[12]

JERRY'S TURN

The Ludendorff Offensives

> A message came down about getting ready to move shortly, which way it did not say. . . . As soon as I got out [of my trench] I found we were under heavy concentrated machine gun fire which seemed to come from all directions. Men were falling all around but no help could be rendered as it was a case of every man for himself.
>
> —Private M. F. Gower, British Fourth Infantry Division, to his sister, April 1918

Lt. Pat Campbell, an artillerist with the British Fifth Army, had spent the early part of 1918 responding to a series of false alarms. Occasional German shelling and trench raids had played with his nerves, but there had been no indication from headquarters that anything larger was afoot. Rumors had spread that a great German attack would begin in late February, on or around the second anniversary of the start of the massive German offensive at Verdun. But late February passed without incident, as did early March. Campbell, like virtually all soldiers on the western front, knew that the Germans had to attack in order to win the war with their transfers from the Russian front before the Americans landed in France in force. In fact, he almost wished for a German offensive. "It might be an agreeable change if they did [attack]," he wrote later; "we had done all the attacking in 1917. One failure after another. Now the Germans could have their turn."[1]

Even by mid-March, however, the German attack had not materialized, and Campbell had started to think that his superiors doubted the Germans were coming at all. "If our generals really thought they were [attacking], then the back areas would have

been full of our reserves. But we saw no one." A brief trip to the rear indicated to Campbell that the multilayered defense lines marked on his map existed on paper only; no troops were there to man them. The first line of trenches represented the only resistance the Fifth Army could offer. As a result of the many false alarms and rumors, the army seemed to Campbell less well prepared to meet an attack than it had been in the previous weeks. More men were on leave in March than in February, partly explaining the empty rear areas Campbell saw. The front was so calm that Campbell had taken to wearing his comfortable soft cap. "No need to wear a steel helmet in a war like this."

The morning of March 21 brought German shelling, itself not an unusual occurrence. The fire that morning, however, was heavier than that of the previous weeks and, for the first time in Campbell's sector, much of the shelling was falling behind British lines, aimed, he soon discovered, at British rail junctures and command posts. Campbell quickly realized that the shelling had cut the telephone line connecting his forward observation position to divisional headquarters. He could not see what was happening in front of him because of a thick morning fog and the general chaos of the day. Neither could he get an accurate general picture or even fresh orders from his divisional headquarters. "I felt alone and lost," he later recalled.

As the morning wore on, British soldiers retreated past him in increasingly large numbers, but he still had no clear idea of the overall picture. Campbell and his battery could not assist the retreating British soldiers because they did not know the positions of either the Germans or British units. Directing artillery fire at prearranged coordinates might only hit empty space, and firing randomly at the front might kill British soldiers instead of German ones. "Something *was* happening up front," he later wrote, "and I did not know what it was."

That night, Campbell's unit managed to hold its line despite a lack of reserves and no information whatsoever about the general

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The city of Arras, which for most of the war sat within artillery range of the front line, suffered tremendously during the war. The Germans failed to capture it during their spring 1918 offensives. (Imperial War Museum, Crown Copyright, P. 396)

situation in the Fifth Army. Campbell knew that if the enemy attacked in force the next morning "we should not be able to hold him." The full magnitude of the situation dawned on him and a fellow officer who told him, "O my God! It will be another Sedan," a reference to a French disaster in the Franco-Prussian War.[2] Unable to direct artillery fire because he lacked telephone communications with his divisional headquarters and unwilling to retreat because he did not want to leave British soldiers without vital artillery support, Campbell and his men hung on, hoping for a miracle.

On the afternoon of the second day of the offensive, Campbell's signallers succeeded in restoring contact with headquarters,

and Campbell could see advancing German units in the valley in front of him. He immediately directed fire onto new coordinates only to be told that the division had already packed up all of its guns and ammunition for an immediate retreat. Campbell eventually convinced his superiors to allot him two guns, but his commander warned him to be careful with his ammunition. "Careful with ammunition!" he later wrote. "For weeks past we had been firing hundreds of rounds every night without knowing whether we were inflicting a single casualty. Now in broad daylight when I had the whole German army to shoot at he told me to be careful with ammunition." Campbell ranged his guns and prepared to fire his limited shells, but before he could do so he received an order to retreat. His unit was in imminent danger of being surrounded and cut off. Campbell had just enough time to destroy his guns, but had to leave more than 2,000 rounds of ammunition behind. "Jerry's turn today," one of his men told him. "Our turn again tomorrow."[3]

