

Turner and Ketchen would affect disastrously the Second Division and must be followed by many resignations". He had "reluctantly" come to the conclusion that General Alderson was "incapable of holding the Canadian Divisions together".⁶⁷ In Ottawa the Prime Minister and his cabinet gave their assent on 26 April and Alderson's appointment to the post in the United Kingdom followed.⁶⁸ For many years, during and after the war, it was widely believed that the immediate cause of Alderson's removal had been the differences of opinion between himself and the Minister of Militia regarding the use of the Ross Rifle (below, p. 158). As we now know,* this was not the case.

General Alderson's new appointment was to be of brief duration; for in November 1916 a reorganization of Canadian command in the United Kingdom terminated his employment. During his eighteen months in command of Canadian forces on both sides of the English Channel he had made an important contribution. It had not been an easy task to organize, equip and train the Canadian Division in the mud of Salisbury Plain, particularly when so often his views had clashed with those of the Minister of Militia. Under his leadership Canadians had sturdily withstood the German onslaught at Ypres, and to him must go no small part of the credit for building the staunch Canadian force that within a year was to win its spurs as a corps on Vimy Ridge.⁶⁹

The Canadian Government had left the nomination of Alderson's successor in the hands of the Commander-in-Chief. He selected a distinguished British officer and a future Governor General of Canada—Lieut.-General the Honourable Sir Julian H. G. Byng. Sir Julian was a cavalry officer who at the outbreak of war was recalled from service in Egypt to command a cavalry division and subsequently the Cavalry Corps in France. He commanded the 9th Corps in the Dardanelles Campaign, returning to the Western front in February 1916 to take over the 17th Corps.

The Battle of Mount Sorrel, 2-13 June

The beginning of June found the 2nd Canadian Division still in front of St. Eloi. Major-General Currie's 1st Division had two battalions in its front line, which centred on Hill 60, immediately north of the Ypres-Comines railway. The remaining two miles of front on the Corps left were held by the 3rd Division (Major-General Mercer), with four battalions forward. This part of the Canadian line formed the most easterly projection of the Ypres Salient into enemy territory. The challenge to German aspirations presented by this obtrusion was the greater in that the 3rd Division's sector included the only portion of the crest of the Ypres ridge which had remained in Allied hands—a tenure which gave the Canadians observation over the enemy trenches. This advantageous position extended from a point about a thousand yards east of Zwarteleen (beside Hill 60), passing in

† * Sir Robert Borden's Papers did not become available for examination at the Public Archives of Canada until 1952.

† Mount Alderson, in Alberta, overlooking the Waterton Lakes, is named after the first commander of the Canadian Corps.

succession over a flat knoll called Mount Sorrel and two slightly higher twin eminences, "Hill 61" and "Hill 62", the latter known also as Tor Top. North of these points the ground fell away to the Menin Road, but from Tor Top a broad spur, largely farm land, aptly named Observatory Ridge, thrust nearly a thousand yards due west between Armagh Wood and Sanctuary Wood. If the enemy could capture Tor Top and advance along Observatory Ridge he would gain a commanding position in the rear of the Canadian lines, and might well compel a withdrawal out of the salient. At the least such an advance might, as the Germans themselves stated, "fetter as strong a force as possible to the Ypres Salient", and thus reduce the number available for a British offensive elsewhere.⁶⁰

Opposite the 1st and 3rd Divisions the enemy's 27th and 26th Infantry Divisions, of the 13th Württemberg Corps, had for the past six weeks been stealthily preparing just such a blow. Warnings were not lacking. During May Canadian patrols reported that German engineers were pushing saps forward on either side of Tor Top. These progressed slowly but steadily in spite of our artillery and machine-guns; and before the end of the month a new lateral trench connected the heads of the saps, now fifty yards in advance of the main front line. The same kind of thing was going on south of Mount Sorrel and at other points beyond. Some weeks earlier observers of the Royal Flying Corps had seen near the Menin Road, well behind the enemy lines, works curiously resembling the Canadian positions near Tor Top. (The history of the German 26th Infantry Division confirms that these were practice trenches used to rehearse the assault.)⁶¹ Other indications of forthcoming action appeared in the bringing up of large-calibre trench mortars, and abnormal activity by the enemy's artillery, aircraft and observation balloons. Weather conditions, however, prevented systematic observation of the German rear areas; and the absence of significant troop movements seemed to signify that the looked-for attack was not imminent. (Actually the only additional enemy troops transferred to the sector for this operation were artillery.) Then on the night of 1-2 June the Württembergers refrained for seven hours from shelling the Canadian trenches, in order, as it subsequently transpired, to avoid interference with their own wire-gapping parties. Later their guns resumed normal activity, and Canadian suspicions were allayed.

