

THE GREAT EPISODES OF THE WAR

The Inspiring Battle of Hooge

AFTER our heavy guns went south towards Carency, at the end of May, 1915, to strengthen the French batteries which were pounding the famous fortress of the Labyrinth, our artillery commanders recovered their confidence. The result was the brilliant success at Hooge, in front of Ypres, on Monday, August 9th, 1915. After the Battle of Neve Chapelle some of our artillery brigadiers rather lost their nerve. This was entirely due to the ignorant public outcry about the loss of troops at Neve Chapelle by our own artillery fire. But when it was afterwards learned round Carency that the French troops were often caught by their own guns, our gunners regained their more scientific views.

A Sacrifice for Larger Gain

They came back to Ypres with their minds strengthened and clarified, and all our army soon understood the principal element in the problem underlying every modern attack. Was the infantry ready to lose perhaps a score or so of men by their own shell fire, in order that their total casualties might be diminished by five or ten thousand? Naturally the British infantryman preferred to run a little risk from his own guns in order to prevent very heavy losses later. So our gunners were able to adopt at Hooge the stern, vigorous tactics which their French comrades had been employing for many months. The idea was to pound the enemy's position until the last possible fraction of a moment before the charging infantry reached the target. A few men would probably fall under the fire of their own guns in the last fraction of the critical second, but their comrades would win the German lines at a comparatively slight cost of life. We had lost the Chateau of Hooge at the end of the second Battle of Ypres. It was at Hooge that Sir John French had watched the Worcesters win the first battle of Ypres in the previous autumn.

The new German position near the chateau, only two miles from the shattered Flemish city, endangered all the northern part of our line. Hooge had to be retaken if we did not wish to retire from Ypres. As a matter of pure strategy, we ought to have so retired, and put the Ypres Canal between ourselves and the enemy. We should have lost absolutely nothing of importance from a military point of view, and have made out new position practically impregnable. But Sir John French, an Irishman, was also something of a psychologist. He knew that the German public would be amazingly heartened if the ruins of Ypres fell into the hands of its soldiers. He therefore held on to the town, in order that the weight of unrelenting German opinion should tell against the scientific plans of the German Staff, and compel that Staff to keep hammering without any military motive at Ypres.

Britain's Great Artillery Effort

Sir John French also desired to relieve some of the pressure against the Russians by attracting large German reinforcements against our army. There was only one way of doing this—the way that ran through Hooge towards Menin. For all these reasons our artillery at the beginning of August began to take a special interest in the German position around the chateau, and the German general brought up some thousands of sappers to prepare against the imminent attack. In some places the extraordinarily narrow trenches were deepened to fifteen or twenty feet, to protect the garrison from shrapnel fire. The dug-outs were even deeper than the trenches, and were reinforced with timber, iron sheeting, and thick layers of earth topped with sand-bags. In particular, there was a huge crater fifty feet deep in places, caused by a mine exploded by our engineers the previous month. This was turned into a shelter for reserve troops.

But when the artillery completed its bombardment, by an enormous mass of fire at dawn on Monday morning, all the work of the German engineers was rendered useless. Our heavy guns went mowed in such numbers that the low

ridge of Hooge was churned up by high-explosive shell. It was the most intense and terrible display of artillery force known to our army. It is quite possible that Sir Herbert Plumer, who directed the attack, knew what would happen. He opened fire at Hooge at three o'clock in the morning. Thereby he caught a double force of Germans, for the enemy were just in the act of changing the units in the trenches.

Our guns beat down everything before them, and then came the infantry movement which completed the victory won by our munition factories. While our guns were still pouring thousands of shells into the German trenches the British troops charged. They did not wait for the bombardment to cease. Our men stormed across the ground under an arch of infernal fire from their own guns. The infantry knew quite well this time the risk they were running, and scarcely a second elapsed between the lifting of our artillery fire and the rush of our infantry over the German sandbags. It was about a quarter to four in the morning when our gunners lengthened their fuses and lifted on the German reserve position, just as the charging battalion swarmed over the first German parapet.

British Supremacy on Land

The enemy's line was captured with remarkable ease. The Germans remaining alive in the trenches were too dazed by the shell fire to make much resistance, and most of the garrison was still sheltering in dug-outs excavated below the trenches. In every hole there were four or five men waiting for the terrible bombardment to cease before they climbed up into the trench to repel the infantry attack. But so instantaneously did our infantry follow on the lifting gun fire that nearly all the Germans in the dug-outs were surprised by the swiftness of the assault.

Our men bombed their way along the trench towards the mine crater on the ridge. Here a German battalion was trying to collect for a counter-attack, but our men fought their way into the huge pit with such fury and speed that the counter-attack never occurred. We had lost Hooge on the last day of July through the enemy bringing up flame projectors and burning our men to death. In the return battle, therefore, the British soldier came forth with as fierce a fire in his heart as ever man carried. In the crater—a hundred and fifty feet wide in places, and honeycombed with trenches round the lip—our men took their revenge in clean, sharp, deadly hand-to-hand fighting. They hunted the Germans up and down the sides of the wall, crying out "Give us a chance of a shot!" They emptied the dug-outs with bombs, and brought up four machine-guns by which the users of poison gas and burning petrol were slain when they tried to escape from the crater trap. Afterwards, some four hundred German corpses were found in and around the crater, but even in the heat of the fight a hundred German prisoners were taken.

Two more attempts at counter-attacking were defeated without any struggle. Our splendid gunners caught the German forces as these were fixing bayonets for a charge, and destroyed them by shell fire. After the affair in the crater, the most violent infantry action occurred round a redoubt which the enemy had built on the left of the trenches from which our men had been driven in July by flame projectors. The position was recaptured, together with the stables at Hooge, and when the hostile artillery massed against the lost German line the only loss we suffered was some twenty yards of trenches on the low-lying ground, which were flattened out by the enemy's shell. It was not designed to occupy this bit of trench, because it was seen beforehand to be weak; but in the attack our troops, mostly Territorials, captured more than they had been ordered to do. They were amazingly happy, these young soldiers of the new army. At last, after months of struggle against terrible artillery odds, they saw that Britain could outclass Germany on land as well as on sea in gun-power.