Tomorrow would be a long time coming. The confusion in Campbell's unit repeated itself all along the line of the British Fifth Army. Ludendorff had targeted the Fifth Army as part of a massive operation code-named Michael. It aimed at slicing through both the Fifth and the Third Armies, cutting off their communications and avenues of retreat, destroying them, and then advancing on the British First and Second Armies from their rear. The Germans had assembled forty-four divisions to lead the attack, spearheaded by men from the German Seventeenth Army, most of whom were veterans of Caporetto. The Germans planned to use the same storm-troop tactics that they had used in Italy and Russia the year before. German artillery would target supply centers and communication nodes, while elite troops bypassed enemy strong points to cut off main enemy units from behind. Only then would conventional German infantry units advance and attack the isolated enemy front line. Speed, skill, and surprise would carry the day.

Concentration proved to be another key. Ludendorff had targeted the Fifth Army with good reason. Its commander, Hubert Gough, the man who had led the Curragh mutiny and mismanaged the Passchendaele offensive, had failed to implement an elastic defense-in-depth system. His army had just eleven divisions to cover forty-two miles of front. Gough judged that he did not have the reserves to develop a deep defense. Once the Germans broke through, therefore, the Fifth Army had no choice but to retreat those units still capable of movement. Thousands of British soldiers did not have that chance. They had no choice but to surrender when their units became cut off and surrounded.

The Germans found the Fifth Army's neighbor, the Third Army, under the command of General Julian Byng of Vimy Ridge fame, to be a tougher foe. With a shorter area of front to cover, Byng had developed a much more sophisticated system of defense. His Third Army still took heavy losses, but gave less ground. Ludendorff decided to reinforce his success, redirecting units designated for operations against the Third Army and sending them instead to inflict as much damage on the crumbling Fifth Army as possible. If the Germans could destroy the Fifth Army, Ludendorff calculated, they could force the exposed Third Army to retreat even if it did take fewer casualties than Ludendorff had envisioned.

Haig had expected French commander Henri-Philippe Pétain to meet the emergency by sending French troops under his command north. Instead, Pétain feared an attack on his own front and held his units in place, meaning that the Fifth Army's south (or right) flank received no support from its neighboring French allies. Consequently, the Fifth Army's heavy losses and its inevitable retreat had to be followed by the orderly retreat of the exposed Third Army. The Germans advanced rapidly into the area the British evacuated and took advantage of the opportunities in front of them. By early April, the German offensive had advanced as far as Montdidier, retaking the entire Somme River area and costing

the British 170,000 casualties (including 21,000 prisoners of war on the first day), 1,000 heavy guns, and, by one estimate, more than 2 million bottles of whiskey, a loss that later provided a critical unexpected benefit to the British.[4]

The German attack had taken Haig and his headquarters inexplicably by surprise. Less than a week before the attack, Haig's headquarters had told the Fifth Army not to expect a "serious" attack in the Somme sector and Haig's staff had authorized leave for more than 88,000 men, causing some of the absences that Campbell had noted.[5] The heavy losses of 1917 had led Haig to reduce the size of his infantry divisions from twelve battalions to nine. The attrition upon which Haig had built his strategy had cut both ways, leaving the British army too weak to defend the line in the strength necessary to turn back a German offensive.

British lack of preparation had enormous consequences as the British Fifth and Third Armies moved west, abandoning all of their forward defenses and most of their armaments. Retreating across the ground of the Somme battlefields that they won at so high a price two years earlier proved to be especially demoralizing. Journalist Philip Gibbs, then traveling with the Fifth Army, recalled that losing the Somme positions "struck a chill in one's heart," although he also noted that it did not cause a general panic.[6] The situation was one of the worst the Allies had faced since 1914. "It seemed," Campbell thought, "as though we should go on retreating forever, I could see no end to it."[7]

The Germans had won a tremendous local victory, moving at a speed not seen in the west since 1914. Ludendorff had seemingly designed another masterpiece, exporting the tactics that had worked so well in Russia and Italy to France. The British had been his main target, and now two of their armies were in headlong retreat. Once the British had been defeated, the Germans assumed, the French would have no choice but to follow them out of the war. The Americans, who then had just three infantry divisions in line in the relatively quiet area south of Verdun, would have to re-

treat across the Atlantic, leaving Germany master of Europe. The kaiser confidently predicted a complete and total victory. He told his entourage that when the English delegation came to sue for peace, "it must kneel before the German standard for it was a question here of a victory of the monarchy over democracy." He ordered schools closed in celebration and bestowed Hindenburg with the Iron Cross with Golden Rays, last given a century earlier to Field Marshal Blücher for, ironically, helping the English rid the continent of Napoleon.[8]

