite Ypres to the Russian front.

On April 21st conditions were judged to be favourable enough for the undertaking to be ordered for 5:45 next morning. But the 22nd, a Thursday, dawned clear and calm, and at half-past five the attack was put off until evening.

To the nearly 17,000 Canadians of the First Division helping to guard the Salient, April 22nd began as another routine day. After a hard night of work on the defences, followed by the usual stand-to at dawn, most of the men were glad to lie down in their trenches to snatch a few hours of sleep.

Brigade staffs were busy with details of administration. From Brig. Gen. Turner's Headquarters at Mouse Trap Farm, north of Wieltje, a request went back to Division at the Chateau des Trois Tours, for some playing cards and mouth organs for the men in the trenches. About mid-afternoon a favourable reply came over the wire: "There are one hundred mouth organs at divisional headquarters. Please call for them. No cards available just now, but will send you some out of next assignment."

Men of the 16th Battalion, which had come out of the line on the previous day and was now billeted along the Yser Canal, were given a pass to go into Ypres. For the past three days the town had been receiving increasing attention from German artillery. This did not unduly perturb the staff at Fifth Corps Headquarters. They connected it with the relief of the French—it was customary to harass opposing territory when an exchange of troops was known to be taking place—or with the fighting at Hill 60.

Then on the 20th a giant 17-inch howitzer had begun firing at intervals. Its first shell, five feet long and a ton in weight, landed in the Gland Place, killing some forty soldiers and civilians. As the spasmodic shelling continued, the unfortunate inhabitants of Ypres began leaving their homes. Scattered groups of refugees could be seen shuffling along the road to Poperinghe, pushing wheelbarrows and pulling handcarts piled high with their household goods. On the Thursday afternoon the enemy's artillery fire suddenly thickened into a bombardment, and shells began falling thickly into the stricken town. All at once people were screaming and running frantically in every direction. "I saw one woman carrying a baby," recalls a member of the 16th Battalion, "and the baby's head was gone. It was quite devastating."

Soon after four o'clock the enemy shortened his fire, bringing the French front line on the north of the Salient under a violent bombardment, which gradually shifted to the Canadian sector. At five o'clock the Germans opened the valves on their gas cylinders for from six to eight minutes, releasing more than 160 tons of chlorine into a light north-east wind. Behind the gas long lines of German infantry mounted their parapets, and with bayonets fixed began to advance.

The sound of rifle fire coming from the direction of Langemarck, and the sharp bark of French 75s, alerted the Canadians to the fact that their northern neighbours were under attack. Then a company commander of the 13th Battalion, in position beside the Poelcappelle road, climbed out of his trench to investigate. He noticed that the sun had taken on a strange greenish tint, and as he looked over towards the French trenches, he saw a dense cloud of yellowish-green vapour rolling slowly along the ground.

And there was other evidence that the Germans were using gas. The chlorine caught in its deadly embrace the Tirailleurs and the African Light Infantry holding the Langemarck sector, and the Territorials of the 87th Division farther west. Half suffocated, and with eyes streaming and nose and throat burning—their morale broken by this unexpected and unexplainable terror—many abandoned their positions and fled, leaving behind large numbers of dead and dying. The roads leading back to Ypres and beyond became choked with frantic civilians and colonial troops.

Some had faces that had taken on a ghastly pallor. Choking and gasping they pointed to their throats and cried "Gaz, gaz!"

The chlorine concentration spread over an area about four miles wide and nearly a mile deep. It almost completely covered the sector occupied by the two French Divisions, but did not reach in strength into the Canadian zone. The turn of the Canadians would come later. Even so, some of their artillerymen, whose gun area was near the boundary with the French, suffered from the effects of the chlorine. "We weren't equipped with gas masks," recalled a gunner of the 9th Field Battery. "Men were coughing, spitting and choking, and we didn't know what to do till the M.O. of the 14th Battalion, Captain Scrimger—he was to win the V.C. before the battle ended for his bravery in tending the wounded under fire—Captain Scrimger was rushing up and down telling everyone to urinate on our pocket handkerchief and tie it over your mouth." Undoubtedly this remedy saved many from death or serious injury.

