Britpolitics Fact Sheet – First World War- The First Battle of the Aisne 1914

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# 13 – 28 September 1914

After their defeat by the Allied forces at The Battle of the Marne, the German armies had undergone a tactical withdrawal towards the River Aisne. The Allied pursuit had been slow, hampered by fatigue, stretched supply lines and German rearguard actions. The German armies crossed the River Aisne and began to dig in, creating defensive positions on the high ground to the north of the river.

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was still holding the sector between General d’Esperey’s Fifth and General Maunoury’s Sixth French Armies as they had been at the Marne. They were advancing toward the First and Second German Armies commanded by General Von Kluck and General von Bulow. They had been hurriedly reinforced by the German Seventh Army under the commanded of General Josias von Heeringen.

The German Armies had the advantage on the high ground. Their artillery had a full field of fire and it was covering all of the river crossings. They had established well-entrenched defensive positions on the valley slopes and on the plateau above the river near the Chemin des Dames ridge. The Allied forces would have to cross the River Aisne and then attack up hill.

The River Aisne flowed through a valley. The river itself was too deep to cross and the slopes were quite steep in places with patches of woodland, which obscured the view onto the plateau above making it difficult to see the German positions. Torrential rain for the last few days had made the slopes slippery with mud.

The British infantry also had very little artillery support. There was a lack of suitable positions on the south side of the river where the field guns could get a direct view of the German forces.

The first British troops crossed the River Aisne on the night of the 12 September at Venizel. The 11th Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier-General Aylmer Hunter Weston found a bridge that although badly damaged had not been completely demolished and still spanned the river. Walking in single file and widely spaced, 3000 men carefully crossed the river and established positions on the north bank.

More units of the BEF crossed the River Aisne the following day. At Bourg, the 4th Dragoon Guards conducted a successful cavalry charge against the German troops defending the bridge over the canal. The Cavalry and 1st Divisions were then able to use the aqueduct, which carried the canal across the river, to cross over and move further north. At Chavonne a battalion from the 4th Guards Brigade had to be ferried across in boats under heavy fire in order to establish a foothold on the northern bank of the river.

Most of the bridges across the River Aisne had been destroyed. The men of the Royal Engineers worked ceaselessly day and night to try and repair some of the damaged rail and road bridges to allow the BEF to cross the river. Where this was impossible they constructed new crossings. Eight pontoon bridges and a foot bridge, which was made from a series of boxes strung together and suspended across the valley, were assembled by the Royal Engineers. All of this was carried out under persistent artillery fire and in torrential rain. It wasn’t just the men who had to cross the river. The engineers had to find a way to move horses, field guns and all of the equipment and supplies in the baggage train.

By the morning of the 14 September the BEF had established positions on the north bank of the Aisne and were preparing to advance. They encountered unexpectedly heavy German resistance as it was initially believed that the German forces were still in retreat.

The 2nd Grenadier Guards and the Connaught Rangers came under attack from German infantry at a large farm called La Cour de Soupir. Reinforced by the Coldstream and Irish Guards the fighting continued at the farm and in the surrounding woods. Casualties were high as the British tried to advance and the Germans launched counter-attacks across the fields and through the woods. Many of the officers were wounded or killed which added to the overall confusion. On the 16 September a company of 2nd Grenadiers on the edge of a quarry pit in which the British wounded were sheltering, were hit by a German artillery shell. Over half of the Grenadiers, fifty nine men, were killed outright, with further casualties in the quarry below.

Over the next few days the British trenches came under a virtually continuous artillery bombardment. There were many German counter attacks against the British lines that were only driven back with heavy losses on both sides.

Many of the British troops were wearing the same clothes they had fought in at Mons. They were under supplied and there was a shortage of many items including entrenching tools. Parties were sent out to the local villages to search for more as trenches were vital protection against artillery and machine gun fire.

Reinforcements were sent over from England. The 6th Division arrived at the Aisne on the 16 September and four six-inch howitzer batteries on the 23 September.

The Battle of the Aisne involved high casualties on both sides with little forward movement. The French were having a similar experience further along the Allied line. Artillery, machine gun and rifle fire made it impossible for any direct frontal assault on the enemy’s trenches without incurring severe casualties.

By the end of 28 September German counter-attacks had all but ceased as the German commanders realised how futile they were.

The Battle of the Aisne had ended in a stalemate. The Aisne marked the beginning of trench warfare and the positions of the trenches established here would remain almost unchanged for the next four years. It led to the ‘Race to the Sea’, as the Allied and German forces moved steadily northwards trying to out flank and manoeuvre past each other. There would eventually be a 400 mile network of trenches stretching from the Belgian port of Nieuport to the Swiss border near Belfort in Alsace.