At six o'clock on the morning of the 2nd, General Mercer and Brig.-Gen. Williams, commander of the 8th Brigade (which was defending the threatened area about Observatory Ridge), set out to reconnoitre Tor Top and Mount Sorrel. They had just reached the front-line trenches of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles on the brigade right when the enemy's preliminary bombardment burst upon them. It was the Canadian Corps' first experience of the terrific violence that artillery preparation was to attain in the summer of 1916. "All agreed", writes Lord Beaverbrook,* "that there was no comparison between the gun-fire of April and of June, which was the heaviest endured by British troops up to that time."⁶² For four hours a veritable tornado of fire ravaged the Canadian positions from half a mile west of Mount Sorrel to the northern edge of Sanctuary

Wood. The full fury fell upon the 8th Brigade and the right of the 7th Brigade. Hardest hit was Brig.-Gen. Williams' right-hand battalion, the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles, in front of Armagh Wood. Their trenches vanished and the garrisons in them were annihilated. Of this unit's ordeal a German eye-witness was to write: "The whole enemy position was a cloud of dust and dirt, into which timber, tree trunks, weapons and equipment were continuously hurled up, and occasionally human bodies."⁶³ "The Tunnel", a gallery dug on the reverse slope of Mount Sorrel by the 2nd Canadian Tunnelling Company (whose sappers were to do stout work in evacuating casualties), afforded some safety until it was blown in; its surviving occupants were captured. In all, the 4th Mounted Rifles suffered 89 percent casualties—of 702 officers and men only 76 came through unscathed.⁶⁴

Neither Mercer nor Williams returned from the Mounted Rifles' area. The latter, wounded, was taken prisoner when the German infantry assaulted. The death of Mercer—his ear-drums were shattered by shellfire, his leg broken by a bullet, and finally he was killed by a burst of shrapnel as he lay on the ground—came tragically at a moment when his new command was entering its first big action.⁶⁵ That afternoon Brig.-Gen. E. S. Hoare Nairne, of the Lahore Divisional Artillery, assumed temporary command of the 3rd Division.* Williams' place was taken for the time being by Lt.-Col. J. C. L. Bott, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (then in brigade reserve). For several critical hours, however, both the 3rd Division and the 8th Brigade were leaderless; and the conduct of the defence suffered accordingly.

During the morning the deluge of hostile fire increased in intensity. Our artillery, assisted by two squadrons of British aircraft, accomplished little. Enemy shellfire eventually killed or wounded all forward observation officers and cut all telephone lines. A few minutes after 1:00 p.m. the Württembergers exploded four mines just short of the Canadian trenches on Mount Sorrel, and then attacked—two battalions each of the 121st and 125th Regiments (26th Infantry Division) on the right, and two battalions of the 120th Regiment (27th Infantry Division) on the left at Mount Sorrel.⁶⁶ Five other battalions were in support, and six in reserve. In bright sunlight the grey-coated figures advanced in four waves spaced about seventy-five yards apart. Afterwards Canadian survivors spoke of the assured air and the almost leisurely pace of the attackers, who appeared confident that their artillery had blotted out all resistance.

All was methodically planned. The men in the first line had fixed bayonets and carried hand grenades and wire cutters. Those who followed were equipped with entrenching tools, floor boards and sandbags. As they flowed over the flattened trenches along Mount Sorrel and Tor Top they encountered only small, isolated bands of survivors from the 1st and 4th C.M.R. who could offer little effective resistance. There were brief episodes of hand-to-hand fighting with bomb and bayonet, and where sheer numbers were not sufficient to overcome resistance,

* On 16 June Brig.-Gen. Lipsitt was promoted to Major-General and succeeded General Mercer in command of the 3rd Division.

* Sir Max Aitken was elevated to the peerage in January 1917.

the enemy used flame projectors. The machine-guns of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and the 5th Battalion (1st Division)—on the left and right flanks—raked the attackers. Though they inflicted substantial casualties they could not halt the advance. It remained for the 5th Battalion Canadian Mounted Rifles, holding a series of strongpoints immediately behind the 1st and 4th battalions, to check enemy attacks on the east and south-east sides of Maple Copse with rapid and accurate fire. Exploiting along Observatory Ridge, the Germans captured three strongpoints and overran a section of the 5th Battery C.F.A., killing or wounding all the gunners.* Of this incident a German regimental historian was to write: "It is fitting to stress that here too the Canadians did not surrender, but at their guns defended themselves with revolvers to the last man."⁹⁸ Before the Germans began consolidating they had seized most of Armagh Wood and pushed back all but the northernmost 600 yards of our line in Sanctuary Wood.