The enforced withdrawal of the French troops had left General Alderson's northern flank wide open. At the lower levels of command, where the critical nature of the situation was quickly realized, little time was lost in taking steps to fill at least part of the gaping hole in the Allied line. Brig. Gen. Turner ordered his left battalion in the front line—the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada)—to extend its flank down the Poelcappelle-Ypres road. Two platoons swung around to line the road ditch, from which they were soon exchanging rifle fire with Germans holding a parallel hedge. The Battalion Commander, Lt.-Col. F.O.W. Loomis, who was also in charge a small mixed garrison in St. Julien, placed a company of his men on each side of the road north of the village.

As the Canadians came into their new positions, they fell to vigorously with entrenching tool. To many of them, compelled during training to construct seemingly endless stretches of trench, digging had heretofore seemed one of the less profitable occupations of soldiering but circumstances alter cases, and by dawn, the time of greatest danger, many were up to their hips in new trench.

The dispositions that had been made still left a mile of the road to Poelcappelle un guarded, except for the 10th Battery Canadian Field Artillery, from St. Catharines, which was deployed in an orchard east of the road. Behind St. Julien there was a much wider gap. Half a mile from the village was a small wood, some 400 yards across, called on French maps *le Bois des Cuisinieres*—possibly because French troops had found it a good hide-out for their regimental cooks and field kitchens. The British Designation—Kitchener's Wood—

probably bore no connection with the famous English General. In this wood a British battery (2nd London Heavy Battery) of 4.7-inch guns constituted the only manned position between the former French front line and the 3rd Canadian Brigade's Headquarters at Mouse Trap Farm. To protect his headquarters, General Turner ordered the 14th Battalion, which he had been holding in Brigade Reserve at St. Jean, to man a portion of the GHQ line northward from the St. Julien road. But it was not until eight o'clock that Turner received a delayed message releasing from Divisional reserve his remaining battalion, the 16th Canadian Scottish. He immediately ordered it forward to his Headquarters.

Brig. Gen. Currie, of the 2nd Brigade, whose 10th Battalion had also been in divisional reserve beside the Canal, anticipated orders by resuming control of the battalion and bringing it forward to support the 3rd Brigade. He acted to secure his own sector by concentrating his remaining battalion, the 7th, along Gravenstafel Ridge, east of St. Julien, in an area called on French maps "Locality "C."

In his first battle Currie was demonstrating the qualities of generalship which later served him so well as Corps Commander. Major A.G.L. (Andy) McNaughton, whose 7th Field Battery from Montreal was in support of General Currie's 8th Battalion, had only one day in the battle before a German shell put him out of action for several months. But he saw quite a bit of Currie under fire. "My experience with Currie there," General McNaughton recollects, "was very favourable [giving the] impression of a cool and collected commanding officer who knew what he was about; and I know from talking with the infantry commander who was taking orders from Currie ... there was the same sort of feeling in the infantry battalion, that they were being well handled on the brigade level."

While these Canadian dispositions were being made, the Germans had been steadily advancing, meeting only scattered resistance. By six that evening they had Langemarek and Pilckem in possession; they had reached the Yser Canal at Het Sas on their right, and in the centre they had passed the Franco-British boundary and overrun the battery in Kitcheners Wood, capturing the four guns there. They had met their stiffest opposition on their left, between St. Julien and the Canadian frontline trenches. Here the two isolated platoons of the 13th Battalion fought obstinately until overwhelmed by superior numbers. In the orchard north of St. Julien the 10th Battery, which from the start of the attack had been firing steadily in support of

the 13th Battalion, was suddenly presented with an ideal target for its 16-pounders. A French sergeant who had rallied to the Canadian guns gripped the Battery Commander's arm and pointed across a hedge with the single word: *Allemand*. There, moving down the Poelcappelle road barely 200 hundred yards away, was a column of German infantry. No. 3 and No. 4 guns were immediately swung 90 degrees to the left, and at point blank range their gunners began firing over open sights. The Germans suffered heavily. Soon their dead lay in heaps. The survivors, hastily taking cover, busily dug themselves in and opened rifle fire upon the Canadian gunners.

