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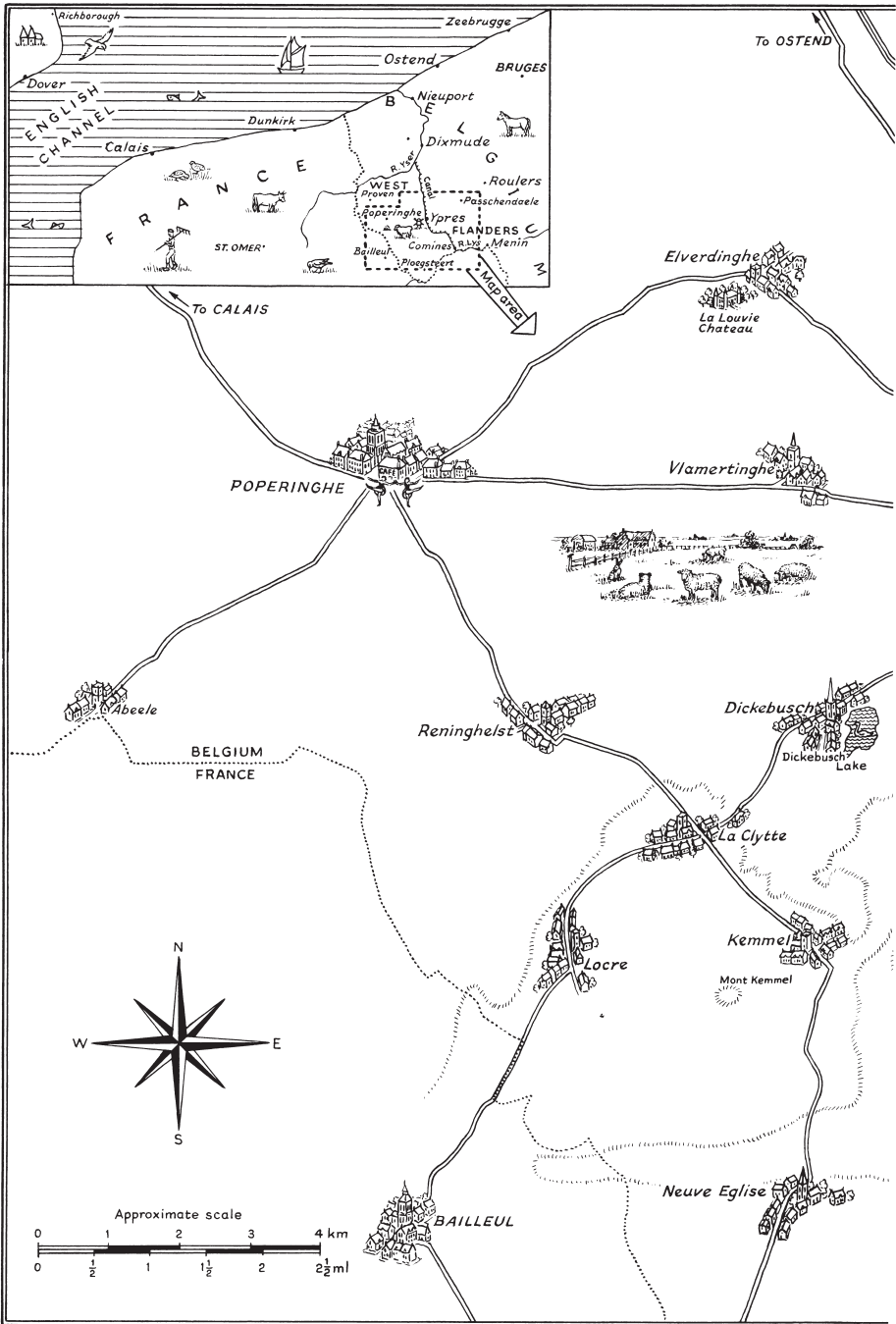
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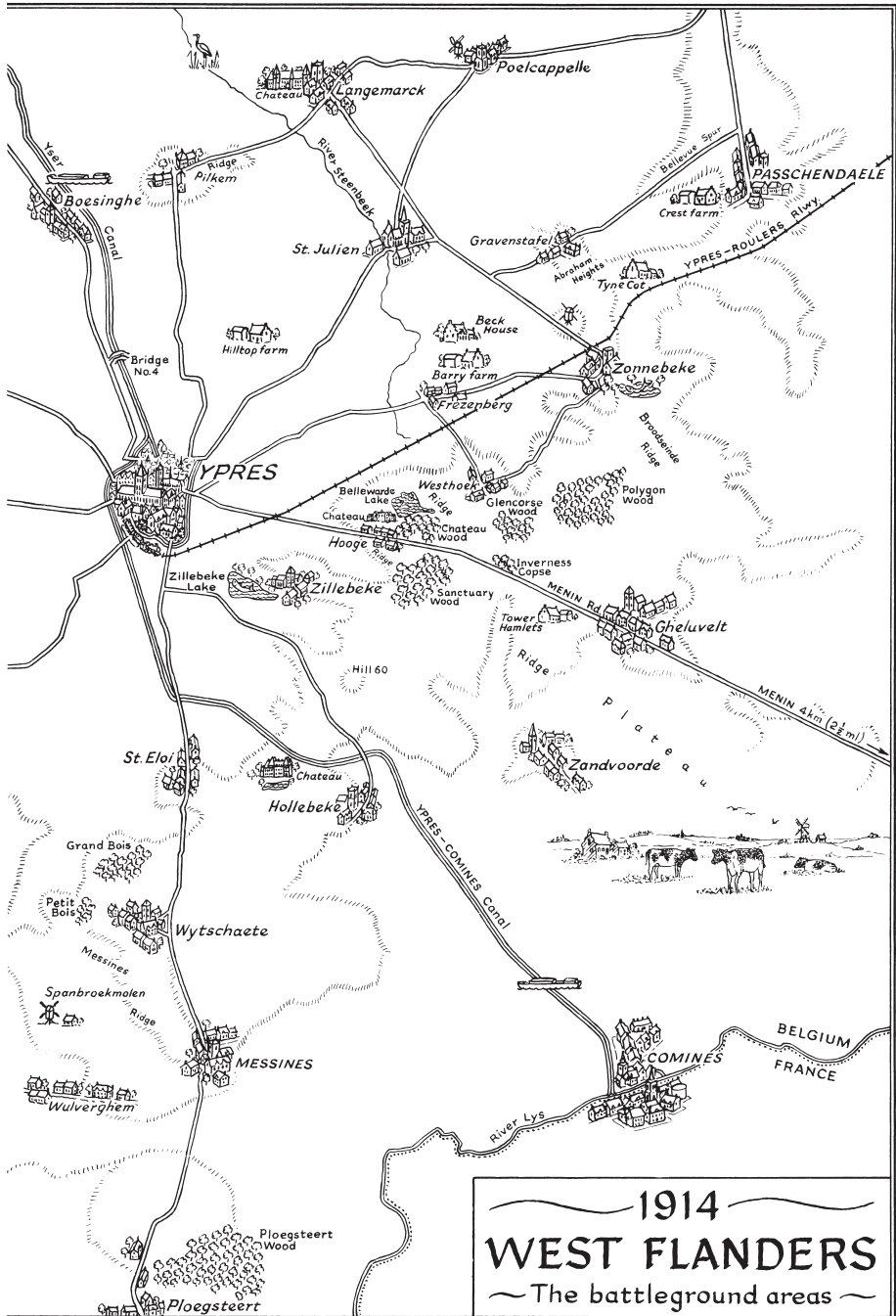
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Captain Martin Greener
Gunner Jason Addy
Lance-Corporal (later Quartermaster-Sergeant) Joseph Pincombe
2nd Lieutenant Jimmy Todd
2nd Lieutenant Alfred Angel
Captain Alan Goring MC
Field Postcard
Typical postcard sent from home to the field
2nd Lieutenant Paddy King
Private Victor Fagence
Typical postcard on general sale out of the line
Rifleman George Winterbourne
Private Charles Miles
Charles Miles and legless comrade, photographed after the war
Private W. G. Bell MM
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Private Harold Diffey
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Sergeant John Carmichael VC
Corporal Nick Lee MM and the crew of the tank *Revenge*
Unteroffizier Jeff Werner
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78th Winnipeg Grenadiers
Gunner Bert Stokes
Colonel Roderick Macleod DSO, MC
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Sister Jean Calder with VADs and nurses, photographed with a Belgian
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1914
WEST FLANDERS
 The battleground areas

