

pillbox after another. Infantry sections created a diversion with their rifle grenades and Lewis guns, allowing smaller parties to work their way round to the blind side to throw in their hand grenades. By these means the defences of the Flanders Line I which had stopped the 2nd Anzac Corps on 5 and 12 October were finally overcome. By mid-afternoon the 52nd had captured Bellevue and Laamkeek, thereby taking a firm grasp on the intermediate objective; by 6:20 next morning the 9th Brigade had consolidated its gains and established outposts only 300 yards short of the Red Line. Lieut. Shankland's was the first of three Victoria Crosses won by the 3rd Division that day. The other winners were Capt. C. P. J. O'Kelly, M.C., who led his company of the 52nd Battalion in capturing six German pillboxes and 100 prisoners; and Private T. W. Holmes of the 4th C.M.R., who single-handedly knocked out two machine-guns, captured a pillbox and took nineteen prisoners.¹⁰⁸

On the Canadian right, due to a series of misunderstandings as much as to enemy pressure—though there were counter-attacks on both sides of the Ravebeek, and the 46th Battalion's positions were under steady enfilade fire from Germans still holding out at Laamkeek—Decline Copse, the common objective of the 4th Canadian and 1st Australian Divisions, was gradually abandoned. Such was the mistake of not assigning the Copse to a single formation. Advanced posts and then company positions were withdrawn to form defensive flanks, and when relieving companies took over less than their prescribed positions, the Germans promptly moved back in. It took the 44th Battalion, attacking astride the railway under heavy machine-gun fire, to restore the situation on the night of 27-28 October. The following evening, fifty to a hundred members of the enemy's 238th Division (which had relieved the Bavarians) penetrated the Copse position, but elements of the 44th and 85th Battalions quickly joined forces and expelled the Germans with grenade and bayonet.¹⁰⁴

It had been a satisfying but costly beginning. On 26, 27 and 28 October the Canadians had suffered 2481 casualties, including 585 killed, 965 wounded and eight taken prisoner on the first day. They had killed many Germans and captured 370. Though not completely successful, the operation had placed the attackers on higher, drier, ground and in a good tactical position to deliver the next blow. But first a major job of housekeeping was required. To ensure the delivery of ammunition, rations and other supplies to the forward troops, engineers and pioneers set to building a track of planks, corduroy and fascines in each brigade sector, to carry brigade mule-trains, 250 strong. At great hazard by day and considerable exertion by night, these preparations were completed in time to strike a further blow on the 30th.

The Assault is Renewed, 30 October

In this next phase (the seventh in the series that had started on 20 September) Field-Marshal Haig hoped to complete the advance to the Red Line and to gain a base for the final assault on Passchendaele. This was the Blue Line ob-

jective, some 600-700 yards east of the Red Line. To secure it would mean taking the strongly held Crest Farm, just north of the Passchendaele road, and in the northern sector the hamlet of Meetcheele, up the Bellevue spur, and the Goudberg area between the Mosselmarkt road and the Corps left boundary. The Corps was to link up on the left at Vapour Farm with the Fifth Army, which would be advancing with the 63rd and 58th Divisions on either side of the swamps of the Lekkerboterbeek; and on the right with the 1st Anzac Corps at the railway line south of Vienna Cottage.¹⁰⁵

The attack began at 5:50 a.m. on 30 October, in clear but very cold and windy weather which blew up rain in the afternoon. As on the 26th, some 420 guns and howitzers crashed out their support of the Canadian Corps. On the right, the 4th Division, augmenting its strength for its widening front, assaulted with three battalions of Brig.-Gen. MacBrien's 12th Brigade—the 85th, 78th and 72nd. The 3rd Division had the 7th and 8th Brigades forward, the assaulting units from right to left being Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, the 49th Battalion and the 5th C.M.R.¹⁰⁶