To help protect the battery in its exposed position, Colonel Loomis sent forward from St. Julien sixty infantrymen of the 14th and 15th Battalions, and a machine gun detachment from his own 13th Battalion. This reinforcement enabled the artillerymen to manhandle their guns back out of the orchard, largely through the skill and daring of the 13th Battalion's Lance Corporal Fred Fisher, who manoeuvred his Colt machine gun forward under heavy fire and brought it into action with telling effect against the enemy. His bravery won him the Victoria Cross, though he did not live to wear the prized ribbon. He was killed next day. Later that evening the fortunate arrival of the gun teams, thanks to the initiative of the non-commissioned officer in charge of the 10th Battery's wagon lines back at Brielen, enabled all four guns to be taken back to safety behind the Canal.

Shortly after eight o'clock in the evening General Alderson Headquarters issued orders for the first counter attack—which was to be made in co-operation with a planned French effort by the 45th Algerian Division against Pilckem. The two Canadian battalions which had been brought up from Divisional Reserve—the 10th and the 16th—were to attack towards Kitcheners Wood. They lined up in a field northeast of Mouse Trap Farm—employing, as one writer has put it, “a formation that might have been used at Waterloo—before the magazine rifle or machine gun had been thought of.” Six waves of men, standing shoulder to shoulder on a two company front, were about to make history for Canadian arms, to engage in close combat with the enemy for the first time in the war. While they waited for the command to march, a regimental Padre, Captain Frederick Scott, moved through the ranks, shaking hands with the men, enthusiastically repeating: “A great day for Canada, boys! A great day for Canada!”

The order for the 10th and 16th Battalions to advance was given at midnight. There was enough moon to silhouette the dark pass of Kitcheners Wood a thousand yards away; and the tightly packed infantry, 1,500 strong, had covered half the distance to the objective before the alarm was given. Let Major-General D.M. Ormond, tell what happened. He was then Captain Ormond, the Adjutant of the 10th Battalion, which was lined up in the lead.

When the 16th Battalion assembled in behind us, our Colonel gave the word to kick off. It was a bayonet charge. Well, there was a hedge a short distance ahead of us. It was a beech hedge and about four feet six high; but apparently when it was young, to support it they put a wire through it; and this was heavy wire, so that when they hit that it just stopped everything. There was no talking, not a word, but with your entrenching tool and bayonet scabbards and rifle butts, that created a great deal of noise.

That did it. From the German positions a single very light shot into air, followed by a shower of flares that lit up the countryside. The enemy opened rapid fire with rifle, and machine gun, and the Canadians were mown down in swathes. Cut with a cheer those not hit ran forward and stormed the shallow trench in which the Germans had dug themselves in on the southern edge of the wood. The attackers poured in among the trees, and in vicious hand-to-hand fighting drove out the Germans and recaptured the big 4.7 guns that had been lost earlier. They had no horses to handle them, but the engineers came up and put them out of commission.

Though most of Kitcheners Wood had been cleared, success was short-lived. The accompanying French attack had not materialized, and the Canadians were coming under galling fire from in front and both flanks. By this time Ormond was the senior surviving officer unwounded in the two battalions. He took the only sensible course, of action—to fall back to the trench which the enemy had been holding. About five hundred survivors of the original 1,500 completed the retirement at about 4:00 a.m., and having reversed the parapet, began extending the trench in either direction.

Up to this point the only Canadian infantry to have been engaged were the eight battalions of the 2nd and 3rd Brigades—for when the Germans struck, the 1st Brigade was being held in Army Reserve west of the Canal. Shortly after 3 o'clock on the evening of the 22nd, General Smith Dorrien released the brigade, and General Alderson placed the 2nd and 3rd Battalions under the command

of Brigadier General Turner. They marched boldly across the open fields, escorted by a detachment of the Divisional Cavalry—the 19th Alberta Dragoons. When they reached the 3rd Brigade Headquarters at Mouse Trap Farm, Turner placed the 3rd Battalion in position behind the GHQ Line, facing north. Private Ron Stewart, a signaler with the 1st Brigade, who was sent forward from Vlamertinghe with a message for the Battalion, remembers finding them after much searching, spread out along a ditch north of the St. Julien road.