Credit for temporarily checking the enemy's right wing belongs to the Patricia's. One of their two companies in the firing line, next to the 1st C.M.R., had been overrun. But the second had escaped the worst of the bombardment, and as the Germans surged eastward its rifles volleyed into the enemy's right rear. It was to hold out successfully for eighteen hours, isolated from the rest of the battalions and with all its officers killed or wounded. Patricia companies to the rear bore the brunt of the fighting, beating off German attempts to reach the vital support line before it could be reinforced. Resolute detachments held successive blocks in the communication trenches, and the enemy's advance was over the dead bodies of each little garrison in turn. Sanctuary Wood cost the P.P.C.L.I. more than 400 casualties including 150 killed, among them the Commanding Officer, Lt.-Col. H. C. Buller.⁹⁹

Under orders issued before the attack the Germans dug in 600-700 yards west of their former line, though short of "the position to be occupied in the most favourable case". Their formation histories, reporting the road to Ypres open, regret the brake upon exploitation applied in advance by the command. Fortunately for the Canadians no German officer had the initiative to exceed instructions and capitalize on success. Pressure to the north against the weakened defenders might well have rolled up the Canadian left wing, which had been so gallantly held by the Patricia company backed by The Royal Canadian Regiment at Hooge.¹⁰⁰

By evening of 2 June machine-guns of the 10th Battalion and batteries of the Motor Machine Gun Brigade sent forward by the G.O.C. 1st Division had established a new line sealing off the German encroachment, and at 8:45 p.m. General Byng issued orders that "all ground lost to-day will be retaken tonight". The counter-attack was timed for 2:00 a.m. Because of the 3rd Division's heavy losses two brigades of the 1st Division were temporarily placed at Brig.-Gen. Hoare Nairne's disposal (the 2nd Brigade to operate against Mount Sorrel and the 3rd against Tor Top), and his 7th Brigade (on the left) was strengthened

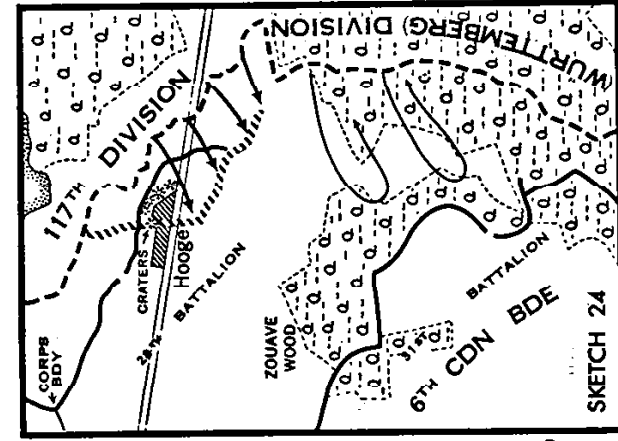
* This was the only occasion in the war when guns of the Canadian Corps fell into German hands. The two 18-pounders were recovered in the subsequent fighting.⁹⁷

by the addition of two battalions of the 9th Brigade. But because of the distances that had to be covered, the difficulties in communication and the interference by enemy fire, the time allowed for assembly proved inadequate and the attack had to be postponed until after seven o'clock. Then came more trouble. The signal to begin was to be six simultaneous green rockets. Some misfired, and in all fourteen rockets had to be used to send up six. Since these had not burst simultaneously (and at least two battalions saw no rockets), units still awaited the starting signal.¹⁰¹

As a result the 7th Battalion, on the right, the 14th and 15th Battalions (centre) and the 49th (left) assaulted at different times. The uneven start permitted a concentration of enemy rifle and machine-gun fire that would have been impossible against a whole line advancing at once. The four units suffered heavily as they moved resolutely forward in broad daylight over fairly open ground, and only small parties reached their objectives, to engage the Germans in hand-to-hand fighting. Weakened by casualties they could not overcome the defenders, and many were killed or captured. Before 1:00 p.m. the right and centre units had withdrawn to their start line, though on the left the 49th Battalion remained in possession of some of the trenches just short of the old German line.¹⁰² The Edmonton unit had suffered heavily. Its casualties brought the total losses of the 7th Brigade for the first four days of June to 1050 all ranks.