The Salient

The aspect of a salient upon a map is familiar to most of us. It is a piece of ground projecting into the enemy lines and offering, therefore, peculiar disadvantages and dangers to the defenders. The Hun can shoot right across it. A salient is an awkward place. But how awkward none can realise fully unless he has tried the following experiment.

The top of the Ypres Salient is somewhere about the trenches in front of 'Y' Wood. Place yourself at night in one of these ditches, moving with care so that the mud and water does not sluice over the top of your gum- or thigh-boots (assuming that you are fortunate enough to possess a pair), and turn your back, for a moment, upon the diligent Boche who is no doubt busily engaged in draining a lake behind his line into your temporary abode. Look at the salient. You will never get a better idea of its extent for it is outlined with the Very lights of which the enemy has so inexhaustible a store. To right and left of you the lights stretch far into the distance. But it is not the distance which impresses you, it is the lack of distance, the short space between that light which has just gone up, far away on the right, and that light which has just fallen far away on the left. That little space – one might think it merely a few hundred yards – is the neck of the salient, and if the Boche gets through there, from either side, or from both sides at once, what hope have you and your pals and the thousands of men round Ypres? Now you know what a salient is.

The Ypres Times, Vol. 6, No. 1, January 1932.

Author's Foreword and Acknowledgments

It is difficult to believe that 2017 marks the centenary of the Battle of Passchendaele which, like the Somme, has haunted the minds of successive generations. But it is hardly surprising if this book reads like a novel or even at times like a horror story: please don't blame me. It is all true, or rather it is compiled from more than 600 true stories and eyewitness accounts of men and women who were there in the bloodbath of Ypres. Some of their experiences are reproduced in their own words as they were recorded. Many more are incorporated in the text, and the tiniest details have contributed to building up a picture of life as it was for the Tommies and Anzacs and Canucks who were at Ypres in that terrible summer and autumn of 1917. Writing this book was a straightforward task of compiling and interpreting their experiences in the light of the events which took place as the campaign unrolled. The facts were all there. There was no need for imagination to be brought to bear on them, for the events were beyond imagining.

Although it has of necessity been compiled from the recollections of old people, this is a story about boys and young men and women, many still in their teens, who were snatched from a safe and circumscribed world, still basking in the afterglow of those Edwardian summers when God was still in his Heaven and a third of the atlas was firmly shaded in the pink of the British Empire. This is their story, faithfully recorded as they remember their experiences, their thoughts, feelings and conversations – and they remember them vividly. The experience of that 'Great' war could never be forgotten. Perhaps Bill Fowler, who was a stretcher-bearer with the 13th (Service) Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, summed it all up when he said, 'In a way I lived my whole life between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three. Everything that happened after that was almost an anti-climax.'

I hope this book does justice to all the people who took the trouble to cast their minds back and talk or write about their experiences. I cannot set one above the other by selecting particular names for particular thanks; their names are listed at the back and every one of them earned my sincere gratitude.

This book was a team effort. It would have been impossible for one

person to tackle the magnitude of work and research involved without assistance. John Woodroff met and talked to many old soldiers, checked all the military information and, on forays to the old Ypres Salient, did most of the driving on unmarked roads so skilfully that we only very occasionally ended up in a potato field. Tony Spagnoly also ranged far and wide in his search for old soldiers and sacrificed much of his time checking personal accounts against the bald facts recorded in regimental diaries and histories. Above all, his personal feeling for the period made a valuable contribution to this book.

Of my BBC colleagues I must thank Ritchie Cogan, not only for his interest and enthusiasm but for devoting innumerable evenings and weekends to assisting with the interviewing. Tony Spagnoly, John Woodroff and Ritchie Cogan also accompanied me on many trips to Ypres to tramp the ground that formed the old salient in all weathers and seasons. I particularly remember a freezing November dawn on the Bellewarde Ridge. We had the consolation of knowing that it must have been worse for the soldiers in 1917 – but there were times when we felt that it couldn't have been *much* worse.

In the natural course of events those stalwart old soldiers have 'faded away', but I cannot forget Bert Thorne, MBE, 'Hon. Sec.' of the 13th (Service) Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, Old Comrades Association, who started it all off by taking me on one of his OCA battlefield trips. The extent of my regard and gratitude may be judged by the dedication at the front of the book.