The 2nd Battalion (from Eastern Ontario) Turner sent to aid in in the counter attack that was already in progress. Dawn was breaking as one of the 2nd Battalion's companies made a belated and unsuccessful assault against the southwest corner of Kitcheners Wood. "That is where Major Pennant got it," Jack Booker, a member of the 2nd Battalion recalls. "I always remember him as a big, heavy man, with his cane, yelling, 'No. One Company, Charge!' Well he only got about ten feet when down he went. We lost a lot of men, trying to get out of that green field."

The second counter-attack was made early on the morning of April 23rd. It was a hurriedly improvised operation, and as is often the case with impromptu schemes, it suffered from hasty planning and faulty co-ordination. Shortly after 3 o' clock that morning the two remaining battalions of the 1st Brigade—the 1st and the 4th—had crossed the Canal opposite Brielen. The 4th Battalion had been played gaily forward until a German shell broke up the band. Thereafter the march continued in silence. The two battalions deployed on the east side of the road leading north to Pilckem—just below the crest of Hiltop Ridge. On their right were two companies of the 3rd Middlesex Regiment—one of the first of 33 British Battalions that would be placed under command of the Canadian Division before the battle ended. Orders were to attack northward, in conjunction with an assault by two French battalions, striking eastward from the Yser Canal against Pilckem. But once again the French, who having lost all their 75-mm guns in the first German onrush, now had to await the arrival of fresh artillery, were unable to make the attack. Unfortunately the CO of the 4th Battalion, whose four companies were in front, had no word of this cancellation, and at 5:25 a.m. he gave the command to advance. Moving in excellent order, as though on parade, the Canadians began their walk towards Mauser Ridge, 1,000 yards to the north, where the coming of daylight had revealed the enemy digging in.

Almost immediately the advancing troops were assailed by a hurricane of bullets from rifle and machine gun, to which German artillery soon added their shellfire. Some reached the valley bottom between the two ridges, managing to occupy Turco Farm briefly. But they were still 600 yards from the German front trench, and it was terribly apparent that no one could breast that fire-swept slope and live. There the survivors of the Canadians and the Middlesex dug in.

Throughout the night and during the morning of the 23rd reinforcing battalions had been hurrying into the Canadian sector from the reserves of British divisions to the south. Helping to fill the gap behind the GHQ Line was a group called Geddes Detachment—a composite brigade of four battalions from the 28th Division under Colonel A.D. Geddes, the CO of the 2nd East Kents more familiarly known as the Buffs. Then, shortly after midday the 13th Brigade arrived from Hill 60, and its four battalions, rather the worse for wear from their recent fighting there, went into position between the Ypres-Pilckem road and the Canal.

There seemed to be a good chance of forming a defensible line along the Canadian flank—a flank that had now become part of the Canadian Division's long front. But back at Cassell, 30 miles behind Ypres, Sir John French and General Ferdinand Foch (who was in command of all French forces between Arras and the sea) wanted more than this. They agreed to co-operate in restoring the front line exactly as it was before the gas attack.

Accordingly, early in the afternoon of the 23rd, General Smith-Dorrien issued orders for a general advance between Kitcheners Wood and the Yser Canal. Six British battalions, from Geddes Detachment and the 13th Brigade made the assault, in the direction indicated on their map by the hachured arrows. The ground over which they advanced was already dotted with the dead and wounded of the 1st and 4th Canadian Battalions and the 3rd Middlesex. Indeed the remnants of these three units found themselves once more involved before the futile endeavour was halted by the merciless German fire.

Its two efforts that day cost the 1st Battalion casualties of 404 all ranks. The 4th Battalions losses of 454 included the Commanding Officer, who was killed. In paying this heavy price these men of the 1st Brigade had acquitted themselves well. Listen to the testimony of one of the 4th Battalion's survivors, who looks back across the years and seems to echo the words of Canon Scott: "It was a glorious day for the Canadians, because these men had had practically no



General view of ground over which Germans advanced after releasing gas, 22 & 23 April, 1915. Photographed in May, 1919. [Library and Archives Canada PA 4497]

training. But was I ever proud of them? If they had been trained for ten years they couldn't have acted better. To think of these kids that had been pulled from all over the country, and the way they behaved in a murderous fare like that. I never felt so proud of a bunch of boys in my life."

