

WINTER STORMS REINFORCE A STATE OF DEADLOCK

In November a severe winter set in. Life along the opposing lines became a nightmare of horror, with every trench a ditch of half frozen water which all ingenuity failed to overcome. Blocked in their advance to the sea across Belgium, the Germans made a final effort to smash through the British lines before Lille in December, the brunt of which first fell on the forces from India and the British brigades on the La Basse roads. Misled by the transfer of certain forces to Ypres, the Bavarians concentrated suddenly and launched one of their human battering rams behind a curtain of shells. The advanced trenches were overwhelmed and the wounded survivors were stamped on and beaten to death in a frenzy of rage. The British recaptured most of their trenches, but at heavy cost, and the Germans had gained some ground. But it was the last flicker of Germany's desperate battle for the coast, and the offensives simmered down to a monotonous defensive, with artillery exchanges and merciless sniping on both sides to relieve trench tedium. The French made a surprise attack on Vermelles, which they captured after a terrific hand to hand fight, strengthening their junction with the British, and gaining the first step on the way to Lens. A succession of heavy snowstorms was punctuated by thaws which added greatly to the suffering of the soldiers.



1st Nov 1914: Everywhere, the Germans are now being caught and forced to defend, when their ideal military machine is geared for invasion. The French XIV Corps moves north from the 10th Army, while the French IX Corps attacks southwards to Becelaere relieving the BEF

2nd Nov 1914: October has crept out and November dawned in icy drizzle, fog and sleet, set to introduce a winter war of unprecedented severity. Every day, each side grows stronger, each side digs in, and ever greater offensives in either direction are launched ... and lost

3rd Nov 1914: To a series of rapid, unexpected attacks at Ypres, the Germans responded bravely but aimlessly, apparently waiting for orders. The battle continues with great violence and with more than 250 heavy guns, the Germans capture Messines and Gheluvelt

4th Nov 1914: Realities of War: Austria has invaded Serbia in a third attempt to conquer the Serbs in retaliation for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

4th Nov 1914: Realities of War: Through a mist of tears I read that all hands on the "Monmouth" are lost at Coronel: my nephew Christopher, aged 15 was aboard

4th Nov 1914: Realities of War: We have few effective cryptographic, telegraphic or telephone systems in place and we are reliant on our brave dispatch riders

5th Nov 1914: Thwarted by allied resistance and ten days of failure in a desperate series of attacks, the German advance grinds to a halt. The Teuton armies refuse to bow to the tremendous allied pressure; they believe that they were invincible, and must take Ypres. A cascade of high explosives sweep the British at Messines; trenches cave in; hundreds die in a mass of sand and human debris

5th Nov 1914: The tentacles of war continue to slither across borders and boundaries: France and Britain declare war on the Ottoman Empire

6th Nov 1914: Dazed and stunned by a bombardment of such profusion that the bursting alone sounds like thunder, the British still hold Ypres. Haig's 1 Corps has lost all but 10 percent of its officers, and 15 percent of other ranks but, even on the verge of collapse, they still fight. At Gheluvelt staff officers gather up mixed forces, even from the hospitals, and charge, taking on the Germans with the bayonet

7th Nov 1914: Unable to break through at Gheluvelt, Max von Fabeck attacks Wytschaete held by only a handful of men from the Household Cavalry. Four waves of German troops sweep across the Menin-Ypres road: the first is annihilated; the second lost in a bloody slaughter, the third rips through the Allied barricades and closes with the bayonet; the fourth remains intact and wins 400 yards of mud. A bizarre to-and-fro game is now played daily along the front from Armentieres to Dixmude; neither army moves but thousands die

8th Nov 1914: Today, under the thunderous roar of heavy shelling on Ypres by German artillery, there is little movement and the front is quiet. Generals: your war is now nothing but a siege that will end only upon the death of your men or the exhaustion of your resources

9th Nov 1914: Young poorly trained German troops hurl themselves at our lines but the machine guns and barbed wire are impossible to penetrate. A boy soldier stands and stares across the battlefield through the bloody, gaping bullet-hole that was his eye

10th Nov 1914: A terrific bombardment of the British and French lines, southeast and northeast of Ypres, engaged every sector along the front. A whistle blows at 11am and a huge bolt of Prussian Guards from Arras is launched at the British line, again towards Gheluvelt

11th Nov 1914: The ground was a quagmire from the constant rain, but field guns, pushed and dragged through the mud, met the Prussian Guards. Dismounted Horse Guards and Northampton reservists, mere pygmies against the rampant Prussians, throw themselves into the fray ... and then the supports, including cooks, clerks and the lightly wounded, were loosed, to expel the invaders with the bayonet. Without orders or formation, individual soldiers fought like lions until the bewildered Guards staggered back over the trenches.

