

overpowered were regained, such a heap of German dead lay in and around them that the bodies of our own men were hidden.

All accounts go to show that the enemy's losses in the whole of his constantly repeated attacks on this sector of the battle front were enormous. One battery of eight machine-guns fired 70,000 rounds of ammunition into ten successive waves of Germans. Long lines of attacking infantry were caught by our machine-gun fire in enfilade, and were shot down in line as they advanced. Great execution also was done by our field artillery, and in the course of the battle guns were brought up to the crest line and fired direct upon the enemy at short range.

At one point west of Bourlon the momentum of his first advance carried the enemy through our front line and a short way down the southern slopes of the ridge. There, however, the German masses came under direct fire from our field artillery at short range and were broken up. Our local reserves at once counter-attacked, and succeeded in closing the gap that had been made in our line. Early in the afternoon the enemy again forced his way into our foremost positions in this locality, opening a gap between the 1/6th Battalion and the 1/15th Battalion, London Regiments. Counter-attacks, led by the two battalion commanders, with all available men, including the personnel of their headquarters, once more restored the situation. All other attacks were beaten off with the heaviest losses to the enemy.

The greatest credit is due to the troops at Masnieres, Bourlon and Moeuvres for the very gallant service performed by them on this day. But for their steady courage and staunchness in defence, the success gained by the enemy on the right of our battle front might have had serious consequences.

I cannot close the account of this day's fighting without recording my obligation to the Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies for the prompt way in which he placed French troops within reach for employment in case of need at the unfettered discretion of the Third Army Commander. Part of the artillery of this force actually came into action, rendering valuable service, and though the remainder of the troops were not called upon, the knowledge that they were available should occasion arise was a great assistance.

THE FIGHTING AT GONNELIEU AND MASNIERES.

(12) On the 1st December fighting continued fiercely on the whole front.

The Guards completed the capture of the St. Quentin Ridge and entered Gonnelleu, where they captured over 350 prisoners and a large number of machine-guns. Tanks took an effective part in the fighting for the ridge. At one point, where our infantry were held up by fire from a hostile trench, a single tank attacked and operated up and down the trench, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy's garrison. Our infantry were then able to advance and secure the trench, which was found full of dead Germans. In it were also found fifteen machine-guns that had been silenced by the tank. In the whole of this fighting splendid targets were obtained by all tank crews, and the German casualties were seen to be very great.

Farther south, a number of tanks co-operated with dismounted Indian cavalry of the 5th Cavalry Division and with the Guards

in the attacks upon Villers Guislain and Gauche Wood, and were in great measure responsible for the capture of the wood. Heavy fighting took place for this position, which it is clear that the enemy had decided to hold at all costs. When the infantry and cavalry finally took possession of the wood, great numbers of German dead and smashed machine-guns were found. In one spot four German machine-guns, with dead crews lying round, were discovered within a radius of twenty yards. Three German field guns, complete with teams, were also captured in this wood.

Other tanks proceeded to Villers Guislain, and, in spite of heavy direct artillery fire, three reached the outskirts of the village, but the fire of the enemy's machine-guns prevented our troops advancing from the south from supporting them, and the tanks ultimately withdrew.

Severe fighting took place, also, at Masnieres. During the afternoon and evening at least nine separate attacks were beaten off by the 29th Division on this front, and other hostile attacks were repulsed in the neighbourhood of Marcoing, Fontaine-notre-Dame, and Bourlon. With the Bonavis Ridge in the enemy's hands, however, Masnieres was exposed to attack on three sides, and on the night of the 1st/2nd December our troops were withdrawn under orders to a line west of the village.

On the afternoon of the 2nd December a series of heavy attacks developed against Welsh Ridge in the neighbourhood of La Vacquerie, and further assaults were made on our positions in the neighbourhood of Masnieres and Bourlon. These attacks were broken in succession by our machine-gun fire, but the enemy persisted in his attempts against Welsh Ridge and gradually gained ground. By nightfall our line had been pushed back to a position west and north of Gonnelleu.

Next day the enemy renewed his attacks in great force on the whole front from Gonnelleu to Marcoing, and ultimately gained possession of La Vacquerie. North of La Vacquerie repeated attacks made about Masnieres and Marcoing were repulsed in severe fighting, but the positions still retained by us beyond the Canal de l'Escaut were extremely exposed, and during the night our troops were withdrawn under orders to the west bank of the canal.

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM BOURLON.

(13) By this time the enemy had evidently become exhausted by the efforts he had made and the severity of his losses, and the 4th December passed comparatively quietly. For some days, however, local fighting continued in the neighbourhood of La Vacquerie, and his attitude remained aggressive. Local attacks in this sector were repulsed on the 5th December, and on this and the following two days further fierce fighting took place, in which the enemy again endeavoured without success to drive us from our positions on Welsh Ridge.

The strength which the enemy had shown himself able to develop in his attacks made it evident that only by prolonged and severe fighting could I hope to re-establish my right flank on the Bonavis Ridge. Unless this was done, the situation of my troops in the salient north of Flesquieres would be difficult and dangerous, even if our hold on Bourlon Hill were extended.

I had therefore to decide either to embark on another offensive battle on a large scale, or to withdraw to a more compact line on the Flesquieres Ridge.