They had not died in vain. The successive and determined counter-attacks, costly as they were, had forced the Germans to change their plans. In the first flush of success on April 22, Duke Albrecht had broadened his original limited objectives and had ordered the attack to be pressed westwards across the Yser Canal towards Poperinghe, half a dozen miles behind Ypres, so as to drive a wedge between the Belgians and the French. But later, when Allied counter attacks had halted the German advance, the High Command intervened, telling the Fourth Army in effect to forget about Poperinghe and concentrate on the business of cutting off the Ypres Salient.

To do this, Duke Albrecht ordered a discharge of gas to be made against the Canadian front line east of the Poelcappelle road. This was to be followed by a converging attack to overrun the Canadian held apex and capture St. Julien, striking into the heart of the salient south of Gravenstafel Ridge. At the same time, over to the north



General view of ground over which Germans advanced after releasing gas, 22 & 23 April, 1915. Photographed in May, 1919. [Library and Archives Canada PA 4499]

another German force would cross the Canal and circle southward to cut off the line of retreat at Vlamertinghe while the Salient was driven in. It was to be the gravest threat to the security of General Smith Dorrien's Second Army.

Through the night the Canadians had continued at preparing as best they could to meet a renewal of the enemy's attacks that daylight must inevitably bring. The work of entrenching went on steadily, and telephone linemen toiled at extending and repairing communications broken by German shelling. From Gravenstafel to Kitcheners Wood the Canadian front line was now held by the equivalent of eight battalions. These were about to be attacked by at least three times that number of German battalions.

At four o'clock on the morning of the 21st German guns began a ten-minute bombardment of the Canadian trenches east of the Poelcappelle road. Simultaneously a deadly cloud of chlorine bee-'n rolling in on a 1200-yard front covering the junction of the 8th and 15th Battalions. It enveloped the whole of the 15th Battalion's right company and most of the 8th Battalions left one, as well as part of each unit's centre company. The 8th Battalion had tied makeshift damp cotton bandoliers over their mouths—but these, untreated with any chemical, helped little against

the chlorine. With eyes blinded and throats on fire, men collapsed on the floor of the trench in suffocating agony.

A member of one of the 5th Battalion's Companies which was in close support described how he tried to aid the stricken men of the 6th Battalion: "Men came staggering up that were gassed, and I went and helped theme fellows to make them comfortable by the side of a barn. I gathered up any old coats that were lying around, and covered them up. I even gave them my overcoat, and that night I got cold and I went back to see if I could find a coat or something. I saw those fellows, and they were all dead, a great bunch of bubbles at their mouth and nostrils."

Behind the gas came the German infantry, wearing their mouth protectors. So confident were they that the chlorine had done their work for them, that they advanced, not in open skirmishing order, but in heavy waves—one eye witness even declared that they were marching in column of fours. They met strong resistance on the 8th Battalion's front—a Shrapnel barrage from the supporting 18-pounders of the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade, and steady enfilading rifle fire from the Battalion's right-hand company which had escaped the gas. Those still able to fight manned the low parapet and emptied their Ross rifles into the advancing enemy—those much-hated weapons whose stubborn rifle bolts repeatedly jammed with rapid fire, and had to be jarred loose with boot heel, or entrenching-tool handle, or merely blistered bleeding fingers. Instead of firing 12 or 15 rounds a minute, they were lucky to get off two or three.

The 2nd Brigade's line held. But on the left the 15th Battalion, (the 48th Highlanders of Canada) had neither the help of enfilading rifle fire nor support from their artillery (for the guns of the 3rd Brigade had perforce been pulled back and out of range). The Highlanders were reduced to a handful of men. Throughout the whole war their toll of 647 casualties on that one day was unequalled by any other Canadian Battalion in so short a time. The Germans broke through to a depth of 700 yards, and mounted further attacks to wipe out the apex, saturating the whole area with their shells.