The British were bruised, but far from considering kneeling before the kaiser. They continued to retreat, but at both the upper and lower levels of the British army, leaders took hold of the situation and prevented the retreat from becoming a rout. Dissociated men found their way to the nearest unit and regrouped. In some cases, British units managed local counterattacks that kept the Germans off balance. Key points, like Vimy Ridge at the extreme northern end of the German offensive, remained in British hands, providing reasonably secure places for the British to regroup and refit. As a result, the German attack pushed the British armies back almost forty miles, but did not break them as an offensive army.

Gough lost his job as commander of the Fifth Army on March 28, a victim of both poor circumstances and even poorer decisions. He blamed his defeat on the failure of the French units to his south to stretch their positions north, which would have allowed him to shorten the amount of front his Fifth Army had to cover. Pétain had seen the danger to Gough, but, fearing an attack on his own positions, had decided that protecting the approaches to Paris took precedence over Haig's request to maintain contact between the French and British lines. This situation highlighted a growing problem. The absence of a single commander for the western front gave the Germans fault lines to exploit and created the possibility of British units retreating north to the Channel ports and French units retreating south to cover Paris. If the two

This oversized German tank in 1918 gives a false impression of the strength of German armor. Allied success in building tanks and developing a doctrine for their use provided a tremendous advantage over Germany in the war's final months. (Imperial War Museum, Crown Copyright, 83/23/1)

armies retreated in opposite directions, it would open an enormous gap and provide exposed flanks in both armies for the Germans to attack.

Every general on the western front saw the danger, but only the French had proposed a remedy. Their solution, naming a single western front commander, had been vigorously opposed by the British and the Italians. Because the French army held the longest portion of the line and had the most men in uniform, a single commander would perforce have to be French. Haig and his colleagues remained haunted by their memories of the Nivelle experiment from the year before, which even Clemenceau admitted was a "very strong argument" against a joint command.[9] The British War Office's Director of Military Operations, General Frederick Maurice, a close friend to both Haig and Robertson, reflected the general British sentiment when he called the idea "rubbish" and

wrote that a joint command was "nothing more than an attempt on the part of the French to get control, which they now find is slipping out of their hands."[10] Lloyd George had opposed the idea as well in a speech to the House of Commons in December, and the influential Italian politician Giorgio Sonnino called a joint command "the sharpest wound ever aimed at Italian honor and pride."[11]

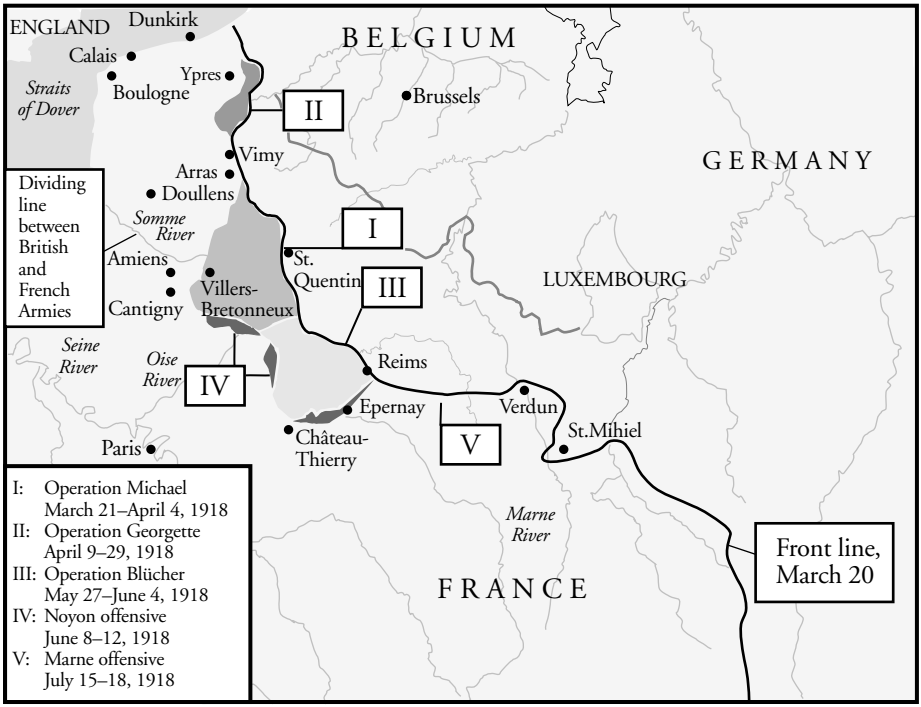
The shocking German breakthrough at the Somme dramatically changed British opposition to a joint command. The danger of a lack of Franco-British cooperation outweighed the organizational concerns and national pride inherent in a joint command. On March 26, the Supreme War Council met in an emergency session at the town of Doullens, close enough to the fighting for participants to hear the sound of artillery fire. The situation could hardly have been more dire. The day before, the French government began preparations to evacuate to Bordeaux for the second time in the war. Also that week, the Germans had advanced their line close enough to Paris to begin random terror bombardments of the capital with the "Paris gun." A 210mm giant with a 130-foot barrel, the Paris gun could fire a shell almost seventy-five miles. It was too inaccurate to target individual points inside Paris. Its only mission was to frighten the capital and induce panic. It failed to do so, but eventually killed 256 civilians and wounded 620 more. A single shell from the Paris gun killed 70 Parisians gathered in a church for Good Friday services, provoking renewed charges of "Hun brutality."[12]