Baron Yves de Vinck, then owner of Hooge Château, was wonderfully helpful, as was Dr Canapeele in Ypres. Mr P. D. Parminter, introduced by Bert Thorne, was a fund of stories and information on the salient, for he not only served there during the war but stayed on afterwards as an officer of the Army Graves Service (now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) and was there during the period in which the battlefields were cleared and the land reconstructed. His unique knowledge of the ground was invaluable and he generously showered me with contemporary printed material that was absolutely unavailable elsewhere. He also provided the key to unravelling the diary of Pastor van Walleghem, privately printed by a historical society, by 'volunteering' his nephew and niece, John and Nenette Parminter, to undertake the monumental task of translating it. They did so with unflinching good humour and patience and resolved the many queries that arose. It is largely due to their efforts that I was able to present a complete picture of the salient as it was when the army was there.

I am greatly in the debt of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and its various members, both at Maidenhead and in Belgium. It was they who introduced me to the Ypres branch of the Royal British Legion, where I not only made good contacts but also many good friends.

Battlefield enthusiasts sometimes complain that after a century of progress and the construction of new roads, buildings and industries, the old salient and even Ypres has changed. But, although life goes on, much still remains and there is one changeless ritual that is both moving and impressive: the vast Menin Gate. It straddles the road into Ypres at the place where night after night a multitude of men marched out into the salient beyond. The Menin Gate is inscribed with the names of over 56,000 of the men who did not come back and whose bodies were never identified. Every night at 8 p.m. the traffic is stopped and a group of buglers from the Ypres Fire Brigade plays the 'Last Post'. At that hour and in that place it is peculiarly haunting. The fact that this ritual is able to continue is due to the continued efforts of the Last Post Committee, which not only raises funds to enable it to function but organizes the many official ceremonies at the Menin Gate. I must thank Ian Conerty for much assistance and, above all, Mr Guy Gruez, MBE, MNZM, OHM, MSM, Honorary Chairman, not only for many favours but, with his wife Marie-Jeanne, for generous goodwill and hospitality over many years.

Alma Woodroff not only transcribed some 300 hours of recorded interviews but typed the draft and the final manuscript with the sort of meticulous efficiency and interest that goes far beyond the call of duty. For this I am greatly in her debt.

I should like to thank David Higham Associates for permission to quote from *The Supreme Command 1914–1918* by Lord Hankey; *The Times* for permission to quote from their contemporary newspapers; the Ypres League for permission to quote from *The Ypres Times*; Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, Société d'émulation, for permission to quote from *De Oorlog Te Dickebusch En Omstreken 1914–1918* by Pastor van Wallegghem; and Francis, Day and Hunter for permission to quote the words of 'A Bachelor Gay Am I' and 'The Laddies Who Fought and Won'.

Lastly, and most importantly, I must thank Vivien Riches, who was my much-valued assistant until she was stolen by a handsome Aussie and whisked off to Australia, where she actually continued to research Australian soldiers. She not only did the lion's share of work involved in organizing and following up the contributions of some 600 people, but masterminded the whole operation and by some mental feat which I, at least, consider to be miraculous has always been able to produce the right information at the right moment. Without her hard work and constant support this book would certainly never have been written. That may be a cliché but, with my hand on my heart, it is true.

Part 1

The Big Bang

Chapter 1

Before 1914 the ancient city of Ypres had been one of the gems of Flanders. Not that many people outside Belgium had ever heard of it, for, in tumbling from its pinnacle as one of the great cloth towns of the middle ages, Ypres had also tumbled into obscurity. A sleepy backwater of less than 20,000 inhabitants, whose prosperity largely depended on the harvest of hops and corn and beets growing on the plains beyond the ramparts that enclosed its medieval towers and high-gabled houses.

Four years of war turned Ypres into a ghost town. Not a leaf grew on a tree. Scarcely one stone stood upon another. From the battered ramparts the eye swept clean across a field of rubble to the swamp-lands beyond. The jagged ruins of the Cloth Hall tower, still pointing an angry skeleton's finger at the sky, were the only evidence that a town had ever stood there.