It took the enemy eight minutes to reply with heavy artillery and machine-gun fire, and by that time the Canadians were well on their way. On General Watson's right (where this time the railway line was included within the Canadian boundary),¹⁰⁷ the 85th Battalion, though losing half its strength in casualties, knocked out all the strongpoints in its path, turning captured machine-guns on the fleeing Germans.¹⁰⁸ The 78th Battalion quickly gained its objectives east of the Passchendaele road and settled down to some effective sniping of small parties of Germans attempting to reorganize a line of defended shell-holes. On the divisional left the 72nd Battalion captured Crest Farm and then sent patrols beyond the Blue Line into Passchendaele, which they found the Germans evacuating. Later these were pulled back to assist in reorganization. By 8:30 a.m. General Watson could report all objectives taken between the railway and the Ravebeek, although north-west of Crest Farm the Blue Line was so badly flooded that consolidation had to be carried out short of the original goal. Owing to the failure of the 3rd Division's right flank to keep abreast, however, the 72nd Battalion was obliged to drop its left flank back along the Ravebeek.¹⁰⁹

North of the Ravebeek the 3rd Division's attack had got off to a good start. During the night, before the main attack opened, the P.P.C.L.I. had captured "Snipe Hall", a particularly troublesome pillbox at the edge of the swamp, which had held up the 9th Brigade on 26 October. From here their assaulting companies struggled forward through the mire to take Duck Lodge, the battalion's intermediate objective. The storm of fire that lashed the Patricias from enemy posts farther up the valley brought heavy casualties. At the end of an hour they had lost almost all their junior officers. On the left of the main road the 49th Battalion, even harder hit, kept level by capturing Furst Farm, 600 yards west of the Meetcheele crossroads. It was reported that in the advance there was little bayoneting by either side but that it was a great day for snipers. German marksmen accounted for many of the Canadian casualties, but the day's

success owed much to the accuracy of Canadian riflemen in covering their comrades' advance against German machine-gun nests and pillboxes.¹¹⁰

The best progress on the 8th Brigade's front was made by the left-hand companies of the 5th C.M.R. The Mounted Rifles had difficulty getting through the swampy ground in Woodland Plantation, north of the Bellevue ridge, but by seven o'clock brigade observers could report enemy parties in retreat, joining large numbers who were seen withdrawing in disorder and without equipment along the roads running north from Crest Farm and Mosselmarkt.¹¹¹

By mid-afternoon of the 30th the 3rd Division was well up on the Blue Line on the extreme left, but on the right flank the 465th Infantry Regiment was still holding a small salient about Graf House.* The P.P.C.L.I.'s main accomplishment had been the storming of the fortified positions guarding the Meetcheele crossroads, an achievement largely made possible by the extreme heroism of two men. When the battalion's left companies were halted in their ascent of the ridge by fire from a machine-gun sited in a pillbox beside the main road, Lieut. Hugh Mackenzie, D.C.M. (a Patricia officer who was serving with the 7th Machine Gun Company) and Sergeant G. H. Mullin, M.M., a regimental sniper, led an attack on the position. Mackenzie was killed while drawing the enemy's fire, but Mullin went on to capture the pillbox single-handed, shooting its two machine-gunners with his revolver, and forcing the garrison of ten to surrender. Both won the Victoria Cross.¹¹⁴

To the left of the Canadian Corps, the 63rd (R.N.) and 58th Divisions, operating on lower and muddier ground, made only slight progress. For a time the 8th Canadian Brigade found itself with both flanks open, but, with the timely use of 5th C.M.R. reserves and companies of the 2nd C.M.R., Brig.-Gen. Elmsley re-established contact with only minor losses of ground. The success of the Mounted Rifles was in no small measure due to the sterling leadership of a company commander, Major G. R. Pearkes, who seized and held Vapour Farm and Source Farm against a series of local counter-attacks, keeping the 5th C.M.R. battalion headquarters informed of the situation by carrier pigeon. It was difficult indeed to reinforce these key positions astride the Inter-Corps boundary, isolated as they were by the swampy source of a stream that ran north-westward into the Lekkerboterbeek.¹¹⁸

When, late that afternoon, the Canadian advance appeared to have reached its limit and reports of large numbers of Germans concentrating north of Mosselmarkt pointed to a major counter-attack, General Currie gave orders to Major-General Lipsett for the 3rd Division to consolidate what it had won, pushing out posts where possible, and to patrol rather than attempt to occupy the bog between the 7th and 8th Brigades. There was some question as to whether Major Pearkes' position could be maintained, for the Naval Division had been unable to reach its Source Farm objective. Reasoning that were these

