BRIT POLITICS Fact Sheet – First World War- The First Battle of Ypres 1914

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# Events from 19 October – 22 November 1914

The Battle of the Aisne ended in a stalemate. Both the Allies and the Germans realised that a victory could only be achieved by outflanking (going around) the opposing army. This led to the ‘Race to the Sea’. As they fought to manoeuvre past and get behind each other so the German, British and French armies moved further northwards. At the same time the Allies were trying to push the German forces back to the east, while the Germans were trying to push the Allied forces back to the coast and gain control of the Channel ports. The Race to the Sea ended when the Belgian Army took up positions along the River Yser in the middle of October, extending the Allied line to the Belgian coast at Nieuport.

The British sector was on the Allied left flank to the right of the Belgian Army. This included the area around Ypres which was strategically important as it was on the route to the Channel ports. The Commander in Chief Sir John French wanted the British forces to be nearer to the coast as this would make re-supplying and communication with England easier. On the 1 October the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) began their withdrawal from the River Aisne.

The British 7th Division had landed at Zeebrugge on the 7 October. After the surrender of Antwerp to the Germans on the 10 October, the 7th Division had covered the withdrawal of the Belgian Army before arriving in Ypres on the 14 October. The next day they took up their positions, forming a line a few miles to the east of Ypres while they waited for the rest of the BEF to arrive. On the 18 October they were ordered to advance towards Menin.

The Allied forces wanted to launch a large offensive in the north that would push them past the German flank and end the war by Christmas. British Command believed that the German forces had not yet arrived in significant numbers and that a rapid advance was still possible.

On the 19 October the British Headquarters at St Omer received reconnaissance reports from the Royal Flying Corps that large columns of German troops were only a few hours from Ypres. The German Fourth Army, commanded by Duke Albrecht of Württemberg was mainly made up of reserve corps. They took up positions to the north of the British sector. The German Sixth Army commanded by Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria held the German line to the south. The 7th Division abandoned their advance on Menin and withdrew back towards Ypres.

On 20 October the Germans launched a large assault. The 7th Division came under an intense artillery bombardment and then an attack by German infantry which they managed to hold off. On the same day the German forces captured the town of Passchendaele which was situated on a ridge and overlooked Ypres. Despite attempts by French forces to recapture it, the Germans would retain control of Passchendaele for the next three years.

The BEF were still deploying along the British sector. General Haig’s First Corps were the last to arrive and they took up positions to the north of Ypres. On the 22 October two Indian divisions, the Lahore and Meerut Divisions, went into the line on the right of the BEF. Sepoy Khudadad Khan of the 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis was the first Indian to receive the Victoria Cross for his actions at Hollebeke. Though wounded Khudadad Khan“…remained working his [machine] gun until all the other five men of the gun detachment had been killed”. The BEF desperately required reinforcements as most of the battalions were under strength. They were also running short of ammunition for the artillery.

The German Armies launched offensives to the north and south of Ypres as they tried to break through and encircle the Allied forces. Wave after wave of attacks were launched by day and by night at the cost of many casualties. Heavy artillery bombardments normally preceded the German infantry assaults. At Langemarck the British estimated that during one attack 1500 German infantry were killed and 600 taken prisoner. They were mostly students who had volunteered for the Reserve Corps and had received little training. They had advanced across the open fields in massed formation straight towards the British positions.

On the 24 October German infantry broke through the British line into an area known as Polygon Wood. There were confused pockets of fighting as the British troops attempted to repel the German forces and restore the line. Reinforcements were rushed in. Major Edward Hankey of the 2nd Worcestershire Regiment led his battalion in successive bayonet charges to retake the wood. The 2nd Worcesters sustained 200 casualties. The 2nd Wiltshire Regiment who had been overrun by the initial German attack had only 172 men left.

German forces had attacked the Belgian Army to the north of the British sector, crossing the River Yser on the 24 October. On the 27 October the lock gates at Nieuport on the Belgian coast were opened which allowed the sea to flood the surrounding land, securing the extreme end of the Allied left flank.

General Max von Fabeck was in command of six divisions of German troops, known as Army Group Fabeck. These were sent to reinforce the area south of Ypres. Early on the morning of the 30 October they launched an attack on Zandvoorde. For one and half hours the German artillery shelled the British trenches being held by the (dismounted) Household Cavalry. Their positions were then stormed and captured by German infantry. The 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers put up strong resistance against the German attack, but by mid-morning the Zandvoorde ridge was in German hands. Only 86 men of the entire Royal Welch 1st Battalion were left, the rest were killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

The British launched counter attacks but all were repelled and incurred heavy casualties.

On the 31 October Army Group Fabeck launched an assault on the Messines ridge. The 9th Lancers and 11th Hussars fought (dismounted) from house to house in the streets of Messines village but they were overwhelmed and forced to fall back. The Territorial battalion The London Scottish valiantly held on to Wytschaete for most of the day but were eventually forced to withdraw with the loss of 394 casualties.

Gheluvelt was also the scene of heavy fighting on the 31 October. By midday the British forces had been pushed back. The 2nd Worcestershire Regiment launched a successful counter attack and managed to halt the German advance with the few remaining South Wales Borderers. Although the village of Gheluvelt had been lost, their actions were significant in helping to close the gap in the line between the 1st and 7th Divisions. Sir John French called it “…the most critical moment in the whole of this great battle”. The same day a shell had landed on the 1st Division headquarters at Hooge Chateau with the loss of several senior officers. The 31 October had seen a major German breakthrough narrowly averted.

Sir John French had eighty four infantry battalions under his command, but the severity and relentless nature of the fighting had resulted in heavy casualties. Each battalion now contained fewer than three hundred men, less than a third of their full battle strength. Some battalions had fewer than a hundred men. The British Army were also running short of ammunition. The men themselves were exhausted and suffering in the cold, wet autumn weather. This was a new type of warfare where battles were fought almost continuously for days on end, with little respite from the heavy shelling and infantry attacks. At the end of October General Foch had redeployed some of his French troops to reinforce the British lines, although they themselves were also heavily engaged with the German forces in their own sector to the south.

At the beginning of November more assaults were launched on the British lines. The last big attack came on the 11 November. After an intense artillery bombardment a mass of German infantry moved along a nine mile front across the fields and down the Menin road towards Ypres. Fierce fighting at the Menin road saw British and French troops forced back. The German infantry exploited a gap in the line and made it to Nonnebosschen Wood. Here artillery fire and a hastily arranged counter attack, which included a charge through the wood by the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, drove the Germans out. It was a crucial victory as the line of British artillery was all that had stood between the German infantry and the open fields behind them.

As winter set in the attacks diminished, with German Command little realising just how close they had come to defeating the Allied forces at Ypres. Both sides spent the winter strengthening their defences and digging the trenches that would come to epitomise the fighting on the Western Front.

The First Battle of Ypres was an Allied victory. A decisive German breakthrough was prevented despite their numerically superior forces, but at the cost of heavy casualties on both sides. The Ypres Salient was created which left the Allied occupiers exposed to enemy fire from three sides. The German forces had also captured the strategically important areas of high ground at Passchendaele and Messines.

From their first arrival in France in August to the end of November the BEF had incurred total casualties of almost 90,000 men. Sir John French could not hope to launch any effective counter-offensive against the German line until significant reinforcements and ammunition had arrived from Britain and its Empire.

Although Flanders would be heavily contested and repeatedly fought over the stalemate on the Western Front would last until the spring of 1918.