By 1920 it was the booming mecca of the first mass-explosion of tourism in history. The single third-class fare from London to Ypres was a mere £1 12s 6d – a little less than the average weekly wage of the lowest-paid workers. A package-deal was even better value, for a four-day excursion, including travel, hotel accommodation and meals, could be arranged for as little as £3 17s 6d. In the Twenties, tens of thousands of people travelled to Ypres, packing the cross-channel steamers to the gunwales, pouring into trains at Ostend and pouring out again at the shabby wooden sheds that served as a temporary station.

In the face of such an influx, accommodation was a problem. The construction of hotels was naturally not at the top of the list of priorities in a city whose returning inhabitants were still living in cellars and huts; but there were inns in the surrounding villages and organisations like the YMCA; and the Church Army, which had put up temporary wartime buildings in the area as canteens for the troops, turned them into hostels to provide for the needs of the post-war visitors. Their needs were simple, for they regarded themselves less as visitors than as pilgrims.

They were mostly women, these pilgrims. Some of them were accompanied by a husband, or a father, or a son. More often by a sister or a daughter because their husbands and fathers and sons were already here. A whole generation of young men lay buried beneath the Flanders mud.

Of the million men who had been killed in the Great War, a quarter of a million lay in the few square miles around Ypres. Their graves marked the perimeter of the dreaded salient which, at all costs and for no reason that in hindsight seems good enough, had to be held. It would be more correct to say that the *cemeteries* marked the perimeter of the salient, for the salient itself is a graveyard. Under its farms and woods and villages lie the unrecovered bodies of more than 40,000 soldiers who died or drowned, wounded in the mud. In spring and autumn their bones are still turned up by ploughs and ditching machines. The salient was a slaughterhouse. Around Ypres the fighting never really stopped, but, from time to time, it intensified. After the war, the Battle Nomenclature Committee, in its wisdom, saw fit to entitle those periods of intense fighting the First, Second and Third Battles of Ypres. In the popular mind all the agony and suffering of the salient became associated with one word. Passchendaele. For 'Passchendaele' stood for all that was dismal, all that was futile and, by a strange quirk, all that was glorious in the history of warfare. In all the history of warfare, no campaign was more catastrophic, no 'victory' more empty. Passchendaele stands on the summit of the slopes that surround the city of Ypres. The troops called them hills.

Of course, they weren't really hills at all. They were folds in the ground sloping gently up from the flat plain of Flanders. In peacetime it is strollers' countryside, patchworked with fields and copses, farms and hamlets separated by such leisurely gradients that it is hardly worth stopping to admire the view. Hill 60, sixty metres high. Hill 40, forty metres. Hill 35, an insignificant pimple on the landscape. But the ridges surrounded the salient, and it seemed as impossible for the British armies to break out of it as it would be for a canyon to burst free of the Rockies.

The salient was formed by accident, forged by retreat and held by iron determination. After the opening *mêlées* of the autumn of 1914, the weakened remnants of the Allied forces found themselves occupying a line that straggled inland from the coastal town of Nieuport along the southern bank of the River Yser. It bulged out to follow the rough semi-circle of low ridges to the east which seems to hold the city of Ypres in cupped hands, snaked back along the high ground to the west and, where it billowed down to merge with the plain, swung south past Armentières and Arras, deep into France and east again to the Swiss border.

Sitting astride the ridges above Ypres, the army was able to take an interesting view of its situation. In front of it was occupied Belgium, a land invaded but still unscarred by war, and across it at a safe distance was the ace in the German hand – the great railway junction of Roulers. It scarcely mattered that the line to Ypres and the coast had been effectively cut. The

soldiers could see for themselves, as the steam engines puffed busily back and forth across the plain, that a network of communications ran back from Roulers into Germany itself, to the very gates of the Ruhr armament factories, to the very doors of the depots where troops gathered for the front.

Behind them the land rippled gently down to the moated ramparts of Ypres. On a clear day, beyond its spires they could just see glinting in the distance the waters of the English Channel, disturbingly close to their backs. Ypres was the key to the channel ports – and the Germans knew it. It was obvious to them that the line of troops was thin and the sporadic gunfire told all too clearly of a shortage of ammunition (a quarter of the guns had been taken back from the firing-zone because they had no shells to fire). It would be a pushover.

To a certain extent it was. In the autumn of 1914, in twenty-two days of bitter fighting the ragged British army was pushed over the rim of the ridges, down the slopes of the shallow saucer, downwards and inwards, closer and closer to Ypres at its back. And then, almost within hailing distance of the Menin Gate, it stopped.