Although these attacks failed to achieve their purpose, they had nevertheless closed a 600-yard gap from Square Wood across Observatory Ridge to Maple Copse, and advanced the Canadian front about 1000 yards from the scratch positions taken up after the German assault. Work now began on extending this line northward to Hooge, so as to give depth to the 7th Brigade's defences. The enemy, too, had not been idle. Setting himself to defend his important gains he had fortified his new line with machine-guns and barbed wire and constructed eight communication trenches leading forward from his old front line. It would almost seem that the fact of the struggle being between two rational corps—Canadian and Wirtemberger—had strengthened the determination of each to win.

Sir Douglas Haig agreed with General Plumer's desire to expel the Germans from such a commanding position only two miles from Ypres; but in view of the preparations for the Somme offensive he did not wish to divert to the Salient more troops than necessary. He therefore restricted further support from outside the Canadian Corps to artillery and one brigade of infantry, and suggested that the next counter-attack be carried out with few infantry but many guns. This emphasis on artillery—which followed the tactics so successfully employed by the Germans at St. Eloi—brought to the disposal of the G.O.C. R.A. Canadian Corps, Brig.-Gen. H. E. Burstall, one of the greatest arrays of guns yet employed on so narrow a front. The 218 pieces included 116 eighteen-pounders, and ranged in calibre up to two 12-inch howitzers. They represented the Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery, the 1st and 2nd Divisional Artilleries and the Lahore Divisional Artillery; the British 5th, 10th, 11th Heavy Artillery Groups, 3rd Divisional



THE ATTACK ON HOOGE 6 JUNE 1916

German front line after attack.....
100 500 1000
YARDS

Artillery, 51st Howitzer Battery and 89th Siege Battery; and the South African 71st and 72nd Howitzer Batteries. The "heavies" of the British 5th and 14th Corps, on either flank, were to cooperate.¹⁶

The main task of the artillery before the counter-attack was to hamper the enemy's consolidation by pounding his front and support lines and seeking out hostile batteries for destruction. German accounts admit the success of this programme. "The losses of the 120th Regiment and the 26th Infantry Division mounted in horrifying numbers . . . What was constructed during the short nights was again destroyed in daytime."¹⁴ But bad flying weather made it impossible to register the heavy guns, and the counter-attack, originally set for 6 June, had to be postponed.

In the meantime the enemy struck again. The target was the spur at Hooge, which had changed hands many times since the Germans first took it in 1914. Their most recent tenancy had been for eight days in the previous August. The spur overlooked Ypres, and its possession would complete the enemy's domination of the salient. In a series of reliefs the 6th Canadian Brigade, brought up from the 2nd Division's reserve, had taken over the 7th Brigade's sector north of Sanctuary Wood, and was thus holding the extreme left of the Corps front. At 3:05 p.m. on the 6th 200 yards of trenches covering the eastern outskirts of the ruins of Hooge were shattered by the explosion of four large mines. Two companies of the 28th Battalion holding these trenches suffered heavily, one being almost wiped out.¹⁵ Determined rifle and machine-gun fire from the remainder

of the battalion and the 31st Battalion on the right beat off German attempts to reach the support line. But "Hooge had gone . . . and Ypres remained open to its assailants".¹⁶

In keeping with the C.-in-C.'s policy of limiting operations in the Ypres Salient so as not to hamper preparations for the Somme offensive, General Byng decided to leave the Hooge trenches in German hands and to concentrate on regaining Mount Sorrel and Tor Top. To guard against further trouble on his left, the British 2nd Dismounted Cavalry Brigade, organized in three battalions, came on loan to the Canadian Corps as a counter-attack force.¹⁷ After further postponement because of bad weather the Canadian operation was set for 1:30 a.m. on the 13th. It was to be carried out mainly by the 1st Division. Because of the casualties suffered by units of two of his brigades in the unsuccessful counter-attack of 3 June, General Currie regrouped his stronger battalions into two composite brigades. Brig.-Gen. Lipsett on the right had the 1st, 3rd, 7th and 8th Battalions, and for the attack on Tor Top Brig.-Gen. G. S. Tuxford (3rd Brigade) commanded the 2nd, 4th, 13th and 16th Battalions. The 58th Battalion (9th Brigade), plus a company of the 52nd, was to assault on the left. The 5th, 10th, 14th and 15th Battalions were placed in a reserve brigade under Brig.-Gen. Garnet Hughes.¹⁸