Doullens had once hosted the headquarters of Foch when he had worked to fuse British, Belgian, and French efforts during the Ypres and Yser campaigns of 1914. He and Clemenceau had guessed that the British would change their minds about a joint command if the French promised to move reserves north to halt the immediate crisis caused by the Fifth Army's collapse. Clemenceau initially favored giving the job to Pétain, but the French general arrived at Doullens pessimistic about the ability of

the Allies to win the war. Instead of focusing on ways to reorganize Allied defenses, Pétain urged Clemenceau to consider abandoning Paris. Haig, who had already concluded that the initial German successes had left Pétain a "broken reed," saw Amiens, the juncture of the British and French armies, as much more important than Paris.[13]

Haig had already decided to support the feisty Foch for the job of commander-in-chief because he knew from experience that Foch would fight. Foch had many supporters inside the British army, including his close friend Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff at the time of the Doullens meeting. Foch's reputation inside the British army might have then been even higher than it was in his own army. British General Beauvoir de Lisle recalled meeting Foch in 1916 when he was then "out of favor [with the current French government], but even at that time, we looked upon him as the greatest soldier in the French army."[14] To most British generals at the time of Doullens, he seemed the best choice to lead the Allied armies.

For his part, Foch promised to repeat his performance from 1914 and unify the various Allied efforts into a coherent whole. His promises to fight for Amiens ("I would fight in front of Amiens. I would fight in Amiens. I would fight behind Amiens," he told the conferees) and not retreat the French armies toward Paris led Haig and Lloyd George to drop their opposition to a joint command and support Foch for the job. Haig helped to draft the final memorandum, which entrusted Foch with the "coordination of the action of the Allied armies on the western front."[15] Haig remained the commander-in-chief of British forces and Pétain the commander-in-chief of French forces, but Foch now sat in a position to direct the efforts of both. He quickly took control of the forces Pétain had set aside for the defense of Paris and moved them north to help close the gaps in the British line. He made it clear that the Allied armies would not choose between defending Paris and the Channel ports, but would fight for both.



The Ludendorff offensives, 1918

"I fought for them [the Channel ports] in 1914," he told the British liaison officer to his headquarters, "and will do so again."[16]

Foch's appointment did not immediately solve the problems and mutual suspicions that had arisen between the French and British. Just four days after Doullens, Haig told a colleague that he thought the "French were bloody people to fight with, and that it was just the same now as in 1914, that they ran away."[17] Pétain continued to show great reluctance to move French troops out of his sector in order to help the faltering British. Nevertheless, the creation of a single command in the person of the confident Foch had produced such obvious benefits that the Allies, this

time including the Americans, extended Foch's power on April 3, giving him "strategic direction of military operations," meaning the power to direct counterattacks when Foch deemed them appropriate.[18]

Two days later, Ludendorff closed the first phase of his operation. Given the general stasis on the western front for four years, Germany's ability to move the lines more than fifty miles in two weeks shocked the Allied commanders. The British had suffered an estimated 178,000 casualties and the French 70,000. Untold numbers of Allied artillery pieces, tanks, and ammunition rounds lay in German hands. But the Allies had not panicked and they had not broken, thanks in part to Foch's calm handling of the overall situation.