The place was Nonne Bosschen – Nun's Wood, a wedge of thicket on the breast of one of those deceptively gentle rises halfway between Passchendaele and Ypres. The German commanders drew in their breath for one final crushing attack. Streams of guns poured up to stiffen the bombardment; the troop trains steamed into Roulers with reinforcements of crack Prussian Guards, fresh and untried, but trained to razor-sharp precision. As far as the depleted British Expeditionary Force was concerned, the only thing which could be remotely described as 'reinforcements' was the embryo Kitchener's Army of volunteers, which – between vigorous bouts of button polishing – was still learning to form fours and shoulder arms on village greens and playing fields on the other side of the Channel.

But reinforcements of a kind nevertheless arrived, hurrying up the road from Ypres in hastily formed platoons of cooks and spud-bashers, dish-washers and orderly-room clerks, sanitary orderlies and plump waiters from the officers' mess, storemen and quartermasters, wagon drivers and messengers – a raggle-taggle bunch of non-combatants who had never seriously expected to find themselves at the business end of a rifle. This was a point of minimal importance in view of the fact that there were barely enough rifles to go round.

Into the line they went to fight with picks, with shovels, with entrenching tools; but ready to snatch up firearms as they fell from the hands of the killed and wounded and to use them at point-blank range to drive off the enemy swarming across their trenches. The attackers were thrown back.

The line held. The honours of the day, in that first battle of Ypres, belonged indisputably to Fred Karno.

The remnant of the British army stood its ground, and gradually it began to grow. On walls and buildings all over Britain, the Empire and the Colonies, recruiting posters erupted in a rash of patriotic fervour. Boys newly grown-up and only just weaned from a schoolboy diet of G. A. Henty's adventure yarns, flocked to join up in numbers that, in the first months, were embarrassingly large for the military authorities to cope with. In France the recruits were desperately needed. But at home sergeant-majors approaching retirement looked in despair at the motley hordes they were expected to transform into battalions of disciplined soldiers, while quartermaster sergeants tore their hair and despaired of being able to clothe, billet and feed them. Nineteen was the official minimum age for enlistment, but recruiting sergeants could be helpful.

'How old are yer?'

'Seventeen and a half, sir.'

'Run along, sonny, and come back when you're nineteen . . . tomorrer.'

The recruiting offices were besieged by boys desperate to get a sniff of the fighting before the war ended, as it surely must, by Christmas. And not only in Britain but throughout the British Empire, from Calgary to Cape Town, from Bombay to Brisbane. Soon on every tide the troopships were arriving, their decks lined with waving, cheering soldiers in stiff new-smelling khaki. By April 1915 the weary troops who had held the precious salient around Ypres throughout that first cold and soggy winter had been reinforced by a cheerily strong contingent of Canadians and a reputedly tough-fighting regiment of the Indian Army. The French sector was being strengthened by troops from their colonies of Algeria and Morocco and gradually the first newly-trained battalions of Kitchener's volunteers trickled across the Channel. Armaments and ammunition were still in short supply and guns were restricted to firing a certain number of rounds a day, but the salient had what it had previously so woefully lacked – men. And manpower, at that stage in the war, was all-important in the eyes of military commanders, schooled and nurtured in the tradition of cavalry campaigning. Caught up in the detail of the task of actually getting something which approximated to an army on to the field, the commanders could hardly be blamed for failing to realise that this war would be fought under different rules, under different circumstances and under conditions of undreamt-of hardship.

The harbinger of all the horrors to come arrived late in the afternoon of a perfect spring day. And it arrived at Ypres. The first heavy shells began to crash into the town late in the morning, sending the Saturday-market crowds flying to the shelter of the cellars, and at midday the guns began to pound the outlying villages and the roads leading from them into Ypres. So far the civilians had done their best to ignore the war, but when the gunfire tailed off early in the afternoon the population was in turmoil, and soon a procession of refugees was on the move. With whatever belongings they had been able to salvage piled on to wheelbarrows and handcarts, they poured westwards out of the town, swarming along the roads that led to Elverdinghe, Poperinghe and Dickebusch. They passed farms and meadows where green peacetime grass had long since disappeared under regiments of bell-tents; and field kitchens where steaming cauldrons of stew bubbled and simmered, ready to be ladled into canisters and transported to the troops in the forward areas beyond the canal.