11th Nov 1914: Two more German assaults are launched against the woods held by Smith-Dorrien's exhausted 2 Corps, now comprising just 9000 men. The last force seemed close to breaking through, but the fire of the famous "75s" broke their formation and their morale

12th Nov 1914: I receive the latest casualty reports for October and early November: British 58,155, French 86,237, Belgian 21,562, and German 91,664 - for what?

13th Nov 1914: Rumours that Ypres fell last night are first confirmed, then refuted as a handful of terrified German boy soldiers are rounded up. Situation reports confirm that the Germans have been pushed back all along the Yser - but overall positions have hardly changed - and 8th Division, under Maj-Gen Francis Davies, have arrived at Brielen, bringing much needed reinforcement against further attacks

13th Nov 1914: Germans now hold much of the line from the Menin road to the woods but a heavy snowfall brings a welcome pause to the slaughter. Winter is now upon us and life on the lines is fast becoming a nightmare with every trench a deathly ditch of half-frozen water

14th Nov 1914: Recent reports informed us that Lord Roberts had fallen ill while travelling from St Omer to visit his East Indian regiments at the front. Today, we learned that the lion of South Africa has succumbed to pneumonia and passed away at St Omer; the lines are eerily quiet now

15th Nov 1914: Nights of bitter frost suspend the killing but bring hundreds of frostbite victims to hospitals already busy with amputations

16th Nov 1914: The British line now runs from Wytschaete to Givenchy; the Belgians hold 15 miles north, while the French defend some 430 miles. The diminishing level of German action along the front trigger wild rumours and fresh calls that it will be “over by Christmas.”

17th Nov 1914: The battle of Ypres is done: Albrecht orders his Army to stop fighting and dig in, an order immediately confirmed by Falkenhayn. As Albrecht’s troops pull out, the 400 yards of mud that they won are retaken with great joy by the 2nd Buckinghamshires. While the fighting at Ypres and south has ceased in a state of deadlock, the Ypres roll has now claimed Prince Maurice of Battenberg whose father died as we left Kumassi after the 1895/6 Ashanti expedition

18th Nov 1914: Intelligence reports claim that, after Ypres, Falkenhayn doubts whether Germany will have another opportunity to win the war

19th Nov 1914: Still recovering from the intense fighting, the troops at Ypres stare in awe as Haig and French arrive to assess the situation.

20th Nov 1914: Germany has gained no advantage from their superiority of men or artillery; their attempt to seek a decisive victory has failed. Blocked in their advance across central Belgium, the Germans consolidate their positions to attempt a breakthrough to the north. To the south of Ypres, German troops are again massing at Lille, La Bassee and Lens, likely to become the next battlegrounds.

21st Nov 1914: The German withdrawal from the front south of Ypres gives me a long overdue opportunity to leave for a visit home to Folkestone. I manage to find a seat on a transport returning to the coast via Poperinghe and Hondschoote; we should reach Calais tomorrow

22nd Nov 1914: With a growing register of bodies and the smashed and bloody wounded lying in every inch of space, Calais is a vision from Hell

24th Nov 1914: Now helping on a hospital ship from Calais but Folkestone crammed with troops leaving for France so we are re-routed to Dover. With a constant stream of traffic on the coast road, it is a simple enough task to find transport to Folkestone

25th Nov 1914: Folkestone is crammed with young, excited men leaving for war: I once knew that excitement ... now I also know the horror

26th Nov 1914: I meet my brother William and sister Louisa at our family home and realise, with some sadness, that I know nothing of their lives. We talk of the young men of Folkestone leaving for France and I learn that William’s son Reginald, my nephew, is among them.

27th Nov 1914: William insists that I accompany him for a tour around the family drapery business premises and proudly shows me a new machine that he has patented; in truth, though, my thoughts are elsewhere

28th Nov 1914: After three frustrating days of talks about our family business (of which I care little) I know that I should be back in France

29th Nov 1914: I have no authority or press commission, but I manage to join the troop ship SS Invicta for Boulogne

30th Nov 1914: Latest intelligence reports that, after defeats at Ypres and the Channel ports, the Germans are re-grouping to attack at Arras