In fact, Ludendorff's great offensive plan had already failed. It had lacked a grand strategy from the beginning, with Ludendorff famously announcing that his only intention had been to "punch a hole into [the allied line]. For the rest, we shall see."[19] Having punched a rather considerable hole, Ludendorff sat at a crossroads. He had inflicted heavy casualties, but his own forces had suffered more than 239,000 casualties, many from Germany's elite units; March 21, 1918, had been Germany's costliest day of the war so far. Even with the odds in their favor, the Germans found that their attack had been very costly. Even worse for the Germans, the will of the French and British had not broken and the offensive had led the Americans to promise to move more men to Europe more quickly.

German soldiers had, in addition, broken discipline to loot French towns and eat and drink from British and French stores. Compared to the Germans' own often meager rations, the Allies appeared to have limitless supplies, leading many Germans to doubt their commanders' proclamations that the U-boat campaign was strangling Great Britain. The 2 million bottles of whiskey that the British left behind proved to be valuable weapons, as thirsty German soldiers stopped to drink their fill, produc-

ing what one German Army Group commander called "repulsive scenes of drunkenness."[20] One British medical officer noted that the mighty German army had been beaten by "something Ludendorff and his staff officers had not foreseen," namely "the abundance of Scottish drinking spirit!"[21]

ANOTHER HUNDRED YEARS WAR

Ludendorff himself understood that his territorial gains notwithstanding, his grand plan could not possibly produce the desired results. He had subordinated grand strategy to the tactical superiority that the German army had developed with elite infantry and artillery units. Ludendorff saw that the German army's most elite unit, Oskar von Hutier's Seventeenth Army, "had lost too heavily" in the first two days of the offensive to remain as the lead formation in future attacks. He also understood that his tactical success had not yielded results commensurate with winning the war. "Strategically," he noted, "we had not achieved what the events of the 23rd, 24th, and 25th [of March] had encouraged us to hope for."[22]

Despite the disappointments of the first days, Ludendorff could not switch to the defensive at this juncture. His overall mission, to win the war before the Americans could appear in large numbers, had not changed. He therefore launched his second major offensive in Flanders on April 9. Once again he targeted the British in what became known as the Battle of the Lys to the British and Operation Georgette to the Germans. Ludendorff was after the area defended by two divisions sent to the western front by Britain's "oldest ally," Portugal. The German attack caught the unfortunate Portuguese as they were being relieved. The line in their sector crumbled and dissolved within hours.

British efforts in 1918 to blame the outmanned Portuguese provide only a partial explanation for the setback. The Germans also infiltrated the British line near Ypres, capturing most of the

ground to south of the town, including the strategically important Kemmel Hill and the symbolically important Messines Ridge. This German breakthrough threatened the nearest major Channel port, Dunkirk, which sat just twenty-two miles from the newly mobile front line. Operation Georgette therefore posed a serious threat to the BEF's supply lines. While British commanders reorganized their men and set up new lines of defense, the joint command structure provided immediate help. Foch dispatched ten divisions of French troops to the Flanders front he knew so well and ordered Pétain to assume seventy-five more miles of the western front in order to permit the British to concentrate their efforts.

Haig and his staff had been caught by surprise once again. They had expected a renewed German offensive farther south in the Arras–Vimy Ridge sector. They had underestimated the danger to the Lys sector in part because they had presumed that the Lys valley would not dry out until May, as had been the case in previous years. The relatively dry winter of 1917–1918, however, had produced firm soil in the Lys region by March, a fact that Haig's staff was unaware of. His headquarters, therefore, had not ordered the creation of an elastic defense in depth in the region. Some local commanders had taken the initiative to order such defenses on their own and, where they existed, they generally offered greater resistance to the Germans.[23]

Haig attempted to rally his men with his "Backs to the Wall" order of April 11. It read, in part, "There is no course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause we must fight on to the end. The safety of our homes and the freedom of mankind alike depend upon the conduct of each one of us at this critical moment."[24] The order was an extraordinary statement from a man not normally given to public eloquence; it reflected the urgency of the situation.

To many of his men, however, Haig's order suggested despera-

tion or even panic, adding to fears that the situation might be even worse than many had dared to fear. Most soldiers, noted one corps commander, had had "their backs to the wall since March, and did not need to be told," especially by a general sitting in relative comfort behind the lines.[25] Most men, fighting for their lives and those of their comrades, did not even hear of the order for days. Pat Campbell noted laconically that he "never saw any of our men reading it."[26] Inspired by Haig or not, British soldiers fought with increasing determination, containing the Lys offensive and holding both Ypres itself and the critical railroad juncture of Hazebrouck to the southwest.