Some horse-drawn limbers were already clattering on their way, loaded with ration canisters. Seated on them, taking their ease while they could, were the men of the carrying parties on whose broad backs they would travel the last lap into the line. That is, if they ever got there, for in spite of the MPs who were doing their best to control the chaos, the sweating horses were making heavy weather of getting the wagons through against a determined tide of refugees, who were less frightened by the threats of the cursing drivers than by the threat of the big guns behind.

At five o'clock the guns started up again. Walls crumbled and crashed in the dying town, as if to encourage the last stragglers on their way. On the extreme northern edge of the salient, far to the left, there was the distant popping of light field artillery. But it was disregarded by those who happened to notice it between the roars of the heavy shells that were hammering Ypres into dust and debris. It was common knowledge that Algerian troops had just taken over the French line on the Canadians' left, and no doubt they were quite properly firing on enemy objectives as an exercise in order to register the accuracy of their guns. It was known as 'shooting yourself in', a preliminary which was as necessary for the efficiency of the gunners as it was unpleasant for the enemy, who were naturally provoked into replying with retaliatory gunfire. In reality the situation was somewhat different. So different that no soldier on earth had ever experienced anything like it before.

It came on the breath of the light evening breeze as it sprang up in the north, a thick yellow-grey cloud that rose from the enemy lines and drifted gently across to the Algerian positions, enveloping the terrified men in a retching, throat-catching suffocating fog. Behind it came the German infantry, fixed bayonets at the ready, seen terrifyingly through streaming

eyes as they loomed out of the trailing vapour, helmeted and gargoyle-masked. As they advanced, the Algerians broke and ran, staggered or crawled away from them and from the deadly gas, but the sanctuary they sought was down-wind. The gas travelled on their heels.

The chaos behind the lines became uncontrollable. On the Poperinghe Road, bedlam broke loose as teams of half-crazed horses and riders plunged on to it from the road leading to the Yser Canal, closely followed by mobs of infantry streaming back across the fields. Ambulances, hastily summoned, added to the traffic of confusion, and the demoralised troops, some wounded, lay blind and choking along the roadside. By eight o'clock the situation was all too clear. Fifty guns had been abandoned and there was an undefended gap in the line four miles long.

It was the Canadians who saved the day. They were in the most desperate situation of all, for the collapse of the French lines meant that they now had four miles of absolutely nothing on their left. Not being able to use their infantry in the dark, the Germans switched their tactics to heavy shelling. All night the bombardment continued but somehow, in spite of it, the Canadians managed to deploy to the left to cover the gap, somehow they managed to mount a counter-attack, somehow the casualties were evacuated, somehow reserves were brought up and spread in pitifully small numbers along the gap to try to establish a new line. They had little chance of succeeding.