What was left of the 13th and 15th Battalions fell back to form a new line along the crest of the Gravenstafel Ridge, a line strengthened by reserve companies of the battalions of the 2nd Brigade. These included the remnants of the 10th Battalion, brought back across country from Kitcheners Wood to rejoin its parent brigade. General Ormond recalls the strange spectacle of some Germans wearing kilts



Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April to 25 May 1915 by Richard Jack. [Canadian War Museum Beaverbrook Collection of War Art 19710261-0161]

that they had picked up as they came through the 15th Battalion's lines. "We stood up on our parapet and gave three ruddy cheers and shook our fists at them. We gave them everything we had, and they figured it wasn't worth while, and they just turned around and went back. They did that again, and we did it again. We were quite happy about it. So then they did it a third time. When they went back the third time, we thought we'd won the war!"

But then the big 4.1's and 5.9's of the German artillery opened up, dealing devastatingly with the Canadians on Gravenstafel Ridge. There was a further withdrawal shortly after midday, this time to a line 1000 yards north of the road leading from Wieltje to Gravenstafel; though in front of Gravenstafel the 2nd Brigade's 5th Battalion and part of the 8th still held their positions in the original front line.

In the meantime, the left of the 3rd Brigade's line from Keerselaere, north of St. Julien, along to Kitcheners Wood had been under continual pouncing from the guns. Twice during the morning Brigadier General Turner's battle-worn units had driven off attacks by German infantry. The withdrawal from the Gravenstafel Ridge had left St. Julien open to attack from three sides; and soon after midday enemy troops entered the battered village, the small garrison fighting desperately until overwhelmed.

Then occurred one of those costly misunderstandings which are often caused by the fog of war. A message reaching General Turner to “strengthen your line and hold on” was misinterpreted by him as referring to the GHQ Line over on his left rear. At 1.40 p.m. he issued an order to the various units under his command (six Canadian and two British Battalions) to hold the GHQ Line from the Wieltje-St. Julien road southward.

Allan Beadoc—who produced *The Book of Remembrance* in the Memorial Chamber of the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill—was in the 2nd Battalion’s trenches, south of Kitcheners Wood. He recalled:

We were to stay on till four o’clock and then make a retirement. So at four o’clock we had to retire. It was a most terrifying experience to see your chums going out, one after the other, out of the end of this little trench that we had—out into the open, where machine gun fire was just spurting in as through a hose. And one after the other they would go over, like jack rabbits—and they were piling up there. And we were moving to this ultimate destiny, you might say, and feeling, ‘Well my turn is next.’ I got through it. Why, I don’t know. I guess I was lucky ... It was feeling of great elation.

Another member of the 2nd Battalion, George Patrick, wanted to make sure about the situation and inquired from an officer: “Are we running away from that gang?”

“Oh no,” was the reply. “We are simply retiring to a prepared position.” I said: “That’s all right. That’s fine.” So I went back and I said to my chum, “Let’s get out of here.”

Fortunately more British reinforcements were on the way. Thus it happened that while the exhausted units of the 3rd Canadian Brigade were pulling back, into the GHQ. Line, five British battalions made a most timely appearance and filled the gap through which a resolute German advance could have cut off the 2nd Brigade and the adjoining 23th Division.

Next morning, Sunday, April 25th, these British units, all of the 10th Brigade, made an heroic but vain attempt to recapture St. Julien. As they left their start line north of Mouse Trap Farm, German machine-gun fire mowed them down in long, terribly regular rows. An inexperienced staff officer peering through his field glasses and seeing no forward motion, inquired: “Why do they stop?” There

was terse reply: "They are dead." In those few minutes the 10th Brigade had lost 73 officers and 2300 other ranks.

All that dreadful Sunday units of the 2nd Canadian Brigade, undergoing continual bombardment, hung grimly onto their positions in front of and to the west of Gravenstafel.

One company of the 8th Battalion and two of the 5th were still in the front line trenches they had been holding on April 22nd, but there left flank was wide open. "We are enfiladed and in danger of being cut off," the 5th Battalion's Orderly Room Sergeant wrote in his diary. "Anxiously all day we look for reinforcements and nothing comes ...Our headquarters is tumbling about our ears." And later—"Ordered to retire at once, in daylight. God help us all. It is madness to go before dark. We say goodbye to each other and part."