Farther to the south, the Germans renewed their efforts to seize Amiens. The town sat on the Somme River and commanded a vital railway link. It was also the meeting point of the French and British armies and was therefore always at the center of German thinking. On April 24, the Germans concentrated their meager tank assets (mainly captured British models) and captured the town of Villers-Bretonneux, just ten miles east of Amiens. Hindenburg said that the town had to be held "whatever happens, so that from its heights we can command Amiens."[27] Australian troops retook the town the next day, with a determined surprise attack unsupported by artillery. The retaking of Villers-Bretonneux marked one of the war's great achievements, leading one admiring British officer who witnessed the attack to comment about the Australians, "I am glad they were on our side."[28] For the Germans, the loss of the town took the steam out of Operation Georgette. On April 29, Ludendorff called off part two of his great offensive, having once again failed to drive a breach between the British and French armies.

Territorial losses notwithstanding, the British had held their lines. With reinforcements from Foch, they would be able to secure the Channel ports. Some officers even spoke optimistically of resuming the offensive in the near future. Haig's headquarters shelved emergency plans to demolish Calais and flood the region

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This aerial photo shows Queant, a Hindenburg Line strongpoint. Note the three belts of interlocking barbed wire (foreground, left to right) designed to protect German forces in the town itself. (Courtesy of Andrew and Herbert William Rolfe)

west of Dunkirk. The first two German attacks of 1918 had been tremendously costly, but they had not appreciably altered the strategy of the war. It appeared to many British soldiers that the Germans had the power to inflict great damage, but not enough power to force a decision. The British, for their part, could hold on, but could not deliver a knockout blow of their own. "I suppose," one officer told Campbell, "it will be another Hundred Years War."[29]

The human costs of Ludendorff's first two attacks were appalling. The German army had suffered 257,176 casualties in April on top of the 235,544 they had suffered in March. Germany was sim-

ply unable to replace manpower losses on this scale. The German army began to experience higher desertion rates, and some units reported that they could not expect their men to obey orders in the future. Sixth Army headquarters bluntly warned Ludendorff that "the men will not attack."[30] Still Ludendorff pressed on. He switched his attention south to Champagne, hoping to inflict a major defeat on the French that would impel the British to stretch their line in support. After dealing with France, Ludendorff then planned to strike the extended British again in Flanders.

Ludendorff launched his third offensive, code-named Blücher, in late May. His target was the infamous Chemin des Dames sector, where French forces were packed in between the ridge and the Aisne River. The French commander, Denis Auguste Duchêne, had commanded a corps in this sector during the failed French attempts to capture the ridge in April 1917. Now, as Sixth Army commander, Pétain had urged him to establish a defense in depth. Duchêne had resisted, arguing that the terrain in the Chemin des Dames sector did not allow for such a defense. Three British divisions, badly beaten in the first two German offensives, had moved down to his sector for what they hoped would be a rest period. The three British division commanders had seen firsthand the dangers of a forward defense such as the one Duchêne had in place. When they raised their concerns and asked him to consider the creation of an elastic defense, Duchêne dismissed them with an inelastic "J'ai dit" ("I have spoken").

The dense formation of French defenses in Duchêne's Sixth Army provided a mass of targets for the experienced German artillery, which opened its most deadly fire of the war on Sunday morning, May 26. Ludendorff had concentrated an astonishing 2 million artillery shells and 1,100 batteries in this sector. Even more astonishing, the Germans fired almost the entire allotment of shells in less than five hours, annihilating French defenses and stunning the French forces into a stupor. Thirty-six divisions of German infantry, twenty-seven of which were veterans of the

spring's operations, then moved forward against twenty-four dazed and decimated Allied divisions that were covering the sector between La Fère and Reims. In the ensuing days, the Germans advanced as far as forty miles, severing French rail lines and coming within sixty miles of Paris.

The Germans had scored another monumental tactical success, but that success had brought them no closer to winning the war. The French had held the key cities of Reims, Château-Thierry, and Epernay, thereby containing the damage. The ground over which the Germans had advanced, moreover, offered few resources. The Germans had scorched this same ground during their retreat to the Hindenburg Line. Thus German forces, now as far as ninety miles from their railheads, were operating without regular food, water, or ammunition. The only strategic goal in this region, Paris, obviously lay outside the ability of the German army to capture or even seriously threaten. Still, Ludendorff was so taken with his success that he reinforced it, taking resources away from the original strategic goals of his offensives, Flanders and Amiens. That decision left the German army weaker in the area of greatest strategic importance, leading Foch to tell the British liaison officer to his headquarters, "I wonder if Ludendorff knows his craft."[31] All the German army had to show for its efforts in the south were two dangerously exposed salients and an exhausted army with which to defend them. By June 4, Ludendorff had to halt the offensive while he reorganized and decided on his next move.