Four intense bombardments of 20 to 30 minutes' duration carried out between the 9th and the 12th four times deluded the enemy into expecting an immediate attack; it was hoped that when none materialized he would suppose the artillery preparation for the real thing to be merely another feint. For ten hours on 12 June all German positions between Hill 60 and Sanctuary Wood were shelled unremittingly, particular attention being given to the flanks, from which machine-gun fire might be expected to enfilade the attackers. At 8:30 that evening, after an intense half-hour shelling which proved extremely accurate, the assaulting units moved up to their start lines—in some cases in no man's land. For forty-five minutes before zero there was one more blasting by the heavy artillery, and then the attack went in behind a dense smoke screen and in heavy rain.

Brig.-Gen. Bursiall had hoped that with so much artillery support our infantry would be able to advance "with slung rifles", and events proved him very nearly right. In four long lines the battalions pushed forward through the mud, each on a front of three companies—from right to left the 3rd, the 16th, the 13th and the 58th Battalions. There were occasional checks by fire from some machine-gun emplacement which had escaped destruction, or from grenades hurled by isolated pockets of Germans. But the majority of the Württembergers, completely surprised and badly shaken, offered little resistance. Almost 200 were taken prisoner, the survivors falling back to the original German line. In an hour the battle was virtually over. "The first Canadian deliberately planned attack in any force", states the British Official History, "had resulted in an unqualified success."¹⁹ The 3rd Battalion had retaken Mount Sorrel, the 16th now held the northern part of Armagh Wood, the 13th had cleared Observatory Ridge and Tor Top, and the attached 58th Battalion (reporting casualties of 165 all ranks) had recovered

much of the old line through Sanctuary Wood. Between 2 and 14 June the Canadian Corps losses numbered approximately 8000; in the same period the Germans in that sector sustained 5765 casualties.⁶⁰

Inability to take effective counter-measures because of the Allied superiority in aeroplanes, artillery (40 batteries to 28 German) and supplies of ammunition was cited by the Germans for their failure to hold their gains of 2 June. They even judged the weather to be in our favour. "For the continual rain contributed to the softening up of the troops, which were exposed to heavy fire day and night."⁶¹ It was a meteorological viewpoint which the Canadian veteran lying in lashing rain in no man's land until the assault or standing knee-deep in water in the assembly trenches might find difficult to share.

Consolidation of the new front line began early on the 13th, as did the enemy's bombardment as soon as he realized the extent of his lost positions. On the morning of the 14th he launched two counter-attacks against Mount Sorrel, both of which were broken up by our artillery. He subsequently advanced his own line to within 150 yards of ours (the average distance which had existed between the forward positions before 2 June) but made no further move to reopen the battle.

Summer in the Salient

The Canadian Corps remained in the Ypres Salient until the beginning of September—its role "stationary yet aggressive". Though holding their positions but thinly the Canadians continued to harry the enemy with bombardment, mining and raids. A German attempt to recapture The Bluff on 25 July by blowing a mine beneath our trenches was frustrated when the 7th Battalion, warned by the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company of the forthcoming explosion, seized the crater ahead of the enemy. Advanced patrolling entered its third stage on the 29th, when twenty members of the 19th Battalion raided enemy trenches opposite St. Eloi in broad daylight to secure identifications and evidence of mine-shafts or gas cylinders. They killed or wounded an estimated 50 Germans, identified as Württembergers, and found the suspected gas-cylinder boxes; Canadian casualties were only minor. Encouraging as this success was, with complete surprise an essential factor such raids could be carried out at only irregular intervals. On 12 August an enemy attack in company strength at Hill 60 was repulsed by the 60th Battalion, whose "steadiness and tenacity" brought commendation from the Army Commander. There was warm praise for the support given on the occasion by the Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery and the 1st Divisional Artillery.⁶²

On the 14th the Canadian Corps played host to King George V and the Prince of Wales. While the royal visitors looked on from Scherpenberg Hill, near Kemmel, 6-inch howitzers of the Corps Heavy Artillery and field guns of the 2nd Divisional Artillery and a Belgian unit under command of the 3rd Divisional Artillery bombarded the St. Eloi craters. Four days later Canada's Minister of Militia and Defence, Sir Sam Hughes, visited Corps Headquarters and the 3rd Division.⁶³