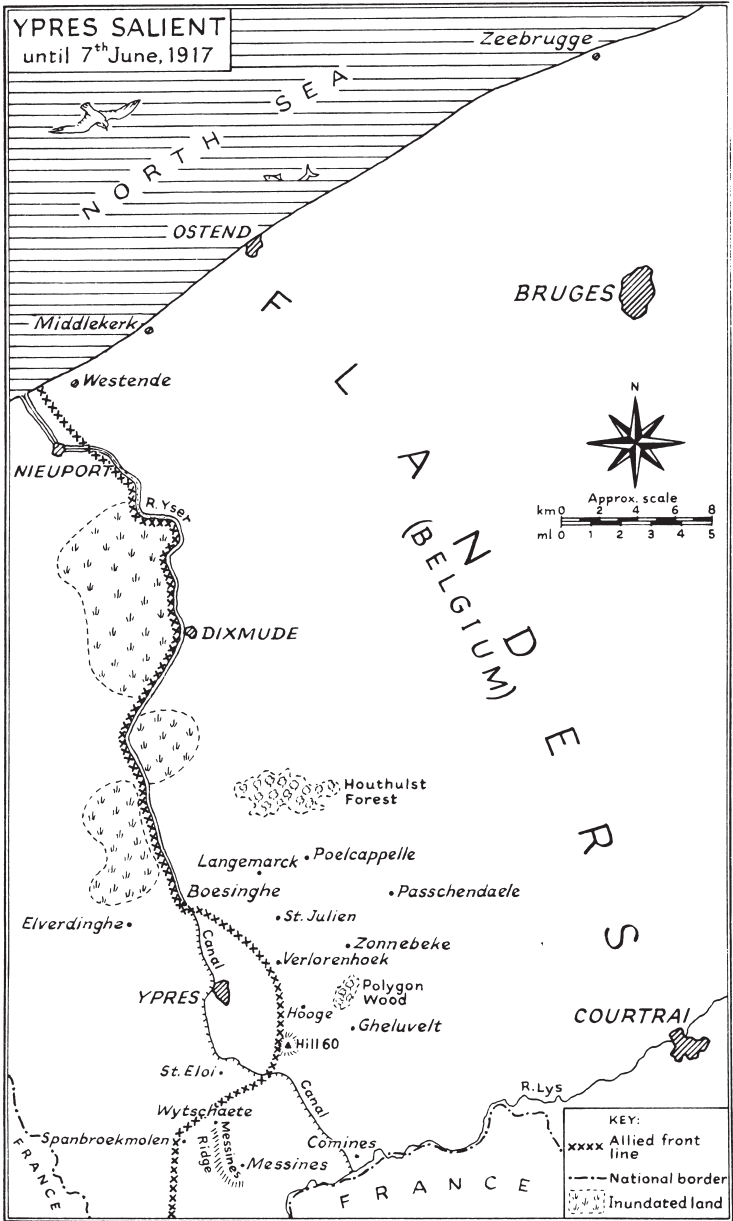
The Germans rushed in no less than forty-two fresh battalions, and against them, devastated by heavy bombardment, the effort of twelve Canadian and six weak British battalions was unavailing.

The sensible thing would have been to withdraw from the salient, abandoning Ypres, and to establish a stronger line in the rear beyond the canal bank, a tactical possibility which had indeed been earlier considered. But emotion was riding high, at least in Britain, where the flags waved and the drums beat and the newspapers trumpeted forth glory in every edition. Public opinion, like Queen Victoria during the Crimean War, was not interested in the possibility of defeat. Public opinion, however, was not trying to hold the salient. Public opinion was not manning a line of trenches bombarded by six times as many German guns as there were guns to retaliate. Public opinion was not required, for want of gas-masks, to urinate on its sock and clap it over its nose as more noxious gas-clouds rolled inexorably towards it.

The appalling casualty-lists were read with horror, but in the spirit of the times they only served to stiffen the resolve of a nation in mourning. For these were not casualties of the regular army of professional risk-takers which, in any event, now hardly existed. They were the volunteers, 'Our Boys' who such a few short months ago had marched off, wreathed in

beams of enthusiasm, to do their bit, and 'Our Boys' must not be said to have done their bit in vain. If they had died to protect Ypres, then Ypres must not be given up.

For somewhat different reasons, the French commander, General Foch, was of the same opinion, which in no uncertain terms he brought to bear on the perplexed Commander of the British Force, Sir John French. The Germans must be kept occupied in the salient so that too much pressure might not build up on the line further south. The Commanders of the Army on the spot saw things differently. General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, heading the Second Army, proposed to draw back and reduce the salient to Ypres and its outskirts. French refused to consider any such thing, promptly removed him from his command, and appointed General Sir Herbert Plumer in his place. Plumer's first action as Commander was to order an only slightly less drastic strategic withdrawal. By then French had no alternative but to agree, and at the end of May 1915, five weeks after the first gas attack, the withdrawal took place. In those five weeks 60,000 men had been killed, wounded or were missing. The grim and dreadful salient was consolidated. One day people would call it immortal.



YPRES SALIENT
until 7th June, 1917

Zeebrugge

NORTH SEA

OSTEND

BRUGES

Middlekerk

Westende

NIEUPOORT

R. Yser

DIXMUDE

(BELGIUM)

Houthulst Forest

Langemarck • Poelcappelle

Boesinghe

• Passchendaele

Elverdinghe •

• St. Julien

• Zonnebeke

Verlorenhoek

YPRES

Hooge

• Gheluvelt

Hill 60

St. Elor

R. Lys

COURTRAI

Wytschaete

Comines

Messines

Spanbroekmolen

FRANCE

FRANCE



Approx. scale
km 0 2 4 6 8
mi 0 1 2 3 4 5

KEY:
xxxx Allied front line
--- National border
Inundated land