"RETREAT, HELL! WE JUST GOT HERE"

Foch could afford to be cavalier about his adversary despite the latter's string of tactical successes, because he knew that he had a weapon Ludendorff could never hope to match. The American army, under its formidable commander General John Pershing, was at long last ready for action. A consummate professional with a reputation for working hard and holding stubbornly to his be-

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American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) commander John J. Pershing (right) stubbornly resisted seeing his army placed under European commanders. With him is Benjamin Foulois, who became brigadier general and chief of the Air Service in the AEF. (United States Air Force Academy McDermott Library Special Collections)

liefs, Pershing had been a fast riser since his appointment as First Captain during his days as a cadet at West Point. His marriage to the daughter of the longtime head of the Senate Military Affairs Committee and patronage from President Theodore Roosevelt provided Pershing with needed political connections in the Republican party, although he was always careful to stand above partisan politics. Despite his failure to find and capture Pancho Villa, his political acumen during the operation had won him admiration from the Democratic Wilson administration as well, making him an obvious choice to command American forces in Europe. Pershing was also an excellent judge of military talent. His early appointments for positions in France included future five-star general George Marshall as well as the brilliant and enigmatic George Patton.

Almost one year after entering the war, the United States had finally solved enough of the myriad problems involved in waking from its isolationist slumber to enter the fray. One of the most serious of these problems involved determining the exact relationship between the United States and its allies. America had refused to sign the Treaty of London, which formed the legal basis for the alliance, preferring to call itself an "associated power." President Wilson had made it clear that he did not see American war aims as being entirely synonymous with those of France, Britain, and Italy. He and Pershing had made it equally clear that the Americans would fight only as an independent and visibly American entity. Both men firmly resisted European plans to "amalgamate" the American army at the company or battalion level into French and British divisions. America's inexperience, lack of suitable doctrine, and shortages of modern war materiel contrasted sharply with its principled resistance to amalgamation, but Pershing held firm.[32]

In the end the amalgamation controversy produced more smoke than fire. The Americans had agreed early on that limited and temporary amalgamation would be acceptable if it were needed to meet an emergency. "We do not desire loss of identity of our

forces," Secretary of War Newton Baker wrote to Pershing in December 1917, "but [we] regard that as secondary to the meeting of any critical situation by the most helpful use possible of the troops at your command."[33] At the height of the crisis in late March 1918, Pershing had come to Foch to make an extraordinary offer that contrasted sharply with American resistance to amalgamation. Pershing, in his uncertain French, told the new commander-in-chief that "the American people would consider it a great honor for our troops to be engaged in the present battle. . . . Infantry, artillery, aviation, all that we have is yours; use them as you wish."[34]

The Europeans, for their part, agreed to the creation of an independent American army under American commanders, but not, as Clemenceau told Pershing, "while my country's fate was every moment at stake on the battlefields, which had already drunk the best blood of France."[35] Foch and Pétain had argued that a separate American army made operational sense because American troops could be expected to fight better under American officers. Still, the emergency created by the German offensive had to be stopped by any means necessary before an independent American army could be created. As a result, the two sides agreed to the temporary inclusion of American divisions (under American commanders) into French corps and armies until the immediate crisis had passed.

The Americans, British, and French also agreed to a system to transport and equip the Americans as quickly as possible. On May 2, Foch negotiated an agreement with Pershing whereby the Americans agreed to ship only infantry to Europe, thus maximizing the number of "doughboys" available to meet the German offensives. The British agreed to provide the necessary shipping to transport half of the Americans, ensuring that almost 500,000 Americans would be in Europe by July and another 500,000 would cross the Atlantic by the end of the year. In the end, the Americans exceeded those goals, landing as many as 300,000 men

American light tanks advancing. Compare these tanks to the cumbersome German tank on page 313. (National Archives)

per month. By the terms of an earlier agreement, the French provided the needed munitions in exchange for American steel and raw materials. France became the most important supplier of arms to the American army, eventually giving the Americans 3,532 field artillery pieces, 40,884 automatic weapons, 227 tanks, and 4,874 airplanes.[36] Without these weapons, the Americans would have been hard pressed to conduct offensives at all.