The withdrawal brought more casualties. The 5th Battalion's two companies executed a successful retirement, but as the more exposed company of the 8th Battalion started to fall back, the Germans closed in and overran it. Farther to the left and rear the remnants of the 7th and 10th Battalions, which Brig. Gen. Currie reported as "simply blown out of their trenches by artillery fire," withdrew after midnight. British battalions took over as in utter exhaustion the decimated units of the 2nd Brigade made their way slowly and painfully back to Wieltje Later, as they passed through Ypres, they found the town completely abandoned, every house was roofless. "As we came through," said a veteran of the 5th Battalion, "I remember as distinct as can be, there was a dog barking. It was the only sound we could hear." The 1st and 3rd Canadian Brigades were already out of the line; and the relief of the 2nd Brigade virtually marked the end of the Canadian Division's valiant defence of the Salient. Only the Division's artillery remained in position, covering part of the Salient until the middle of May.

The Second Battle of Ypres was to continue sporadically for another month, with French and British troops holding the Salient. Further allied retirements shortened the line to be defended. By the third week in May it reached a position that was to remain pretty well unchanged until the summer of 1917.

But the crisis had passed with the determined Canadian stand in the first three days of the Battle. By April 25th enough French and British *reinforcements* had arrived to end the danger of a German breakthrough. The battle had cost the First Division 208 officers and 5828 other ranks in killed, wounded and taken prisoner. But their



A Canadian at the graveside of a Canadian who was killed in 2nd Battle of Ypres - November 1917. [Library and Archives Canada PA 2211]

achievements had brought the Canadians immense gain in stature, for had they not proved themselves more than a match for the enemy and not less than the equal of their Allied comrades in arras. In their first major operation of the War Canadian soldiers had acquired an indomitable confidence which was to carry them irresistibly forward in the battles which lay ahead.

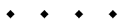
“The Canadians had many casualties,” reported Sir John French in his *Dispatches*, “but their gallantry and determination doubtless saved the situation.” There were many other tributes to the Canadian performance at Ypres, but let me once more quote Sergeant Patrick, who took a rather matter-of-fact view—one quite devoid of heroics: “No one had any idea of getting out. We didn’t know enough about it to know that we were licked. We went in there, and we were going to stay there, and that was that. Enough of us managed to stay there long enough until help came up to fill the gap.”

At the Keerselaere cross roads near the rebuilt St. Julien rises Canada’s memorial to her sons who died in the Second Battle of Ypres. Among all the Dominion’s monuments in France and Belgium this one is unique: a granite shaft surmounted by the head and shoulders of a Canadian soldier—the head bowed in perpetual tribute to those

who fell. But there is another memorial to those who died at Ypres one that will perhaps outlast even the monument of stone.

While the battle was in progress, the Medical Officer of the 1st Canadian Field Artillery Brigade, a doctor from the staff of the Montreal General Hospital, had charge of a dressing station dug into a bank somewhere behind the Yser Canal. He had his hands full caring for the wounded, and as the fighting continued and he saw the little wooden crosses daily grow more numerous, there came to him words that were to be a perpetual inspiration to soldier and civilian alike to “carry on”—and to remember those for whom the

Last Post had sounded. And so one day Major John McCrae sat down in humble billet and began to write: “In Flanders Fields the poppies blow / between the crosses row on row...”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G.W.L. Nicholson (1919-1980) was a high school principle in Saskatchewan before going overseas as an Army Historical Officer during the Second World War. Nicholson authored the official history of the Italian campaign under the direction of C.P. Stacey, head of the Army Historical Section (1956) and in 1955, began work on the one volume official history of the First World War, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*, published by the Department of National Defence in 1962. A distinguished and respected historian, Nicholson succeeded Stacey as director of the Army Historical Section in 1959 and was awarded the Royal Society of Canada’s Tyrrell Medal in 1968. He died in Ottawa, Ontario on 28 February 1980.