* Facing the Canadians on 30 October were, from north to south, the 465th, 464th and 463rd Regiments of the 238th Infantry Division.¹¹² The intervention division was the 39th Infantry Division, which had replaced the exhausted 11th Bavarian Infantry Division in that role on the previous afternoon.¹¹³

gains relinquished they would only have to be retaken before the assault on Passchendaele, Currie with General Plumer's concurrence issued orders at 7:00 p.m. that every effort should be made to hold the line. That evening the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles, augmented by a company of the 1st, took over the 5th C.M.R.'s holdings. The night passed without further counter-attacks.* For his gallantry and leadership Major Pearkes, who already wore the M.C. and was later to win the D.S.O., was awarded the Victoria Cross—the third to go to the 3rd Canadian Division that day.¹¹⁷

The step by step battle was gradually accomplishing its purpose. In this second attack towards Passchendaele the Canadian Corps had achieved gains of up to a thousand yards on a 2800-yard front.¹¹⁸ The cost had been high. The day's casualties had been almost as many as for the previous three-day attempt—884 killed, 1429 wounded (including 130 gassed), and eight taken prisoner.

The Capture of Passchendaele, 6 November

As early as 18 October General Currie had gained General Plumer's agreement that there should be a pause of seven days at the Blue Line, to give time for inter-divisional reliefs and to ensure that when operations were resumed the Fifth Army could help by advancing along its whole front rather than merely forming a protective flank for the Canadian attack.¹¹⁹ This latter requirement was nullified, however, on 31 October, when G.H.Q. ordered the Second Army to take over a section of General Gough's front adjoining the Canadians, so that the battle might proceed under a single command. On 2 November, Plumer relieved the 18th with the 2nd Corps—though when the battle was re-joined the latter would do no more than provide the Canadians with artillery support. On the right of the Canadian Corps the 1st Anzac, 9th and 8th Corps, all under Plumer's command, were to simulate attacks along a four-mile front extending south to Zandvoorde (which lay midway between the Menin Road and the Ypres-Comines Canal).¹²⁰

In the opening days of November the 1st and 2nd Divisions moved forward by rail from their reserve area east of Cassel to take over from the 3rd and 4th Divisions respectively. An uncomfortable three-hour train journey brought them to the ruined station of Ypres, whence they marched to battalion areas in the desolated salient. These reliefs were completed by the morning of 5 November. During the night of the 5th-6th, the assault units moved into their jumping-off positions. All were in place by 4:00 a.m.

General Currie's plan called for an attack in two stages (the eighth and ninth phases of the autumn battle)—the former to secure the village of Passchendaele, and the latter, four days later, to seize the crest of the main ridge

*Corps Intelligence counted four battalion counter-attacks on the Canadian front during the morning of 30th. In the main, all were broken up by artillery and machine-gun fire a good distance from the Canadian positions.¹²¹

to the east. The Corps objectives for 6 November lay along the Green Line, a rough semicircle described about Graf House with a radius of 1000 yards. Besides Passchendaele it encompassed the hamlets of Mosselmarkt and Goudberg to the north-west. On the right the 2nd Division would send three battalions of the 6th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. Ketchen)—the 27th, 31st and 28th Infantry Battalions—against Passchendaele, while in the 1st Division's sector the 1st and 2nd Battalions would advance on either side of the Meetcheele-Mosselmarkt road. These 1st Brigade units would have farthest to go—about three-quarters of a mile. Covering the Corps right flank would be the 26th Battalion (5th Brigade), attacking Passchendaele from the south; on the left flank the 3rd Battalion was charged with a subsidiary operation against Vine Cottages, a strongpoint which the Germans were holding 350 yards south-east of Vapour Farm.¹²¹

The jumping-off line traversed large sections of swampy or flooded areas, especially in Major-General Macdonell's sector, where the only good footing was on the narrow Bellevue-Meetcheele spur. Farther forward, however, the ground was on the whole higher and drier than the Canadians had known in their previous attacks. On the right there were new opponents to be faced. The German 11th Division had arrived from the Champagne area only on 3 November to relieve the 39th Division between the Ypres-Roulers railway and the Mosselmarkt road. Opposite the 1st Canadian Division's left was a battalion of the 4th Division.¹²²