The close personal friendship that developed between Pershing and Pétain furthered the connection between the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) and the French army. In late May, the two armies cooperated in the first large combat operation the AEF faced, at the town of Cantigny. A joint Franco-American force took the town, then held off six separate German attempts to retake it. The Americans made tactical mistakes, but showed the kind of élan that soon made their reputation in both the Allied and German armies. They may have been clumsy and dependent

on the French for many support operations, but their battlefield immaturity would solve itself with experience. As the French, British, and Germans saw them firsthand, few doubted that the Americans had the "stuff" to fight on the western front. Their numbers (on average a division a day arrived in France) and their healthy, well-fed appearance led their allies to see them as "splendid" men with the highest morale and spirit.[37] The psychological effect alone of the appearance of so many fresh reinforcements can hardly be underestimated.

The Americans soon proved to be a formidable battlefield weapon in the war against Germany. They played key roles in shutting off two of the German approaches toward Paris. American troops filled in a gap near a hunting preserve held in force by the Germans called Belleau Wood. According to Marine Corps legend, a German attack on June 2 sent French units retreating, with French officers urging the Americans to retire to stronger positions. A Marine Corps officer, Captain Lloyd Williams, is supposed to have replied, "Retreat, hell! We just got here." Like all great one-liners from history, this one may be apocryphal, but its persistence over time reflects the ardor and spirit with which the Americans fought at Belleau Wood and elsewhere.

On June 5, the Americans attacked the wood as part of a general advance by the French XXI Corps. Nearly three weeks of deadly combat ensued before the Marine commander could signal "Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely." The vast cemetery next to the wood, now officially renamed "Bois de la Brigade de Marine," stands as evidence of the tremendous losses suffered by the U.S. forces to halt the German advance. The Marines lost 4,600 men, almost 50 percent of the men engaged. The victory at Belleau Wood, however, stopped the Germans at their closest point to Paris, just thirty-five miles away. They would not come as close again for the rest of the war.

Just a few miles from Belleau Wood, the Americans played the leading role in stopping another German drive, this time at the

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

American troops, like these men using a light machine gun, struck allies and enemies alike as eager, reckless, and idealistic. The realities of the war caused American commanders to abandon their preconceptions and learn from the French and British. (National Archives)

town of Château-Thierry on the Marne River. While their comrades were fighting off German attacks at Belleau Wood, the men of the Second and Third American Divisions denied the Germans the chance to cross the Marne at Château-Thierry. Other American units entered the battle as well. Their insignia can be seen today on the massive monument above the town dedicated to "the friendship and cooperation between the French and American armies." One American regiment defended a bend in the river so fiercely that it acquired the nickname the "Rock of the Marne." The AEF's forceful presence on the battlefield stood as conclusive evidence that Ludendorff's strategy had been an abject failure. "You Americans," one French officer said in mid-June, "are our hope, our strength, our life."[38] Even the defeat of the British that Ludendorff had so ardently sought would not stop the Americans

from arriving en masse and fighting with more skill each month they were in France.

Despite June losses exceeding 200,000 men, Ludendorff decided on a fourth offensive. He held out the hope of seizing Reims and then advancing on Paris. The German army, wracked by defeatism, desertions, and the mysterious illness soon to be known as the Spanish influenza, could not repeat its previous successes. Duchêne's disaster on the Chemin des Dames led all Allied units to redouble their efforts to create elastic defenses. The Allies had finally seen enough of the Germans to know how to counter their tactics. German deserters (many of them from Alsace) gave the French the exact time and location of the attack. As a result, German advances were negligible and the kaiser watched in frustration as his men failed once again to capture Reims. Ludendorff responded by blaming his staff officers and announcing his hope to defeat the French in the near future, then continue his pursuit of the British, into India if necessary.[39]

Ludendorff's fifth offensive, on the Marne River east of Reims, surprised no one. German deserters, French intelligence reports, and Foch's own intuition had enabled the Allies to divine Ludendorff's plan. Foch had prepared a rude reception for the Germans, assembling infantry, air, and armor from four nations, including six American divisions that fought under the French Sixth Army. The German losses in the Second Battle of the Marne (July 15 to July 18) included 30,000 demoralized prisoners. The Allied victory definitively ended any German hope of capturing Paris and led Ludendorff to cancel his sixth offensive, aimed at the British in Flanders. On July 24, Foch announced to the Allied generals that the time had arrived "to cease our generally defensive attitude imposed until now by our general inferiority of numbers and pass to the offensive" in order to press the Germans every day along the entire front and "not allow them the time to reform their units."[40] Germany's last gamble had failed, and the Allied armies were ready to resume the offensive. The war's final phase had begun.