At 6:00 a.m. on the sixth a powerful barrage, tremendously satisfying to the assaulting infantry, exploded across the front as the attack was launched under a clear sky that later became cloudy but shed no heavy rain. So quickly did the assaulting companies break out of their starting position that the enemy's retaliatory fire, opening a few minutes later, fell mainly behind the advancing troops. Afterwards prisoners reported that the infantry followed their barrage so closely that in most cases the Germans could not man their machine-guns before the attackers were on top of them.¹²³ Almost everywhere the attack went well. The 2nd Division encountered its chief opposition from pillboxes at the north end of Passchendaele, but less than three hours after zero the village that had so long been an Allied objective was securely in Canadian hands.

The 28th Battalion on the left had the hardest time. It came under heavy machine-gun fire early in the attack when it was struggling out of the Ravebeek valley, the men, according to a 6th Brigade report, "being knee deep, and in places waist deep in mud and water". Another troublesome if not serious factor was low-flying enemy aircraft. The visibility being too limited for much air fighting, pilots of both sides amused themselves by strafing each other's infantry. One ground target that received particular attention during the attack was the start line of the 31st Battalion, where German airmen mistook a row of great-coats for troops.¹²⁴

It was a satisfying day for the 6th Brigade. To the honour of being first into Passchendaele the 27th Battalion, on the Brigade right, could add the laurels won by one of its men, Private J. P. Robertson. His bravery in wiping out an

enemy post cleared the way for his platoon to advance and earned him a posthumous Victoria Cross.¹²⁶

On the 1st Division's front it was not the main assault but the subsidiary action on the left flank that produced the severer fighting. Here a company of the 3rd Battalion, isolated by swamp from the rest of Brig.-Gen. Griesbach's brigade, had a stubborn struggle with the defenders of Vine Cottages. In this action a member of the battalion, Corporal C. F. Barron, won the V.C. when he rushed and overcame three enemy machine-gun posts, turning one of the guns on the retreating enemy.¹²⁶ Captured machine-guns and forty prisoners, besides many German dead and wounded, testified to the bitterness of the resistance.

Elsewhere General Macdonell's forces encountered little trouble. Mosselmarkt was surprised and from its large pillbox there emerged in surrender four officers and 50 other ranks. Garrisons of well-camouflaged shell holes nearby put up more of a resistance before being overcome, but by eight o'clock the 1st Brigade had reached and consolidated the Green Line. On its right the 2nd Division beat off the only significant counter-attack of the day. The figure of a small loss of "under 700 men", which appeared in the enthusiastic entry which Sir Douglas Haig made in his diary concerning the operation, must have referred only to fatal casualties reported to him up to that time. Total Canadian casualties sustained during the assault and in shelling on the same day numbered 2238, of which 734 were killed or died of wounds. In all 464 captured Germans were admitted to the Corps cage or casualty clearing stations on 6 November and the following day.¹²⁷

There was satisfaction for the Canadian Corps in having completed a highly successful attack in most difficult circumstances.* Classing it with the victory of Vimy Ridge, the Commander-in-Chief in his despatch referred to the accomplishment as one "by which for the second time within the year Canadian troops achieved a record of uninterrupted success".

On the day after the capture of Passchendaele General Currie gave orders for the ninth and final phase of the battle to be launched on 10 November.¹²⁸ This was to gain the remaining high ground north of the village in the vicinity of Vindictive Crossroads and Hill 52. The road junction was 1000 yards north of Passchendaele on the highway to Westroosebeke, Hill 52, half a mile beyond the crossroads, was the highest point on the northern end of the Passchendaele Ridge. With these goals in possession the Canadians would have complete observation over German positions to the north-east. The frontage of the Canadian attack was considerably narrowed, as the Second Corps on the left took over responsibility for the Goudberg spur. Currie entrusted the main thrust to the 2nd Canadian Brigade (Brig.-Gen. Loomis), with a battalion of the 4th Brigade (Brig.-Gen. Rennie) cooperating on the right.

* Continuous wave wireless sets received their first practical testing in operational conditions during the attack and proved entirely satisfactory. Up to this time commanders had been dubious about relying on this method of transmitting messages, but henceforth they were "willing to consider wireless as an integral part of the general scheme of communication".¹²⁸